



Life in All Directions

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

August 19, 2018; John 6:51-58

When Carly was in preschool I had a friend in the neighborhood who had kids the same age, and we were both juggling childcare and work. We'd sometimes do playdates on days we were both at home with the kids. So one day we were on a playdate at my house, and I used the phrase "life-giving" to refer to something. And she told me that phrase really bugged her. She said "what do you mean life-giving? I'm already alive. I can't be more alive. You're either alive, or you're dead." And I had to laugh. I understood where she was coming from. In a certain way she is right.

But in a certain way I'm not so sure. My husband Jeff gave me permission to share a story with you about his early years in recovery. He had lost a number of members of his family to suicide and had become an addict and alcoholic, but he got sober and started working on his recovery. At one point he was talking with a counselor, who was advising him to do certain things, and he was resisting. He told her that he didn't need to do what she was recommending; he knew how to survive, he had survived thus far. And she said to him, "Yes, you've survived. But you could also be happy." The difference struck him to the core. I suspect when we think of living we all think of more than mere biological survival.

Brian McLaren is a well-known author of books that talk about revitalizing the way of Jesus, and in one called *We Make the Road by Walking*, he says this:

What we all want is pretty simple, really. We want to be alive. To feel alive. Not just to exist but to thrive, to live out loud, walk tall, breathe free. We want to be less lonely, less exhausted, less conflicted or afraid More awake, more grateful, more energized and purposeful. We capture this kind of mindful, overbrimming life in terms like well-being.... *Shalom*... wholeness, and aliveness.¹

There is such a thing as walking around on this earth, in the midst of life in all its messiness and angst and beauty and suffering, and having the capacity to say *yes* to being alive fully in the midst of it. There is such a thing as being whole even in our woundedness and eccentricity or ordinariness. There is such a thing as true life, unbounded in any direction. It's part of what I suspect Jesus means when he talks about eternal life.

When you hear the phrase “eternal life” what do you think it means? Do you imagine that at the point that you die, the current temporary life you now enjoy is converted to a different kind of life, called “eternal” life, that you will then have in heaven? We in Christian faith affirm something called the resurrection of the body, so yes, we do believe there is life beyond death. But can we limit eternity to mean a single line moving forward in time that has a beginning at our death? What if the eternal life Jesus is speaking about is meant to be about

¹ Brian McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking* (Jericho Books, 2014), xv.

here and now, and about the future in this life, in addition to our future beyond death? What if eternal life is even meant to be about the past? What if the kind of life Jesus is speaking about has no limits at all?

In today's gospel reading we heard Jesus say a lot of frankly outrageous and just weird things. And the more people called him on it the weirder and more outrageous he got. He says that the bread of heaven, given for the life of the world, is his flesh. When the people listening to him understandably react to such a statement, he just gets more intense. The English translation says "unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you". Which is bad enough. But in the Greek it says "unless you munch on my flesh and drink my blood" you have no life in you. That's just gross. What does he mean?

We can begin to understand something about that by looking at the historical context around John's gospel. In the years that followed Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus' followers were trying to make sense of him. And there was a prominent group called the Gnostics – have you heard of them? They were people who believed that Jesus had not really come in a human body; they thought he was more or less a spirit. They thought that evil resides in physical reality, and pure goodness is limited to the spiritual and immaterial world. So naturally they thought that Jesus had to have been pure spirit. But John's gospel goes to great lengths to insist that spirit and flesh go together. The Word became flesh, it insists. What if Jesus is saying that the life God wants to give us cannot be limited to the realm of ideas or the abstract or the intellect? I think Jesus is saying that this eternal life is more like eating, and experiencing, and being nourished, than being

impressed with miraculous signs or having otherworldly visions of God. From the very beginning of creation, when God breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of the first human who became a living soul, flesh and breath, body and spirit, the divine and the human have gone together. It seems to me that Jesus cares very much about this. He cares about it because he wants people to understand there is truly eternal life in front of us, and that we can wake up and live it. The alternative to this eternal life, the abundant life Jesus offers, is a kind of death – it's the death of thinking you are limited to survival. For the Israelites in the wilderness, the alternative to the life God offers was the death of preferring slavery in Egypt because at least there they knew where their next meal was coming from.

From the very beginning of creation there was this choice between life and death. Adam and Eve were told that if they ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that they would die. We all know they didn't literally die. But they died in a certain sense. The knowledge of good and evil was the promise of spiritual certainty instead of trust in God, and that false certainty was a kind of death.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm pretty sure God does care about our survival. But God does not intend for us to be limited to biological surviving. God intends more life for us than that.

In case you haven't noticed, this is the fourth week in a row we've been talking about Jesus as the bread of life. It all started with Jesus feeding people with loaves and fishes. He wasn't going to bother people talking about spiritual nourishment when they were physically hungry. He fed their stomachs, and then he fed their hearts. And this is

what is meant for us, as well. In our human bodies, we are intended to thrive; to be nurtured physically, and also know and experience the divine life of God. This eternal life Jesus offers us, which he also describes as abundant life, is about life that explodes in all directions. Eternal life is about the present, and it is meant to impact every part of our present lives. Eternal life is about the future – our individual futures in this life and the life to come, and also the future of the world God so loves, which is why in the Episcopal Church we focus on creation care and reconciliation between people. And eternal life is even about the past, because the love and healing God offers us can redeem what has seemed beyond redemption. And the stories we read in scripture, stories like God feeding the people manna in the wilderness, like Jesus being the bread of life, continue to play out today. The past, the present, and the future are layered together in the kingdom of God, in the eternal life that God grants us, not at some distant point in our personal futures, but collectively, here and now. And in the layering of past, present and future, there is life, and thriving, and nourishment, and healing, and hope.

In Wednesday morning Bible study we were talking about today's gospel text, and it led to a conversation about times we felt nourished spiritually. One person mentioned going up to the Boundary Waters and looking at the vast night sky, undimmed by the lights of cities, and how awed he was by the beauty of God's created universe. Someone else talked about sitting on a rock on a beach in Hawaii, watching sea turtles swim around, and feeling so moved she could cry. Someone else said that when we opened up the scriptures and discovered that the stories in them still speak truth and promise to us today, that is nourishing. The beauty and divine life of God is all around us, in this

actual world, in each one of us, and we are meant to experience it and be nourished by it.

So let's do that. Let's become aware of the eternal life of God, which has no beginning and no end, and which springs forth in all directions for our sake. Let's be nourished together by Jesus, the bread from heaven, as we partake later this morning in the Eucharist. At the end of this service we are going to baptize four beautiful babies – Paige, Nora, Larson and Caroline. We will take them out onto the grass and into Minnehaha creek, and we will sprinkle them with water in the sunshine. And in this way let's celebrate the life of God's Spirit that is being quickened in them. May God grant us eternal life, springing forth in all directions, for the sake of the world God so loves. Amen.