

This is Eternal Life

John 17: 1-5

**First Presbyterian Church
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This past week I was on a conference call with a committee that oversees the relationships between our Presbyterian denomination and the other Presbyterian bodies around the world. We had a letter from Case Thorp who served as an associate pastor at our church some years ago. Case is now the missions pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Orlando. Case is on his way with a team to Madagascar. That's the island nation off the east coast of Africa. I am mainly familiar with Madagascar from playing the board game RISK as well as from the title of a series of children's films. But do you know how many Presbyterians there already are in Madagascar, Africa? About four million! Or nearly twice as many Presbyterians who live in America. There are nine million Presbyterians in South Korea. They're noted for their great devotion to prayer, Bible study and evangelism. There are a million more in Brazil.

Last March I was part of a team from our denomination that met with officials from the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico. We've recently entered into a partnership with them. How many Presbyterians would you think live and worship in that country just to the south of us? I was astounded to learn that there are nearly two million Presbyterians in Mexico! They are strongest in the southern part of the country. We learned of a Presbyterian church in the Yucatan peninsula that averages nearly 7000 per week in worship—and they sing and speak only in Mayan!

This morning we celebrate that the Protestant revolution 500 years ago returned the Bible to the people in languages they could understand. It ignited a revival of faith and Christian formation that continues around the world. Our particular brand of the Reformed faith began in Scotland under the leadership of a fiery minister named John Knox. So we give thanks for the Scottish heritage of faith. But we know this thing is way bigger than people whose ancestors were MacTaggart's, MacDougal's and MacDonald's.

When I toured one of the Presbyterian seminaries in Mexico City, I walked into a study room that had portraits of the great Protestant Reformers on the walls. I looked at the labels under the frames. Martin Luther, Juan Calvin, and one portrait labelled appropriately *Juan Knox*! And that's just the way Knox would

have wanted it. He envisioned a transformed Scotland that would lead to a transformed world, exporting not ethnicity but the transcultural liberating, life-giving, energizing gospel of Jesus Christ. The Edinburgh-born Knox would have been proud to say, “I *am* Juan Knox. I am Mexican. I am also Korean. And Malagasy. Because I am in Christ. And I am brother to all others that belong to Christ.”

So it is to the heart of the gospel that we go this morning. In John 17, we get to listen in as Jesus changes from teaching his disciples to praying to his Father. Jesus let them overhear his prayers so that they could know his deepest heart. On the prayer tassels of Jesus’s robes, they could ride into the Father’s presence and hear the plan that was made before the world began. They could hear Jesus ask his Father for what he most wanted. All Scripture, of course, is God’s Word and therefore Holy Spirit inspired. All Scripture reveals the Triune God to us. But just as some passages in a book bring us the heart of the story the whole book is telling, so John 17 takes us to the heart of the gospel. It is the highest of the high. It is among the brightest jewels in the treasury of the Scriptures. We are brought into the Savior’s intimate conversation with his Father.

Now there’s a deep connection for me with one verse from this passage on Reformation Sunday. My beloved theology professor Douglas Kelly proudly traces his ancestry to the Isle of Skye. He has deep Scottish Presbyterian roots. For years, Dr. Kelly has served as the chaplain to the Highland Games on Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina. So it’s a wonderful coincidence that today’s passage contains one of his favorite verses. He would quote this verse to us often. Because he saw it as absolutely essential to knowing who God is. And how we get connected to the true God. When this verse came to him during a lecture, it was like Dr. Kelly would leave the earth for a moment, and step into the throne room of God, and let us in on how deeply he connected to Christ through this verse. Here it is in the King James he would quote:

And this is eternal life, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.

Sometimes when guys let me know they are going to miss one of my studies, I tell them, “Oh, don’t worry about it. I’m just going to hand out the keys to eternal life, but I’m sure you’ll catch up later.” Well actually this morning we truly are hearing the key to life everlasting. We’re getting in on the secret of life. The distilled, concentrated, power-packed truth: *And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*

What makes for real life? What lights up our days with the sense of everlasting life? What makes us hopeful in the midst of all this sorrow and losing and dying? *This is eternal life, that they might know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*

The gospel announces wonderful news. There is a life without end. There is a life that does not wear out. There is a source into which we may tap. Drawing from that source we can live with vibrancy now. And we go into more life after this one. Eternal life. Everlasting. Endless. Limitless.

Now we know in our bones that eternal life has to be more than just the same old life we live now going on forever. It has to be more than just not dying. We're not just talking about some kind of earthly immortality. People have thought about that for centuries and always concluded that endless life just like this in this world would not be heaven, but indeed be a living hell. We tell lots of stories about this. The book *Tuck Everlasting* shows the pain in having a well of life that others cannot share. The movie *Highlander* captured poignantly what it was like for the Scottish warrior Connor MacLeod to go on living while his beloved wife aged, withered and died. More recently Blake Lively's *The Age of Adelaide* showed the isolation in the life of a person who couldn't die.

In our stories, not dying leads to the end of relationships. The ones who get everlasting life have to watch everyone they love pass away. The only thing worse would be never changing but being forced to live this way together forever! Sort of like all the relatives coming under one roof for Thanksgiving only to find out that the holiday will never end but no one will ever change their annoying habits. Without transformation, endless life is only torture.

But notice how Jesus defines eternal life. He frames it in terms of continuing relationship. He describes living endlessly in connection to intimate knowing of another. Deep relating. This is eternal life, that they may *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. Eternal life is knowing the one true God through his Son Jesus Christ. This is not just knowing about God. It is relating to God as our Father through the saving gift of his Son Jesus. This is forever life in which relationship deepens into eternity. We do not end up endlessly alone but in the splendor of a relationship that ever has new depths, new joys, and new satisfactions. We enter communion with Jesus Christ and all those who are joined to him. We will pass from life in this world, but not into a void.

Rather we will join Jesus in returning to his Father in the kingdom that never ends, the renewed cosmos which Jesus has redeemed by his blood.

In Scripture, eternal life is entering relationship. It is entering into personal, intimate knowing of the one true Creator God, the Father, and his Son Jesus Christ. The Protestant revolution was based on some key principles:

- 1) God speaks to us in his Word, in the Holy Scriptures. This Bible is God's own Word. Authoritative and trustworthy.
- 2) What needs to be known about God for eternal life can be understood by ordinary people reading these Scriptures in prayerful reliance on the Holy Spirit. A lot of things in the Bible are difficult to understand. Not every passage is clear. But the revolution occurred when the Word started getting translated into languages people could understand. And then ordinary people asked God to speak to them as they read the Bible. And they discovered that what matters most is extraordinarily clear in Scripture.
- 3) What the Word teaches that matters most is that God has entered the world in his Son Jesus Christ. He came to save us from sin and death. He claims us as his own. He asks us to yield our lives to him. To connect to him by faith alone. When we do, he fills us with his Spirit, the Spirit of everlasting life.

We're getting right back to basics here this morning. There is news from God's Word for us. News about a relationship we can enter. And if we have entered it, we can deepen it. We can know the Creator God more and more. We meet him when we put our trust in his Son Jesus Christ. We grow closer as we pray, worship, study and serve. *This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*

I know that part of me yearns to know God. But part of me hides from knowing God. Because I am afraid of what he might ask from me. I want to keep God at a manageable distance. I keep him away when I stay distracted. I keep him away when I raise intellectual doubts that are really a smokescreen for hiding my heart. I keep him away when I seek life apart from him. But all those paths lead to death. They lead to a sense of deathliness, pessimism and despair in this world. They lead to everlasting death in the world to come. I know that. And it's time for me to stop fooling around. There is eternal life nowhere else. I need to draw from that life for my daily living. I need to renew my relationship of knowing God

through Jesus Christ every day. There's no more fooling around playing with dead things and building a kingdom of self.

This is eternal life, to know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. Shall we not open our hearts to this God who so opened his heart to us that he gave us his Son? Rather than dance around keeping him at arm's length, what if we were to press on to know him? To open our hearts and give ourselves to him, to seek him in his Scriptures and serve him with our lives? Then we would be embracing the living tradition that came from our Scottish forbears and has grown to be a movement of millions across all ethnic boundaries around the world. To know the only true God by belonging to Jesus Christ the Son whom he sent to save us.