

TOUCHING ETERNITY
Sermon for Epiphany 4C: 1Cor 13
LPC, 1/31/10

Sometimes, when I'm preaching from the Sunday lectionary, if the excerpt happens to be about Christian responsibility, I wonder if someone just coming in the door would find Christianity attractive. The Christian life is sometimes so hard! Of course there are compensations, as everyone here knows. For example, Jesus Christ promises his followers eternal life.

But what exactly do we really mean by eternal life? Is it living forever? But do you actually want to live forever? I'm not sure I do. I've known too many people who have lived long lives and find themselves suffering in their final illness. To many of these people, death is expected as a welcome friend.

On the other hand, I've also known healthy, happy people for whom the knowledge that life is short makes every moment precious. These folks tell me that they wouldn't want to live forever either, if the effect were to cheapen the preciousness of every day of life.

I would suggest that living forever and eternal life, as promised by Jesus, are not the same thing. Living forever suggests a continuation of life as we know it. Life as we know it is full of sorrows that are hard enough to bear during one normal lifespan, never mind forever.

Eternal life is something different. The word eternal does not mean endless time, but outside-of-time. To be eternal, as God is eternal, is to exist outside the linear framework that every human being inhabits during his or her earthly span.

What is appealing about the promise of eternal life is that a promise of being somehow outside of time-as we-know-it means to be free of the confines and ravages of time. To have eternal life, to be out of time, would be to be released from the suffering caused by the passage of time. Thus a person who has had a long life, who suffers in his final illness, and who longs for death, can at the same time desire eternal life.

Now, according to Christian theology, eternal life is not something that begins after you die. Eternal life is something in which the Christian participates during his or her lifetime, while he or she is still firmly rooted in time. The Christian-in-time participates in eternity by valuing things that are eternal, and by acting as if it is the eternal things that motivate his or her actions.

This is the apostle Paul's emphasis as he writes to the church in Corinth. As I have said before, first-century Corinthians were very like twenty-first-century Americans: sophisticated, proud, ambitious and competitive. The Corinthians started out trying to be good Christians. But their sophistication, pride ambition and competitive spirit were getting the better of them. They were vying with each other in holiness. This is the occasion for Paul's writing so eloquently about love, as we heard in today's reading.

Paul writes that even excellence and accomplishment in holiness are things of this temporary, impermanent world. All these things will die. The Corinthians' focus on being excellent is a vain focus. All the things they are taking pride in: their knowledge, their prophetic powers, their ecstatic experiences, are but dust in the wind. If they really want to follow Jesus, they need to focus on things eternal.

The one great eternal thing is love. When we love, Paul is saying, we temporal beings participate in the eternal. When we love, we touch eternity.

It is important to note what Paul means by love. Paul is not using the word in the same way it is used in our culture today. Love, in the biblical sense, is not an emotion, but an intentional activity. It is not something you feel, it is something you do. In some cases it is a self-willed attitude, in others a robust plan of action. Love is an exercise in the eternal.

How is love exercised if it is not an emotion? Paul makes this clear, too. Love is exercised in being patient and kind. Love is exercised in refraining from envy, boastfulness, arrogance, rudeness, selfishness, irritability, resentment, or the perverse celebration of bad things. Love is exercised in upholding the truth, in forbearance, hopefulness and endurance.

Thus, love could be exercised in the writing of a letter to the editor to uphold a truth ... provided that letter is not arrogant or rude. Love could be exercised in waiting to cool down before shooting off an angry email. Love can be exercised in the pursuit of justice for all people, not just oneself, enduring injustice while believing in, and working for, something better.

Paul acknowledges the occasional difficulty in perceiving where true love lies. Because we are experiencing love, which is an eternal thing, through the lens of temporal existence, we see "in a mirror dimly." We will have to wait to fully perceive and understand love. We will have to wait to see love clearly established as the ruling principle of the universe. In this context Paul is not clear whether this will happen after our earthly lives are over, or whether this will happen at the end of time, when God puts all things in order.

In the meantime, the faith that this ideal really exists, and the hope that we will experience it, sustain us. In the meantime, love, faith and hope are the only things that we experience now that we can count on being there for eternity. When we exercise love, we participate in the eternity. While firmly rooted in time, we touch the eternal.

Eternal life begins now.