

From the Pastor's Desk

Aionios Zoe

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. John 3:16

It is the common assumption that the words "eternal life" mentioned above means "everlasting life after death". However, in John's community it was understood differently. They understood God to be "The Eternal One". "Eternal Life" was translated from the Greek "Aionios Zoe" and John's community understood it to mean "participation in the life of the Eternal One" PRIOR TO death. In John's Gospel, "Eternal Life" is the life which God gives to the LIVING through the power of the Holy Spirit. Because we associate "eternal life" with "life after death" it is difficult to find language that properly translates "Aionios Zoe" into English.

When the disciples encountered the risen Lord in John 20: 24 we read: *The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'* *When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'.* In John's Gospel, the coming of the Holy Spirit is equated with the coming of eternal life. This is the Good News. And, on top of it all, the frosting on the cake is that death does not stop eternal life. So, limiting eternal life to only heaven has not been true to the original intent of the author and has led to a misunderstanding of the purpose of the Christian life.

With this in mind, scripture passages such as this take on new meaning:

To the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus says: *Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.* John 4:14 Note that the woman left her water jug at the well when she departed (vs 28), which symbolizes that she has no need to return to the well, the metaphorical "spring of water" i.e., eternal life, is living within her.

It is unfortunate that the understanding of "eternal life" is "life after death". This may be one reason why our spiritual lives often seem to be wanting. Rather than perceiving "eternal life" beginning now, we have deferred it until after death. Understandably, it is difficult for us to see that we are living in the midst of eternal life, especially when we encounter suffering. However, perhaps part of the problem is our conditioning to see eternal life (God's presence) as occurring primarily after death and we fail to see that the world is alive with the presence of God.

“Very truly I tell you” (NRSV translation) is a code in John that Jesus has something important to say: *Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.* John 5:24 Again, note that eternal life begins in this life.

This has great implications for how one views the purpose of the Christian life. A predominate view of Christianity is that one must have correct faith for the purpose a receiving eternal life later. However, when one perceives eternal life as beginning with Baptism, Pentecost or the awakening of faith, the purpose of the Christian life changes. Then Christianity is not about meeting requirements for a future reward. Rather, when the Christian life is about perceiving eternal life now, we look at the world through a different lens and our religious practices take on a deeper meaning. We nurture eternal life when we gather on Sunday morning in relationships of love to pray, sing, fellowship, hear the word of God, and break bread together. Indeed, when we love, we participate in eternal life because “God is love. Whoever lives in love, lives and God and God lives in them”. 1John 4:16 As we do this, the risen Christ is in our midst and the eternal life in which we live becomes more manifest.

Easter is a loud proclamation that death does not stop eternal life. It is then that we will experience it in its fullness. *Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.* 1 Corinthians 13:12 ~PB