

Life Is...

1 John 1:1-2:2

When the boys were little they had a playroom upstairs in a finished attic. My husband and I could monitor their activities while we cooked or picked up the house by listening at the foot of the stairs. One afternoon while fixing dinner, I overheard them arguing or attempting to distribute the ‘cool’ pieces from the giant Lego box they had accumulated. You understand, as a means of boosting sales, Lego severely limits the number of uniquely shaped pieces that are critical to building structures any young man can be proud of. At the time of this discussion Eric was about 3 years old, so Karl would have been over 6. As the older brother, Karl was the self-appointed distribution manager of the Wagner Lego Inventory. Negotiations have deteriorated to yelling so I ran to the bottom of the stairs in time to hear Eric screaming, “That’s not fair!” Karl calmly replies, “Life isn’t fair.” To which Eric boldly proclaims, “Karl – you’re not life!”

You’re not life!

Part of the delight in young Eric’s astute comment is his definition of life as a person. Generally, we think of life as a set of circumstances. Some fun descriptions:

- Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans. John Lennon
- Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving.” Albert Einstein
- Life is like an onion: You peel it off one layer at a time, and sometimes you weep.
- Life is like a hot bath. It feels good while you’re in it, but the longer you stay in, the more wrinkled you get.

Imagine my surprise when I read today’s passage from 1John!

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.
1John 1:1-3

In his letter, John writes Jesus is life! This was a challenging statement! It made my brain hurt! When I think of John writing about Jesus, I remember one of the most beautiful portions of scripture ever written, (you can say it along with me):

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. (KJV John 1:1-5)

Here is the image of Jesus I can embrace! Light eternal. Incomprehensible. A Jesus above the situations of the world, up there in heaven, with God, away from the dirtiness of daily living. Jesus is LIGHT not LIFE! Because as Karl told his younger brother, life isn't fair!

- Life is being misrepresented and misinterpreted. You go to school, learn what is expected of you, live into those expectations and your friends betray you. You lose everything.
- Life is living as a woman in a patriarchal society where men dictate what you can do, when you can do it and who you can talk to. You are shunned, scorned and undervalued.
- Life is taking care of business so you miss an evening with your friends. The stories they tell about that event are unbelievable. You are angry, hurt and feel excluded. Why are you always left out?
- Life is confusing, complicated, messy. Jesus, Son of God, Light Eternal, you're not life!

You're not life! Today's scripture reading and young Eric's retort haunt me.

Perhaps I need to explore the meanings of life. Like a good 21st century

American, I open my computer's dictionary and find these definitions:

1. Life is the condition that distinguishes animals and plants from inorganic matter, including the capacity for growth, reproduction, functional activity, and continual change preceding death
2. Life is the existence of an individual human being or animal
3. Life is the period during which something inanimate or abstract continues to exist, function, or be

These definitions confirm my understanding of life as a situation to be endured.

Life in these terms is an opportunity to request God's guidance and assistance,

sure; but they are not terms that describe an instance of identification, not

meanings that allow me to agree with John's revelation that Jesus is Life.

So I being a good seminarian, I dust off my biblical dictionary and find the definition linked to the scripture passage, 1 John 1.

Listen to what I found:

1. Life is the absolute fullness of being, both essential and ethical, which belongs to God, and through him to Christ in whom the Word put on human nature.
2. Life is real and genuine, an existence active and vigorous, devoted to God, blessed.
3. Life is the light illumined by which one arrives at life more fully.

I found over 50 New Testament scripture references, in addition to today's

reading from First John, clearly attesting to this being the scriptural definition of

life – the absolute fullness of being which belongs to God and through God to

Christ. Jesus is life!

Over the past few weeks, we have been studying the Lord's Prayer in Sunday school. This class is a unique gathering of outstanding theologians and I would commend joining the assembly to all of you. We have spent a good deal of time discussing temptation, evil, God's participation in testing us and the responsibility of our behavior. I mention it here because a scripture passage that became important in this discussion was also referenced in the definition of life. The Old Testament passage is Deuteronomy 30: 19-20 and God is speaking to Israel through Moses:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deut. 30:19-20)

Choose life! God wants us to choose to live into the fullness of our beings, to be active and vigorous, devoted to God. God wants us to be blessed! Choose life! Choose Jesus? How do we do that?

Again, I refer to the outstanding theologians in our Sunday school class. One commented that he had heard people claiming that 'turning their lives over to Jesus' made all the difference in their situations. How do we 'turn our life over to Jesus', he wondered. A classmate replied, "Turning your life over to Jesus entails letting go of any expectation you hold for a situation. It means realizing that wherever an experience leads, you are supposed to be there and God is there with you."

Letting go of expectations? Resting in situations knowing that you are supposed to be there? Understanding that God is with you wherever you are? It is as easy and as difficult as that! Really? And yet...perhaps this is where the secular situational definition of life meets the divine personal definition of life.

Out of God's goodness, we are given ancient, eternal stories in the Bible. In these stories, people find themselves in situations where expectations and results do not match. Let's revisit the 'Life is' situations I introduced earlier.

- Life is being misrepresented and misinterpreted. You go to school, learn what is expected of you, live into those expectations and your friends betray you. You lose everything. The situation and expectation of this first story, of course, is the one we have just celebrated, the story of Jesus. Jesus lived this life. Raised as an observant Palestinian Jew, Jesus lives into the fullness of God's law as no human before him or since has been able to do. Jesus understood the essence of God's law – to build human community by loving God and loving others, treating them as we would have them treat us. He lived into that reality and spent the last years of his life teaching, challenging and changing expectations. In this manner Jesus was life; both the essential and ethical life that belongs to God. This life presented a problem for the secular society in which Jesus lived. It was too risky, unconventional, and disruptive and had to be stopped. Jesus was betrayed by his friends. He was humiliated and lost everything a poor Rabbi had, including his life. But the Fullness of Being that was Jesus could not be stopped by worldly power. God is revealed in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Because Jesus lives we can be in relationship with him. 1 John says, "if we walk in the light, as he

himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another...if we confess our sins (our inability to live as God desires), Jesus who is faithful and just will forgive us...”

- Life is living as a woman in a patriarchal society where men dictate what you can do, when you can do it and who you can talk to. You are shunned, scorned and undervalued. The situation and expectation – Life has been hard for this unnamed Samaritan woman. She is currently unmarried and has had five husbands. Making a living is hard in Samaria, men die young and women cannot survive on their own. She exists to the best of her abilities, given the circumstances, but to avoid the stares and snide remarks she expects from her neighbors, she gathers her water at noon. One day she encounters Jesus. He shatters her expectations. First he ignores his identity as a Jew and asks a Samaritan for water. Then he confuses her by talking of living water, he challenges her intellect with religious discussion, and astonishes her by telling her life story. Her expectations broken, she is awakened to the reality of God in her midst. In the fullness of that joy, she returns to the neighbors she was attempting to avoid and shares the good news of encounter. We are told ‘many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of her testimony...and Jesus stayed there two days...” The Samaritan woman let go of her expectations, recognized the wonder of her encounter with God, and began an active and vigorous life devoted to God. She was blessed.
- Life is taking care of business so you miss an evening with your friends. The stories they tell about that event are unbelievable. You are angry, hurt and

feel excluded. Why are you always left out? The situation and expectation- Thomas was taking care of family business earlier in the week when his friends, the other 12 followers of Jesus met to talk about everything that happened last week. At the time, he was okay with missing the meeting because he needed time to himself to process all that had happened. When they gathered together, they all talked at once and he just couldn't hear, comprehend and think in a crowd. Then they come up with this story about seeing Jesus and receiving a message from him. Right! They probably got into some kind of meditative trance, someone (most likely Peter) made a comment about a vision and they were so tired, their emotions were so raw, that they conjured up a vision of Jesus. Thomas just didn't believe it. He knows what he saw and it was Jesus crucified, bloody and buried. No one lives through that. But they are his friends and he spent all those years with them. He is with them tonight. Suddenly, Jesus is here! Just like they said! And Thomas knows it is Jesus because he doesn't make fun of him or deride him. Jesus calmly answers his earlier challenge to touch the crucifixion wounds. Thomas let go of his expectations, recognized the wonder of Jesus presence before him and lived an active, vigorous life devoted to God. Tradition claims that Thomas carried the gospel to India.

Bible stories are wonderful, but seem a bit removed from today some 2000 years later, oceans away in a time of electricity, mass media and global communications. I would like to share two experiences from my chaplaincy

internships. These incidents came to me while preparing this sermon and they hint at the power faith in Jesus has to affect current events.

As a survivor of the tortuous medical regimens cancer compels modern humanity to endure, I felt an affinity to the patients I cared for as a chaplain intern. I knew God was already present in the rooms I entered. My role was to provide a physical nurturing presence through listening, prayers and song. Neither of these situations will be transformed into a Hallmark made for TV movie with a soothing soundtrack and softly muted lighting. These are stark, tragic, unfair situations of life, one of which is transformed by an encounter with Jesus through faith.

- While interning at a hospice house, I was called to visit a young man in his mid-thirties who was dying of cancer. His body had been weakened by a long struggle with substance abuse and was unable to mount a successful battle against the disease. The medical staff attended to his physical pains with every medicine in their arsenal but he continued to cry out in agony whenever he was awake. When someone was in the room, his anguish was focused and though still visibly agitated, he spoke quietly. I spent a great deal of time with him in an attempt to promote silence on the floor for others. Over and over again he would cry, “God, I’ve done terrible things. Can you forgive me?” I would listen to his life story, read his favorite Bible passages, tell the story of God’s love, sing hymns and pray with him. Yet, only sheer exhaustion brought sleep and relief from his terrors. Hours later, he would awaken and I returned to quiet him. This routine was repeated for the few weeks he was at the facility. His only solace was sleep.

- At a local hospital, I was called to attend a pediatric patient who succumbed to the treatment of a disease he had been fighting from birth. Case studies could be written of the many systems that failed this child from his biological family, child protective services, his church and the medical establishment. Knowing all this background, I was praying furiously for guidance and support as I rode the elevator and walked the hospital corridors to ICU. Entering the ICU waiting room, I spied a couple sitting quietly in the corner, holding hands, the patient's foster parents. After introducing myself, I sit with them, listening to their story and praying with them. They talk about the desperate pain of the situation and the certain knowledge that Jesus has descended into the abyss with them. She says, "Because Jesus cried, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me', I know he is with my child right now, in that bed. And I know that he is here with me and my husband. It hurts. Lord, it hurts. But we aren't alone." I looked at that woman's face; saw the love for her child and I know, to this day, that I was looking at the face of God. There was a calmness and sense of awe around her child's bed that differed from all the other bays in the ICU that night. The staff attended the child with a sense of wonder sometimes lost in the science of medicine. We all knew what was happening but we suspended our expectations to allow for the Fullness of Being.

While reflecting on these situations, I realize that my sermon was started with the premise of designation; life is either one definition or the other -

either/or. Life is either a secular situation or Life is the fullness of being which belongs to God and through God to Christ. Listening to the stories while writing I realize - Life is both! As our Sunday School theologian explained and the bible stories from John and the ICU experience attested: Life is letting go of our expectations and recognizing the wonder of Jesus presence with us. Life is acknowledging our situation and encountering Jesus right there, where we are. Life is both unfair and an opportunity to experience the fullness of being that God would choose for us and offers us through the Son, our risen Savior, Jesus.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Benediction

Friends, know this – Life is both unfair and an opportunity to experience the fullness of being that God would choose for us and offers us through the Son, our risen Savior, Jesus.

And now, may the Creator inspire us, the Savior embrace us, and the Spirit embolden us to engage life fully, until we meet again. Amen.