

SERMON
October 14, 2018
he Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson

Mark 10:17

*As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him,
“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

I don't usually title sermons but I'd like to title this one, "The Joy of Eternal Life," borrowing from a best seller that I know you are all familiar with, "The Joy of Cooking" by Irma Rombauer. Irma Rombauer self-published the book in 1931. Irma was a homemaker in St. Louis, Missouri. The first edition included casual culinary chat. Since that time, "The Joy of Cooking" is one of the most published cookbooks in the United States and has been in print continuously since 1936. The second edition was expanded. The third edition included recipes that could be prepared in under 30 minutes. The fourth was published when she was 69 and her health was beginning to decline and it emphasized healthy eating. It could be said that this book, a cookbook, maps the cultural changes and social perspectives of 20th century America. I have a nephew who prizes his many editions of "*The Joy of Cooking*." For fun, I looked it up on EBay and found a 1943 war edition on sale for \$300. Then I found a first edition of the 1931 book which is on sale for \$3,500. And there are currently 20 "watchers." Who would have guessed that a cookbook could be such an interesting map of culture and social perspectives. And I might add, that it is also a source of theological reflection. You see, on Page 482 of the 1975 Edition is an article on Ham. Irma Rombauer writes,

“Someone defined eternity as a ham and two people.”

She continues,

“The term [ham] probably dates from the days when the term applied ... to the ... mountain of meat we now call a whole ham—the cured and smoked hind of a hog. Now ...there is a wide variety of cuts and sizes available, [and] eternity has somewhat shortened.”

I'd say Irma's chatty style and culinary humor makes her a bit of a theological stand-up comedian. But Irma is more “on to it” that perhaps she realized. Eternity is not such an easy concept to explain. But she did quite well! Eternity is less about clock-time and more about an experience. The Gospels speak of eternal life as a centerpiece of Jesus' message—but most of us, I assume, have a rather mistaken view of what is meant—getting it mixed up with notions of angels on clouds forever strumming harps or sinners in some pit of fire in torment. This is what Marcus Borg refers to as Heaven or Hell Christianity—a terrible misuse God's boundless, unlimited love. In its extreme form (and apparently not that uncommon) Heaven or Hell Christianity says that God love you but will send you to Hell and eternal torment if you don't believe in Jesus. Terrible theology! In the Gospels, eternal life is not about believing a set of statements about Jesus now for the sake of heaven later, but about *loving* Jesus and *loving* God as known in Jesus. It's about entering into “the life of the age to come” now through a loving, life-giving relationship. It has nothing to do with a concept of Hell, but is about a path into life with God here and now. Hell, or Gehennah, was visualized and was a place outside the city walls where refuse and trash was burned. Gehennah was about separation and isolation. The Gospels say, “Come back in!” “For God so loved the world that he gifted Jesus to us that we might know and enjoy an intimate relationship with God here and now.”

Eternal life does not mean some sort of infinite temporal duration or chronology, but rather a sort of timelessness—like the way we experience a genuine loving relationship.

Boundless. Limitless. A treasure. Something that even death cannot destroy. One of the most beautiful love poems I know of is from the 13th century Persian poet, Rumi.

It is called “The Tent.” Here is part of it:

Outside, the freezing desert night.
This other night inside grows warm, kindling.
Let the landscape be covered with thorny crust.
We have a soft garden in here.

The news we hear is full of grief for that future,
but the real news inside here
is there’s no news at all.

Friend, our closeness is this:
anywhere you put your foot, feel me
in the firmness under you.

How is it with this love,
I see your world and not you?

Timelessness. And connectedness. A strength and melding— “warm, kindling....”
Irma Rombauer isn’t quite as eloquent as Rumi, but she gets it—“two people and one ham.”

When I was a young woman, fresh out of seminary and preparing for ordination, I had to go before the Board of Examining Chaplains. The meeting was held one afternoon at 104 West Monument Street in a big old mansion near Mt. Vernon Square in Baltimore. It was a four-story brownstone building with a priceless Tiffany skylight over the marble stairwell. I was ushered into a dark board room with a heavily carved table and chairs. The smoke swirled around the heads of a dozen or so priests who were convened to question me. Down at the end of the table, was the Bishop. There were some initial

pleasantries, and then one of the Examiners asked, “Tell us, Miss Lewald (that was my name), tell us about “immortality.” A number of Biblical passages flew through my head. Something from the 1928 prayer book perhaps. St. Paul, perhaps. “Immortality!” I had no idea what to say. Nervously, and maybe a little flippantly (I was only 26), I answered, “It sounds Greek to me!” Silence. Then the Bishop spoke up from somewhere way down at the end of the table, “Exactly!” And then he proceeded to discuss the concept of “Eternal Life.” “Quite different,” he said, reassuring me. “Immortality smacks of Alexander the Great and his teacher Aristotle who taught him about Greek philosophy, the arts, and mythology.” You might recall that Alexander was taught that when warriors died they were taken over the river Styx—where they were ferried to the other side—where there was “war no more” and where every night was “the night they invented champagne!” Sounds like something a young man would love! By the time Alexander was 26 he had conquered Persian Empire spreading Greek culture into western Asia, forever changing the intellectual and cultural landscape of western civilization. The Romans adopted the same concept—death as cross the river, which has colored our understanding and expectations. It’s Greek in origin. “Eternal Life,” written about in the Hebrew scriptures is something quite different. Different world-view. Different values. Different tradition. Different understanding of God. Different everything.

Jesus spoke Aramaic—a modern version of Hebrew—which gave shape to his teaching. The word for eternal life is ‘olam. ‘Olam means a period of time with no beginning and no end. Only God is ‘olam. Life and eternal life are not consecutive but concurrent. Life and eternal life do not succeed one another, but co-exist. When we think of time it is a sort of chronological thing—like the time on a clock or the days on a calendar. But there is also time that can be called “the time of opportunity.” Time that is vertical rather than horizontal.

“For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to reap. A time to gather and a time to cast away....”

The third chapter of Ecclesiastes is a beautiful love poem of life! It leads us deeper into the experience of life.

“To everything, turn, turn, turn. There is a season, turn, turn, turn.”

This concept has come to us from the Hebrew rather than from the Greek.

Jesus was serious about eternal life when he said things such as “love your enemies; pray for those who abuse you; turn the other cheek; and blessed are the humble.” Eternal life is living in the Kingdom of God now where love matters, now. Only God is ‘olam. Eternal life, therefore, is life lived in God for whom there is no beginning and no end. God’s mercy is ‘olam. God’s righteousness is ‘olam. God’s Word is ‘olam. Life in God is ‘olam. Life in Jesus is ‘olam. The Gospel is an invitation to God’s kingdom, now and forever.

The man in today’s gospel has plenty of stuff but something was missing. His life was full but he was empty. Despite his acquisitions and accumulations he was searching for more. He’s acquired wealth but not the life he wanted. There is an urgency about the man in today’s gospel. He doesn’t just go to Jesus. He runs to him and asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The life he is looking for only God can give. He’s heard about it since his youth. It’s the story told in Scripture. It’s the life promised to his ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It’s the life that drew the Israelites through the Red Sea and into the wilderness. Like those before him this man is seeking the promised land.

So what it it?! He's looking for the *warmth and kindling* and the closeness inside "The Tent."

Jesus says, "You lack one thing." "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." Authentic spirituality, the way of Christ, is always about letting go. Jesus has already told the disciples this twice. He will tell them a third time right after today's gospel. Three times he tells them about letting go in order to experience a new life. St. Mark says, that Jesus loved this man. This gospel is more about love than it is about money. Jesus is being descriptive not prescriptive. He sees how the man's many possessions trap him and possess him and isolate him. The story reveals just how easily we confuse our wealth and possessions with the inherent richness of our life. Too many of us are looking for what a friend of mine described as a "hearse with a trailer hitch." We want to take it all with us. We don't get to do that. As a matter of fact, it is in being lavish with what we have, not holding what we have, that brings us closer to each other. Not just "letting go," but spreading it around like the way God spreads seeds throughout his creation. That's what Jesus asked of the man in today's gospel. It is what he asks of us.

Our primarily investment is not in our retirement but in our neighbor. We are reminded that we do not create our own life, we receive life, we inherit it, from God and others. We are not owners of our life but stewards and caretakers of God's life in the world, each other, and ourselves. We surrender all that we are and all that we have and find that now we lack nothing. The life we give away is now the life we live.

I don't know Irma Rombauer's religious background, whether she was Christian or Jewish, but eternal life was on her mind. She was all about teaching people how to spread a table and welcome guests into your life. She might have said, "Ham is imperishable.

Immortal. A feast waiting for you in the afterlife.” But she didn’t.” She understood what forever and ever means. She even gives it a title in large gold letters—beginning with the word, “Joy.” “The Joy of Cooking.” No, “The Joy of Eternal Life.” I’d say, she got it!

Amen.