

Sunday, May 4, 2008
St. John's Church, Norwood Parish
A Sermon Offered by Bill Flanders

"This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God."

Three Sundays ago, in Susan's forum on author and theologian James Carroll, one idea above all seemed to capture the attention and imagination of many of us. It was Carroll's passionate assertion that theology has always followed human experience. That theology - thought and conclusions about God - is not some super-human doctrine passed down from above that humans write out and proclaim to be God's word. Rather, theology is thought and conclusions about the human experience of God as best writers and thinkers can understand and express such experience.

Today's appointed gospel reading was from the Gospel According to John. As I have read and grappled with John's Gospel over the years, I admit to wondering just how close to human experience this particular gospel comes? It is full of some of the most well known and dearly held quotes in the whole Bible. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God." "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." "And I will raise them up on the last day." "I am the bread of life." "I am the light of the world." "I am the good shepherd." "I am the resurrection and the life." Any one of these is food for thought. Put all of them together and they become almost overwhelming.

How much, though, is based on tangible, human experience? For instance, the experience of the original apostles, of the many of Jesus' disciples, of St. Paul, and Jesus' own family members, and of so many unknown others? - And how much is the writer John's imaginative theological and linguistic genius? That would seem an unanswerable question. But I want to focus on one particular statement that John attributes to Jesus: "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God." This, for me, speaks of experience that I recognize as experience - because I believe it is my own.

"Eternal life." How natural it is for any of us to hear those words and to immediately think, life everlasting - suggesting either life continuing on with no death point, or life continuing on after death. That's the way we think, because that's what the words "eternal life" seem, today, to connote.

But let me suggest an alternative meaning. Instead of thinking in strict linear terms - eternity as an endless horizontal line going on and on and on - might not we also be able to think of eternity as a dimension, as a quality of being that might touch our life and, to our wonder and even astonishment, give a present moment so much depth and so much height that we call it extra-ordinary? As if, for that moment, time stands still? Most of us have had at least hints of this in our lives: a romantic moment when we knew we were falling in love, an esthetic moment when we could hardly bear the natural beauty of a scene before us, a moral moment when we are stunned by someone's extremely generous or courageous act. But the moment that I am referring to as "eternal," is, as one person has put it, a moment in which we experience presence in the present.

Now for all you horror movie fans, I know that there always comes a moment in the film - usually enhanced by the dark - when the hero and heroine, in spite of seeing nothing or no one, are sure in their bones that they feel the presence of some one or some thing. Of course their reaction is terror - which is supposed to be the viewer's reaction, too. I am not referring to that sense of presence, in which we will do anything possible to escape from the present moment. The sense of presence I mean is when we can barely believe the wonder, the preciousness, the holiness of the present moment which, we are convinced, we are sharing with a presence beyond ourselves.

Of this sense of presence we have no sure explanation. We can describe, perhaps, the circumstances of the moment, but not the presence which has deeply touched us. With a sense of deep gratitude and longing, we humbly (and proudly) call this presence - God. And, for us, the experience of this moment is both timeless and ever-lasting - eternal.

I cannot say that all of us have had such an experience. But I do remember when I talked about my own experience some years ago at St. Mark's church, one of the parishioners said, "I think many of us have had such experiences. But it's not easy to understand or talk about them." What he was saying is that theology - our thinking and our conclusions about God - doesn't flow automatically from experience. No doubt he was right. And yet it is crucial that each of us reflect on our own experiences, and over and over again. For these may be our moments of eternal life, and, if we have them, we dare not lose touch with them.

The experience in my life that I've been referring to is one that I mentioned here at St. John's two or three years ago. For those who can't instantly recall its content, it may be no imposition to describe the experience again. Because, as I am hoping you will see, it is not the experience itself that is the crucial thing, but the meaning the experience has, and continues to have for someone, over that person's lifetime.

I had been away from church and all things religious for almost fifteen years - and, I thought, happily so. My life as a musician and voice teacher was stable. I did feel some nostalgia for the penetrating theological thought I'd once devoured, but believed that it was no longer to be found in books as it had been. Then, in a local bookstore, I spied a slim volume entitled "The Silence of God." The author was someone I'd once met, and I purchased the book. That afternoon, while lying on my bed reading the book, I came to where the author, as a young boy in church with his grandmother, asks if it is necessary to keep your eyes closed when you pray? His grandmother tells him that what is necessary is to speak to God "from your heart." "But I was a little boy," the author writes, "and hardly even knew I had a heart." This statement stopped me, and I began to reflect. Here I was in my fifties, and I wasn't sure that I had a heart, at least not one from which I could be in contact with God. Then I remember thinking: I wish I did have a heart. And at that moment a feeling of warmth enveloped me, and I felt in touch with something I'd once known well and had lost. That is what I remember of my experience.

Now the usual conclusion, I know, is to say: "And the rest is history." No. In this case the rest - and it continues to this day - is theology. The rest is trying to make sense of this experience for me, and, today, for you. Because my hope is that this might prompt you to reflect on your own experiences, to work out your own theology, your own meaning for you.

That feeling of being enveloped in warmth. It seemed to be the same kind of feeling we have when we know we are loved by someone we love. It was, to me, a validation both of being loved and being able to love. I was sure of this conclusion; I knew it would always be true for me. The theologian Paul Tillich used the phrase "You are accepted." to describe a meaning one can take from such an experience. That was his insight. Mine seemed to go even further. This sense of real, tangible love was somehow connected with the heart, the symbol of one's internal depth. From this I concluded, and hold to this day, that our connection with the Spirit beyond us that we call God - which can give meaning not only to one eternal moment, but to all of our life - that connection is possible because of something deep inside us. This is what I meant when, in the hymn "Once More the Advent Candles Burn," I wrote: "But this we often fail to say: that God is with us every day, with us and with all human kind, has been and will be through all time."

How many times do we have to feel God's spiritual presence before we know we have experienced a moment of eternity? A moment when we finally know that this now is eternal life? When we have a reason to trust in the goodness and the rightness of all that is to come - even death? What I am trying to suggest is that any one experience might hold that significance for us, if we encourage ourselves to reflect "from the heart" on that moment, and let it become the foundation of our own personal theology, of our faith. If we can find one eternal moment on which to take our stand, then we can be free to welcome the theologies of others, all sorts of theologies, and grasp the ones that speak deeply to us. "This is eternal life, that they might know you, the only true God." For us, a God who is beyond time, but not beyond experience. Amen.