

Sermon Notes – May 14, 2017

“A Life for the Ages”

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- **People have been asking me for months now if I’m counting down the Sundays until I retire. And the answer is, I haven’t been. Until now. With less than two months to go, I’ve started to wonder how to make the best use of these final few weeks.**
- **It’s a freeing time because I can say whatever I want. What are you going to do? Fire me?**
- **Not to worry. I decided that, starting next week, when we go down to one service, I will concentrate on my favourite readings. It’ll be the five things I really, really want you to know.**
- **That means I’m not going to be following the lectionary, so for today, I picked what I think is the most interesting lectionary reading for May and June. It was scheduled for May 28, so if you go to a different church that Sunday, you’ll probably hear another sermon on this same reading.**
- **What we heard was the first and last few verses of John 17, in which Jesus is getting ready, as I am, to say goodbye. The previous four chapters describe Jesus’ last meal with his disciples. That meal is not called the Last Supper, because in John’s gospel, Jesus does not break the bread or pass the cup – he does not serve the first communion. Instead, in John’s gospel, at the end of the meal, he washes the disciples’ feet, and then he makes a long after-dinner speech.**
- **At the end of the speech, he offers this prayer, which is known to Bible scholars as the High Priestly Prayer.**
- **And that, of course, reminds me of my favourite story about prayer, which is told by the science and science fiction writer Isaac Asimov ...**
- **Well, St. Martin’s doesn’t have that kind of Board, and this isn’t that kind of prayer. As in most of the gospel of John, what Jesus is credited with saying sounds more like a theological commentary on what Jesus might have said than it does Jesus actually saying something.**
- **In the other gospels, Jesus speaks in parables and in short, pithy sayings. He seldom talks about himself. In John’s gospel, Jesus never tells a single**

parable and gives long, rambling speeches called discourses, in which he speaks about himself in the third person. Even in this high priestly prayer, Jesus sounds less like he is speaking to God and more like he is giving his disciples a theological rationale for his presence among them.

- You can probably tell that, although I find some wonderful inspiration in John, the fourth gospel is not my favourite.
- What grabs my attention **in today's selection** is that Jesus says he has come so that his followers might have eternal life, and then he gives a definition of eternal life.
- On the face of it, that seems unnecessary. We all know what eternal life is, **don't we? It's going to heaven and standing in line in** the clouds until St. Peter checks off our name in the big book and we can step through the pearly gates so the family circle can be unbroken once again. Right?
- Not exactly. First of all, in the Biblical description of it, the city of heaven is not up in the clouds. Rather, it is here on Earth – an Earth renewed, mind you, but according to the Bible, heaven is Earthbound. As the American theologian Robert Capon says, heaven represents Earth wedded, not Earth jilted.
- So maybe we ought to pay attention not **just to Jesus' promise of eternal life, but also to Jesus' definition of eternal life.** It turns out **it's got nothing to do** with pearly gates or streets of gold or a beautiful garden on the banks of the river of life or a mansion with many resting places or a light at the end of the tunnel or any of the other images of heaven we associate with eternal life.
- **“And this is eternal life,” says Jesus, “that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”** Eternal life is knowing God and Jesus. Period. Full stop. Not knowing in the intellectual sense – not, oh **yeah, I've heard of them. And not, oh yeah, I know them** – we were introduced once. This is knowing someone in the sense of having a personal relationship with them. To know them well enough that you have a pretty good idea how they would feel about you doing this or that without having to ask them. To know them.
- Eternal life, then, stands separate from going to heaven. Eternal life starts in this life and continues into the next one. The phrase translated as eternal life

literally says **life into the ages**. I like to think of it as a **life for the ages**. It's that good.

- It's natural that we associate **life into the ages** with an afterlife of some sort. **We don't need Freud to tell us we are** afraid of death. And never have we been more protected from and separated from death than we are today. We buried my mother-in-law a few weeks ago, and when we got to the gravesite, not only was there no earth in sight, even the hole was lined with green cloth, so the mourners **wouldn't** be reminded of the reality of burial.
- As a minister, it is part of my job during a funeral service to say that the person died. **If I don't, death will be** hidden behind euphemisms like passed away or departed or was called home.
- So eternal life is different than going to heaven. **I'm not trying to deny the** afterlife. An image I sometimes use at funerals is that of death as a window ...
- What might await us when we pass through that window, no one can say. It might be a mansion or a garden or a city.
- Or maybe the ancient gnostics had it right. I disagree with most of what they taught, but one idea of theirs I like is that we each have within us a spark of divine light. When we die, that spark rejoins the light that is God, and we all **become part of God's** radiance.
- In the end, **we don't know, and** honestly, **I don't much care**. For centuries, Christianity has been plagued with the idea that Christians should be willing to put up **with all manner of misery here on Earth because, after all, we're** going to a realm of eternal bliss. That kind of thinking has allowed too many church leaders and others to turn a blind eye of indifference to the cruelties of too many tyrants, monarchs and political machineries.
- Not only is it morally wrong to do so, **it's also Biblically wrong**. **"I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly,"** Jesus said. **Life isn't meant for enduring. It isn't about waiting stoically until it's over. Life is about living. It's meant to be filled with laughter and love and goodness and family and community. And yes, bad things happen, but we're meant to help each through the bad times and not to take advantage of another's weakness.**
- And this is eternal life – to know God and to know Jesus.

- There is an ancient story that comes from the Hebrides Islands, located on the Atlantic side **of the coast of Scotland ...**
- **Some day we will all return to God, the One who has placed a piece of God's** own self within us, but let us not sit around and wait for that day to come. Let us rather increase our knowing of Jesus and of God. Let us live a life for the ages.

On this day, O God, we give thanks for motherhood. We know that mothers are not perfect, and yet we are grateful for the life they gave us, the love they showed to us, the sacrifices they made for our benefit.

We give thanks for the women and men in our lives who have mothered us. And we are grateful that you, who are like a father to us, are also like our mother who art in heaven. We give thanks that you gave us life and showed your love for us in the life and teachings and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Our thoughts this morning are with all those in our country and elsewhere whose lives are disrupted by flooding and high water. We pray that the waters will soon recede, as they did for Noah and his family.

We pray for the leaders of government – for President Macron of France, as he begins his term, for Prime Minister Trudeau, for President Trump, for all the men and women in leadership, whose decisions affect us all. May they govern with a **mother's love** for her children.

On this Mother's Day, we pray for those who are without a home, whether living on the streets of our city or in a refugee camp somewhere. We pray for families whose lives are interrupted by illness, thinking particularly of Joan and Erwin of Robin and Laura and others we know. And we pray for those for whom each day is a challenge, whether because of pain or injury or addiction or poverty or fear or depression. We pray for relief and for peace of mind and spirit.

All these petitions we bring before you, O God, in the name of Jesus, and together **we join in the prayer that he taught, saying ...**