

Live It Up!

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The Celebration of the Ascension  
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Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; 1 John 5:9-13; Luke 24:44-53

Text: "Whoever has the Son has life. . . ." -- 1 John 5:12

About twenty years ago, one of my best friends began telling me that I didn't know how to play.

I didn't know how to have fun. I didn't know how to relax. I didn't know how to let go of my work and responsibilities and cares.

She wasn't nagging me, she was simply pointing out this feature of my personality, and she did so out of loving concern for my welfare. If I didn't develop that skill at being playful, she told me, she was afraid I was going to be doomed to a compromised life. I would never know, she believed, how delightful and healing and just plain fun life can be. In her own way, she was telling me what Mama Cass Elliot told us in her song, "Just don't let the good life pass you by."

My friend loved me at the time and loves me still, and I know that she was holding this mirror up to me to help me become the person she believed God intends for me to be. She didn't get preachy on me, and there wasn't much that was pious in what she had to say. She was looking at my life from a perspective I didn't and couldn't have, at least not directly, and I appreciated her willingness to tell me what she was seeing. Who, after all, wants to be the dull person that all work and no play can make one?

So after a little initial defensiveness on my part, I agreed to spend a long weekend at my friend's tiny and charming cottage home on the banks of a small and charming river in Connecticut. It was just the two of us for most of the weekend that I remember lots of jointly prepared meals and walks along the river and window shopping in her small but very boutique-y village, and cards and books in the evenings. I was served breakfast in bed for the first time in my life, and I remember a bubble bath – one at a time, in case you're wondering.

I've been mindful of my dear friend's solicitous care of me ever since that visit, and I've tried harder to balance my very Protestant work ethic with a healthy sense of play. I've passed on her advice to others, and I pass it on to you this morning. Please go home this afternoon and honor God and the Sabbath not by doing more work, but by going outside to play.

Play is important to us, at every age, and it can take many forms. "When I am an old woman," Jenny Joseph warns us in her poem "Warning," "I shall wear purple, with a red hat that doesn't go, and doesn't suit me." Is that all it takes to play – wearing purple and a red hat? And if you throw in a feather boa and some lacy gloves, does life become more playful for someone who's been widowed? My sister was a Red Hatter for a couple of years, but she dropped out of her chapter when her sister hatters stopped being

playful. They stopped wearing their purple dresses and red hats and they started showing up to lunch in sweatshirts and jeans. Mae thought they'd lost the point; to her, the dressing up, and not just the lunch, was the fun.

Play is one of the ways we find ourselves. We play because we like to play, and what we like to do tells us who we are. One of my goddaughters, I learned the other night from her mother, is becoming a jock. She recently won her karate competition, she played basketball through the winter, and now her parents are regularly at her softball games. J.J. is turning into a jock not because her parents are pushing her into sports, but simply because she loves being physically active. It's hard work – she works as hard at sports as she does on her homework – but she loves it, and to her it's play. It's who she is.

You all know this. You know it about yourselves and you know it about your children and grandchildren. One of the great joys of being a parent or grandparent is being part of this process of discovery, of watching and nurturing the gradual unfolding of a human personality. Nothing, I'm told, quite compares to it, and I believe that. And we know that one of parenting's great missteps is blurring the line between helping our children become themselves and trying to mold them into fresh versions of ourselves.

When the author of First John speaks of having eternal life by having the Son of God in today's epistle reading, I think he's got something like good parenting or good teaching in mind: "And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life."

God has already given us eternal life. It's not waiting for us after we die. It's right here, right now, waiting for us to live it. Eternal life isn't a reward; it's a gift, and it's ours for the accepting. And it has everything to do with this life, and whatever it has to do with the life hereafter, we know next to nothing about.

Now I know and you know that words such as these from First John can be and have been used to reinforce religious tribalism – we Christians have the Son and eternal life, and all the rest of you don't and are therefore damned – and if you want to interpret God and Jesus and the Bible this way, no one can stop you. And lots of Christians have.

But I'm not one of them. I don't understand the God of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in monstrous terms, a God who creates people only to have so many of them perish eternally because they didn't join my religion. A God like that is too small for me – as such a God was for the New Testament scholar J. B. Phillips fifty years ago – and if I have to take my chances on going to heaven to spend eternity with a God like that, surrounded by people who believe in a God like that, I'd rather take my chances with the devil. There are Christians – many of them – today who would say that saying something like that condemns me to hell, but if it does, then like Huck Finn, who refused to betray his friend, Jim, "I'll go to hell then."

You may have heard me say to the children a few weeks ago that words often have different meanings when we speak them in church, and life is one of those words. Eternal life, in our ordinary experience, is a contradiction in terms. Eternal means without end – actually it means without beginning or end – and life in all the forms in which we know it comes with exactly those things – a beginning, a middle, and an end. In our ordinary experience, "eternal" and "life" don't go together, and in our effort to make sense of the phrase "eternal life," we've simplified it to the point of missing its meaning and significance.

For the vast majority of us, eternal life means a whole lot more of this one. At the resurrection of the dead for final judgment, God will put our mortal bodies back together again and send some of us to heaven and some of us to hell. That's the imagery given us

by the Bible and our tradition.

But that's all it is – imagery. It is not history. It is not science. It is not experience. It isn't even common sense.

Common sense tells me that whatever eternal life is, it is not simply a whole lot more of this one, even this one with the bugs worked out. Eternal life isn't about quantity; it's about quality. It's about a kind of life for which time is an irrelevant category, and for which, therefore, death is not the end – because eternal life has no end. Just as it has no beginning.

And neither the death we all face after sixty or eighty or ninety years on this earth, or all the little foreshadowings of that death we live with day in and day out – our fears, our failures, our setbacks, our sorrows, our sins, and our infirmities – none of those can take that eternal life from us, once we accept it as the gift of God that it is.

The anxieties go away, the fears go away, the worries go away, the anger goes away, the resentment goes away – all of that stuff that clings so closely to us, that we wrap ourselves in to assemble our identities – those take their leave of us, one by one, day by day, as we grow more and more into the likeness of God. There's nothing magical about this; it's hard work and it's the work of a lifetime, but that life is your masterpiece, and God has given you all the tools you need to create it: “And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.”

I can't tell you this morning what eternal life looks like for you; I can certainly tell you what it doesn't look like, and I've done some of that already. God's eternal life, given you in Jesus Christ, is exactly like the life God gave you at your birth: it is for you and you alone. No one can live your eternal life for you any more than they can live your natural life for you. You have to live it. You have to discover it. You have to accept it. You and you alone.

“Take hold of the eternal life,” Paul told Timothy, “to which you were called and for which you were made.” My friends, God didn't make any of us for this life only. “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,” Paul told the Corinthians, “we are of all people most to be pitied.”

This life, with all its beauty and sorrow, its possibilities and tragedies, this life is not all the life there is, not for you, not for me, not for anyone. In the midst of this life there is eternal life waiting for all of us, not somewhere beyond the sunset, but right here, right now. It's yours for the taking and for the living. It's been given us in God's loving, saving acts in Jesus the Christ.

And so I urge you this morning, as I urge you every Sunday morning . . . when it comes to eternal life -- live it up!