

2018 08 19 – Eternal Life

John 6:51-58

Jesus said, “I myself am the living bread come down from heaven. If any eat this bread they will live forever.... Those who do eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life.”

Yikes... in this passage from the Gospel of John it sounds like Jesus is asking us all to become vampires - to literally drink his blood in order to gain immortality. It was language like this that resulted in accusations of cannibalism against the early Christians. In the first and second centuries, there were people on the outside who believed that when the followers of Jesus shared communion bread and wine they were actually performing a more gruesome ritual. But we all know that Jesus wasn't speaking literally. When Jesus called himself the “Bread of Life” and asked people to eat his flesh and drink his blood, he was referring to the life-giving Spirit that flowed through him. Jesus was telling his followers to drink in the power and chew on the strength of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being – the same Spirit that resides in and flows through each one of us.

Two weeks ago, Emily Bamforth stood at the front of this church and gave a sermon that she called, “Wonder Bread – The Miracle Diet.” I'm sorry I missed her preaching, but luckily, there is a copy of her sermon for everyone to read on our church website. In that sermon Emily clearly states that

“the Bread of Life is the nourishment we attain when we are compassionate and forgiving, when we are curious and seek inspiration, when we are open and willing to learn. It is all those things which we encounter in our lives that bring us closer to God.”

And she is right. When we follow Jesus’ teachings, when we live as Jesus lived, our lives are filled with life-giving encounters with our neighbours, with creation and ultimately with the sacred. When we live as Jesus would have us live, then we are able to experience the presence of the Spirit in our lives and we are nourished beyond our knowing.

I know that some of you have already heard Emily’s sermon on the Bread of Life, so I’m going to focus on a different aspect of today’s scripture. Jesus claimed that anyone who eats the living bread of heaven lives forever or, in other words, has eternal life. So my question for today is, “what is eternal life?” What does it mean to say that someone will live forever?

During our Community Learning Time, we already began this discussion about eternal life. We talked about the possibility of new life after death. We recognized the fact that our lives on earth will come to an end and that death is necessary for resurrection or new life to occur. But what that new life may look like is something that none of us can know for sure. It’s a question that has fascinated people for centuries and continues to be explored in books, TV shows, movies and even in our churches .

About 25 years ago I was teaching a youth Sunday School class at Bellefair United Church in Toronto. This particular class was mostly made up of 12 and 13 year old boys. At one point I gave them the option of choosing the topics for our upcoming lessons. One of the topics they chose was "Heaven & Hell." Like everyone else, they were interested in what happens when people die.

I did some research and came well-prepared on that particular Sunday morning. I was shocked to discover that these boys, who had attended The United Church since they were infants, had an understanding of the after-life that seemed to come primarily from movies and TV shows, in particular, "The Simpsons." They believed in a fiery place of eternal punishment deep below the surface of the earth called Hell and a beautiful mansion in the clouds called Heaven. They were surprised to find out that I don't believe that those physical places exist.

During that Sunday School lesson we talked about near-death experiences and how people have seen tunnels of light and experienced their loved ones beckoning to them from beyond the grave. We talked about the fact that no one can really know what happens when we die, but that these near death experiences would lead to us to believe that when our body dies, our spirit, that part of us that is sacred and eternal, lives on.

The Bible contains many different ideas about eternal life. David Hart, a United Church minister, describes some of the first century thinking in this way:

The Pharisees believed in an immortal soul that would leave the body at death and then be reinserted into the resurrected body here on earth

during some grand future era begun by God...Other people, such as the Essenes, believed in the idea of a soul or an eternal self that would carry on in a new resurrected body, not here on earth, but in the upper heavenly planes beyond the earth, where God was believed to reside. And then there were people, such as the Sadducees, who believed that when we died we returned to the earth and that was the end of our existence
(*Christianity, A New Look at Ancient Wisdom*, page 232-233).

Jesus lived during this time and amongst these people, and if we look at the words that are attributed to him in the gospels it seems that he used a variety of ideas of the afterlife as examples or illustrations in his teachings. There doesn't seem to be any specific notion of eternal life that he taught. You see, Jesus was more focussed on earthly matters. His ministry was all about creating heaven on earth, it was about creating God's kingdom, a reign of peace and justice for all people. I think he would agree with the quote that I included in this Sunday's bulletin from two contemporary theologians, David Felten and Jeff Procter-Murphy. They wrote, "Whatever the eternal might be, it begins here as a part of who we are today. The message of resurrection is new life today." (*Living the Questions*, page 123)

I want to end with a short reading from Henri Nouwen. This comes from his book *Our Greatest Gift, A Meditation on Dying and Caring*. Henri wrote:

Recently, a friend told me a story about twins talking to each other in the womb. The sister said to the brother. "I believe there is life after birth."

Her brother protested vehemently, “No, no, this is all there is. This is a dark and cozy place, and we have nothing else to do but to cling to the cord that feeds us.” The little girl insisted, “There must be something more than this dark place. There must be something else, a place with light where there is freedom to move.” Still she could not convince her twin brother.

After some silence, the sister said hesitantly, “I have something else to say, and I’m afraid you won’t believe that, either, but I think there is mother.” Her brother became furious, “A mother!” he shouted. “What are you talking about? I have never seen a mother, and neither have you. Who put that idea in your head? As I told you this place is all we have. Why do you always want more? This is not a bad place, after all. We have all we need, so let’s be content.”

The sister was quite overwhelmed by her brother’s response, and for a while didn’t dare say anything more. But she couldn’t let go of her thoughts, and since she had only her twin brother to speak to, she finally said, “Don’t you feel these squeezes every once in a while? They’re quite unpleasant and sometimes even painful.” “Yes,” he answered, “What’s special about that?” “Well,” the sister said, “I think that these squeezes are there to get us ready for another place, much more beautiful than this, where we will see our mother face-to-face. Don’t you think that’s exciting?” (*Our Greatest Gift*, pages 19-20)