

“And this is eternal life,” Jesus prays to his Father, “that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

This may be the most direct definition of eternal life in all Christian scripture. What Jesus says is quite explicit: God has given the Son authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom God has given him. Eternal life is to know God and Jesus Christ.

What if it is *truly* that simple?

The other Gospels tend to hold out eternal life as a hope for the future. We often think of eternal life as a phenomenon that God makes available to us after we die. And the Synoptic Gospels do provide us ample confidence for that hope. John’s Jesus *expands* that understanding; he brings his followers into an awareness of an enhanced life that is available to them *now*.

This reading takes place the night before his arrest, but here in John’s Gospel, Jesus is not praying in a grove of olive trees by himself while his followers sleep. He is praying in the company of his friends as they recline around a table after supper.

The basin of water he used to wash their feet is there but Judas has left. With remnants of supper – crusts of bread, cups of wine – still on the table, Jesus has come to the end of his farewell to his friends and he is praying for them. As soon as his prayer is done, they will get up from the table and walk to a garden a short distance across the Kidron Valley. And there, Judas will betray Jesus into the hands of those who will crucify him.

But for now, Jesus is praying. On the night before his death, Jesus is teaching about eternal life. In the hours before he is taken, his friends are hearing every word that Jesus prays. And I imagine that they must have been a little overwhelmed.

Jesus has given them a commandment to love each other and has washed their feet; he has predicted his betrayal and promised the presence of another companion. As they ate together, Jesus said: “Abide in me as I abide in you.” He told them of his imminent death and promised the joy that would follow. And then, if that weren’t enough, Jesus began this prayer where his followers hear that eternal life is to know God and Jesus Christ. Their heads are surely swimming.

Maybe yours is too on this last Sunday in Easter. Six weeks ago, we sang Alleluias in joyful celebration of his resurrection. Last Thursday was the Feast of the Ascension, when the church celebrated the Risen Christ going on to greater glory; the same event that we heard about in the reading from Acts *this* morning.

After that, we heard Peter telling the people that the Spirit of God was resting on them. But Pentecost isn't until next Sunday. We followed Peter's letter with this Gospel reading set on the night before Jesus was killed. Keeping all that straight can be so perplexing that we may as well be right there at the supper table with the rest of the befuddled disciples gathered around Jesus, our friend and our brother.

It's brilliant! Because in a very real sense, that's right where we are. Right here in this morning's liturgy *is* life eternal. Here in *this* moment, God's presence *beyond* all time and place mystifies our senses in *this* specific moment in time, in *this* particular place.

Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary and Joseph, eats with his friends and prays. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, talks with his followers and prays. And the Word who was in the beginning with God and who was God, prays this: "Now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed."

If we fix our attention *only* on the time-bound historical Jesus, we might miss our relationship with the perfect image of the invisible God in Christ Jesus, the light of all people that shines in the darkness.

And if we fix our gaze *only* on the eternal Son of God beyond all time, we run the risk of neglecting our connection with the incarnated, flesh and blood Jesus Christ, the Galilean carpenter's son.

We need to know both, because God's glory shines pure light. God's glory also sheds human blood and tears. So here on the Sunday after the Ascension, we pause for a moment. And we practice loving in the darkness and in the absence.

The Word made flesh is, in a real sense, no longer in the world. The one incarnation was over when God resurrected Jesus. The physically altered Jesus who met Cleopas and his wife on the road to Emmaus is also not with us. The resurrected Jesus who walked through the bolted door of the upper room is not with us. God has taken that manifestation of Jesus back to the One with whom the Word was in the beginning.

Next week, we will gratefully celebrate the gift of God's love flooding our hearts through the Holy Spirit and we will return to life after Pentecost. Until then, we could choose to sit on our ash-heaps and mourn our loss. But we are still in the world that God loves and Jesus has left work in our hands. We are liberated from sin, not from responsibility.

And so, for the next week, we might choose instead to practice, as St. John of the Cross phrased it, "in darkness and concealment...with no other light or guide than the one that burned in my heart." In this way, we accept God's invitation to a fuller holiness; we move deeper into the realization of what Jesus prayed. "All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and *I have been glorified in them.*"

Now, the word "glory" comes to our English reading through the Greek word "doxa," which is a somewhat clumsy rendering of the Hebrew word "kbd¹," or in Aramaic, "shekhinah." And *that* word refers to more than glorious prestige and status. The shekhinah is the in-dwelling presence of God.

So here in this transitional time after the Ascension and before Pentecost, we can practice seeking for the shekhinah with only the dark guidance of night like St. John of the Cross. When he came to recognize the unity with God that he found in darkness, he wrote: "I abandoned and forgot myself, laying my face on my Beloved; all things ceased; I went out from myself, leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies."

Eternal life, do you see, is available to us right now. As God's presence beyond time and place interacts with us here within time and space, we are also there at the supper table with the disciples gathered around Jesus, our friend and our brother.

That presence abides with us; dwells within us and we within it. That divine abiding, the indwelling of God, is eternal life. That active presence, the shekhinah, at the center of our being gives us eternal life. In our communion with God, as God's children, we come to know God and Jesus Christ with increasing intimacy.

In one of his love poems to the God he found in the darkness, St. John of the Cross wrote: "How gently and lovingly you wake in my heart, where in secret you dwell alone, and in your sweet breathing, filled with good and glory, how tenderly you swell my heart with love."

¹ Pronounced "ka-VODE"

Practicing the ability to seek the shekhinah within a congregation has compelling spiritual value for the surrounding community. The life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Galilean carpenter, our brother, who was also the Son of God, our redeemer, was the beginning of the Gospel not the end. Jesus left us work to do on behalf of God's creation.

Practicing the skills of seeking the shekhinah within ourselves has practical stabilizing value for the individual practitioner. Over the course of our personal faith development, we inevitably come to phases marked by the excruciating pain of God's apparent absence. When it feels as though God has abandoned us in the dark, we can return to our practice and this prayer.

We can prepare for the discovery of a larger, more astonishing God on the other side of darkness. "Holy Father," Jesus prayed, "protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." *Before* we are in the midst of spiritual dryness and absence, we can practice seeking the indwelling presence that Jesus prayed for God to give all God's children. Practicing now helps us to integrate the darkness and continue in renewed unity with the Holy One.

Now that death has lost its power over God's children, it is no longer a dividing line. In fact, there is no longer the same role for what comes before and what comes after, because eternal life is both somewhere off in our future and also right here in this present moment. "When our heart understands this divine truth," Fr. Henri Nouwen wrote, "we are living the spiritual life."

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