

Sermon

April 5, 2006

When does eternal life begin?

What is eternal life?

When does it begin?

That's the question for tonight.

John 3:16.

**For God so loved the world
that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish
but may have eternal life.**

The promise of eternal life is great news.

The great news that we will live forever
with God who loves us.

The great news that God loves us so much
that he gave us Jesus--
--to live for us
--to die for us.

And because of Jesus,
we have life everlasting.
Life that doesn't end.

I included the last verse of Amazing Grace tonight.

We'll sing it in a few minutes.

What do those words say?

**When we've been there 10,000 years,
bright shining as the sun,
there's no less days to sing God's praise,
then when we'd first begun.**

It's really beyond our comprehension
that we can live forever with God.

And everything the Bible tells us about heaven--
--is amazing.
We don't know a lot of details.
But we know it's good.
The images of the Bible
try to share the amazing wonder of heaven.

It is a great thing
to live forever with God in heaven.

And there's more.
The Bible reading I read a couple of minutes ago
gives us another ingredient of heaven.
I wasn't thinking of this passage
when I first decided to use this question--
--but I should have been.

Jesus says:
**And this is eternal life,
that they may know you,
the only true God,
and Jesus Christ,
whom you have sent.**

Did you hear that?
It's a definition of eternal life.
If I was defining eternal life,
I might say something like:
"Eternal life is living forever."

Seems logical to me.

But what does John say?
**And this is eternal life,
that they may know you,
the only true God,
and Jesus Christ,
whom you have sent.**

What is eternal life?
Eternal life is knowing God,
knowing Christ.

Eternal life is knowing God.

If that's what eternal life is--

--when does it begin?

Whenever we know God.

In hearing the word.

In baptism.

In knowing God's love for us.

And when does it end?

Never.

We were talking about this on Monday night

at our Monday night Bible study--

--as they helped me think through the sermon.

Actually I didn't plan that either,

but the Bible chapter we studied Monday

corresponded with the Bible verses for tonight.

Which is amazing--

--and nice.

Anyway,

one of the things we talked about

was our tendency to think of eternal in a linear fashion.

And, of course, there is a sense where that is true.

But for God,

time doesn't have the same meaning as for us.

And these words in John

seem to say

that eternal life is not something which is linear--measured in time.

Instead, eternal life

is measured by our relationship with God.

And that relationship with God

also flows into all of our relationships with one another.

Martin Luther was asked:

"What would you do, if you knew the world was going to end tomorrow?"

Do you know his answer:

He said that he would plant a tree.

I have to say
that his answer has always been and still is
somewhat puzzling to me.
What do you think he meant?

???

Perhaps he meant
that the significance of what we do
carries on forever.
That our actions in this lifetime
have eternal significance.
And that it isn't the result that is key.
It's the process.
It's the relationship.

Maybe.....

For the Gospel writer John,
eternal life begins in this life
and lasts forever.
I like that.

To me,
that means that we are to be involved in things of ultimate importance--
--of eternal significance.

My fear in saying that,
is that we think we need to be doing major, magnificent things.
Instead,
it seems to me that the everyday things we do
have eternal significance,
even though they may seem everyday and ordinary.

For those of us blessed to have children,
the everyday care we give them has everlasting significance.
Even when we'd rather not change a diaper
or be firm with a consequence
or say no in the face of anger.
But it's those sorts of things
that take seriously our connection to one another
and our connection to God.

And what we value
is shaped by an eternal perspective.
What is really important?
What really makes a difference from the point of view of eternity?

Again, I don't think that means that the things we often think of as big things
are really central.
Often, it's the things we think of as little things
that from the perspective of eternity,
really make a difference.

So,
taking time serving together as a family or a small group
is a big thing.
Prayer--
--individually or in a group
--is a big thing.
Tarping a roof on the gulf coast
--is a big thing.
Listening to your Grandpa
or your Mom

or your daughter
or your niece when they need to talk--
--is a big thing.
Using the gifts God has given you to serve,
through your work,
or your school,
or your home,
or your neighborhood--
--that's a big thing.

These are things with eternal significance.

**And this is eternal life,
that they may know you,
the only true God,
and Jesus Christ,
whom you have sent.**

Many of you probably know of Oskar Schindler
because of the movie "Schindler's List".

I want to show a little part of that movie.

Schindler was a German industrialist
who built a business in what is now Poland,
using Jewish labor during World War II.

And in doing that,
through all sorts of means,
legal and illegal,
he saved about 1100 Jews,
who would have otherwise died in the concentration camps.

His motives weren't always pure.
His character and conduct weren't always good.
But God worked through him
to make a difference.

My sense is that,
in this scene,
he realized what had eternal significance.

MOVIE CLIP

**And this is eternal life,
that they may know you,
the only true God,
and Jesus Christ,
whom you have sent.**

When does eternal life begin?
It has begun.
As you live in relationship with God,
as you follow Jesus Christ,
you have eternal life.

In Jesus' name,
Amen