

P Christ is risen!
C He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

When we think of our life span, we tend to think in a linear fashion. We see our lives' events arranged sequentially laid out before us in a clear progression from the past to the present and then from that point we presuppose the future. This makes clear sense to us...it's logical in our temporal understanding of who we are, where we have been, and what we hope to become and even what awaits us beyond the grave because we know that nobody gets out of here alive.

It is beyond the grave where we see an unending duration of existence with God. The problem is, we attempt to take our temporal-linear understanding of right now and overlap it with what is beyond the grave and what awaits us all, and we end up holding fast to what we know and what we like and apply it to what we do not know about what lies beyond the grave. We tend to look at our life now and assume life beyond the grave will be just like it...minus the things we don't like about our life now.

When looking ahead then in this fashion, would my Great-Grandfather, who drove a horse drawn milk cart foresee a device he could carry in his pocket that would enable him to talk to anyone anywhere in the world and then on that same device have access to a vast library of information on any topic he could think of? My Grandson can...but in our contemporary context what do we anticipate that this life right now will reveal about tomorrow or what happening right now will reveal something to us beyond the grave?

I find it very difficult to think of a lifetime in any other way than in a linear fashion framed and undergirded in temporal relationships...but what lies past that is unimaginable in our understanding. Nonetheless, we know our past, for the most part. We are aware of the present and try our best to understand it. But right now, we only have a promise as our insight into the future and no comprehensive or concrete details about it...because we know there is a human limit we call death and the grave...that leaves us asking...now what? And so, we cling to that promise of a holy and certain resurrection. So then, in our temporal thinking, we conclude then that eternal life picks up sequentially where the limits of our temporal understanding ends. Moreover, this is where we hope we have gained enough temporal equity to apply as a downpayment into this eternal life that fits into our likes and dislikes...the place we call heaven.

I begin here today this way because Jesus mentions eternal life. And as I said, for the most part, we conclude eternal life to be a high-quality, intimate, and unending existence with God. This high-quality intimate and unending existence with God is eternal life or what we assume eternal life to be...and we then add the details. Today in our Gospel lesson we have the opening of chapter seventeen of John's Gospel. This entire chapter is a prayer. This chapter of John is what is known as the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus.

On the night of His betrayal, just moments before His arrest, Jesus lifts His eyes to heaven and offers the longest prayer in all of Holy Scripture. In this prayer we hear Jesus praying his heart, praying for Himself, his disciples, and for the disciples who are to come after them, that's you and

me here today. Once again, as I mentioned last week, I mention it again that this is all still taking place in that room where Jesus is joined with his disciples, he knows his death is drawing near. In this gathering in this room, Jesus gets up from the table and washes the disciples' feet. We heard this back on Holy Thursday, or Maundy Thursday. This too was the night of his betrayal and it is here Jesus begins his Farewell Discourse that goes on for the next four chapters. At the end of his discourse, Jesus prays this prayer knowing that the very feet of the disciples that he just washed will turn and desert him in his darkest hour, and yet, he still prays for them...and he prays for us.

In this prayer, Jesus reveals the intimate relationship between Him and the Father. We hear of his divine mission to make God the Father's name known to those whom God has given him. We hear of glory, unity, truth, and protection out of love in this prayer. Listen again, but listen for these themes:

⁶ "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. (John 17:6-11)

As the Father and Jesus are one, we too are one with God through our relationship or our "oneness" with Jesus through our faith. And as followers or Children of God, we establish relationships that gather others into this same relationship with God as we make know God's grace and promised mercy and salvation to others. But in this prayer, we have before us today, Jesus is NOT talking about a life beyond the grave when he mentions eternal life, he is addressing our life right now.

This prayer ought to serve as a reminder for us here today and *not* as a reminder of life beyond the grave. This High Priestly Prayer serves as a reminder, with details, that we are called now to intervene for others on behalf of Jesus...however, we DO NOT intervene with judgement, hatred, or power that divides us from others, we intervene with love, mercy, understanding, and openness that joins us with others...NOT to make them like us or us like them, but that we can love and care for each other as they are despite our differences. While this prayer does not say it directly, this prayer is an intercession for a vision of strength in diversity and difference rather than a prayer of separation and isolation from others. Bonhoeffer reminds us of this when he writes:

God does not will that I should fashion the other person according to the image that seems good to me, that is, in my own image; rather in his very freedom for me God made this person in His image. I can never know before hand how God's image should appear in others. That image always manifests a completely new and unique form that comes solely from God's free and sovereign creation. To me the sight may seem strange, even ungodly. But God creates every (person) in the likeness of His Son the Crucified.¹

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together, A Discussion of Christian Fellowship*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Pub, 1954. Taken from the discussion in Chapter Four on Ministry under the heading of "The Ministry of Listening" page 93.

Jesus is praying that we live in that same truth, love, and unity, that reflects the relationship between the Father and the Son that Jesus has been making known to us in his Farewell discourse, and in this High Priestly prayer that is before us today. But here's the thing, this not something we do in order to extend our lives beyond the grave, this is NOT a glimpse into what we assume "eternal life" will be...nor is it a reward system to gain us access into heaven or this "eternal life." The eternal life that Jesus is mentioning is how we live RIGHT NOW, if we say we have the faith we claim to have. Again and again in this Gospel of John, Jesus says that those who believe in him *have* eternal life. Jesus does not say that we have *the promise of* eternal life after death...we have eternal life here and now.²

Eternal life does not happen when we are dead. Eternal life began a long time ago and it will continue a long time after us. The eternal life that Jesus is referring to today is just that...today, right now...right now we are in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, so what does that mean for us right now? Listen again to what Jesus says when he is praying about eternal life:

³ And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴ I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.
(John 17:3-4)

Eternal life is NOT an abstract idea that happens when we are dead, eternal life is making known the love and grace of God right now by finishing the work that Jesus started so long ago. In other words, we pick up in the linear sequence of eternal life and carry it on or give to others in the relationships we inspire and initiate so that others will pass on and carry on. Saint Paul says it this way:

¹⁵ Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. (2 Cor 4:13-15)

As we go about living in the grace of this eternal life right now, I think we do so with a similar understanding that Dietrich Bonhoeffer mentions:

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear. So it is His work that we do for our brothers (& sisters) when we learn to listen to him.....listening can be a greater service than speaking.

But he who can no longer listen to his brothers (& sisters) will soon be no longer listening to God either; Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother (& sister), but only for himself and for his own follies.³

We are most certainly blessed with the free gift of faith that enables us to know our heavenly Father as the only true God, and Jesus Christ the only Son of God who is God's love and mercy made manifest for all. Through that same faith, we are drawn into that same relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ the only Son, not when we are dead, but right now. This is a

² Kysar, Robert. *Preaching John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002. Chapter 2. Theological Themes: The Heart of Johannine Thought, page 74

³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together, A Discussion of Christian Fellowship*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Pub, 1954. Taken from the discussion in Chapter Four on Ministry under the heading of "The Ministry of Listening" page 97-98.

relationship that frees us all from the bonds of sin and death. Through the faith freely given us, we are then able to live in this eternal life right now and to freely share this same relationship with others. So as Peter informs us today, let us:

^{5:6} Humble *ourselves* therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that *God* may exalt *us* in due time. (*Let us*)⁷ Cast all *our* anxiety on him, because he cares for *us*. ⁸ (*Let us*) Discipline *ourselves*, keep alert. Like a roaring lion *our* adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, steadfast in *our* faith, for *we* know that *our* brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. ¹⁰ And after *we* have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called *us* to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish *us...as His own*. ¹¹ To him be the power forever and ever...⁴ (1Peter 5:6-11a)

For this was, is, and will remain true now and forever...for just as Christ is risen, We too are risen indeed, alleluia.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ Italicized words in this passage are added to flow with the close of the sermon