

Life Sustainer, we receive the things you desire to offer us today and each new day! Grant us wisdom and openness to your Word and use its teachings to energize our bodies and spirits. Amen.

August 12, 2018 – John 6:35, 41-51

“Whoever Believes Has Eternal Life”

If you’ve ever decided to read all four Gospels, you’ve probably noticed something about the Gospel of John. It’s very different from the other three Gospels. And one thing you will certainly notice is there isn’t nearly as much action in it as in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Take, for example, the chapter in which this morning’s text is found. It gets our attention with Jesus feeding more than 5000 folks with a young boy’s lunch of five loaves of bread and two fish. And following that, there’s a brief account of Jesus walking on water. But then the chapter seems to go on and on and on with Jesus sermonizing about the Bread of Life. For almost 50 verses Jesus talks about something that we all feel could have been said in just a few short sentences. And so the temptation is to skim past his long-winded discourse, which seems to circle back and repeat itself at times, in search of something more worthy of our attention. But if we do, then we do the Gospel a disservice, because it’s worth our while to sit and reflect on what he has to say.

Now, if you’re looking for a Spark Notes summary of the Gospel, all you need to do is go back to the first chapter. The whole book can pretty much be summed up when the author in that opening prologue, describes Jesus as the Word, saying “the Word became flesh, and lived among us.” (v. 14) “He came to his own home,” it says, “and his own people did not accept him.” (v. 11)

And as if by way of illustration, this morning’s text opens with the crowd grumbling and complaining and refusing to accept Jesus’ claim to divinity, with his words, “I am the Bread of Life.” “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?” they ask each other. “How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” (v. 42) Jesus is just like one of them. How can he possibly be sent from God? They remember when he was in diapers. They can easily recall his awkward teenage years, not so different from any of the other village youth. “Jesus isn’t divine!” they argue. Why, he’s nothing but a peasant with an oversized opinion of himself!

He came to his own home, and his own people did not accept him. But how often are we guilty of the same thing? I know I certainly am. As much as I would like to feel morally and intellectually superior to this morning’s crowd which grumbled and complained about Jesus’ words, I’m no different than they are because, more times than not, I forget that every common, ordinary person I encounter is a child of God, and within them is a divine spark that I so easily fail to notice.

I can see Jesus in the faces of everyone present at Sunday worship, but completely overlook his presence in the stressed-out, underpaid, overworked wait staff serving my lunch not an hour later. I can get so caught up in deadlines and to-do lists, that I regularly miss God’s glaring presence in the elderly person who won’t get out of my way at the grocery store, or the exhausted parent and unruly child in line at the Post Office, or the frustrated school teacher who feels more like a baby sitter than a teacher. I am given multiple opportunities every day to witness God’s presence in lives of ordinary people, and most of the time I miss them.

Fortunately for Jesus’ audience, he’s not offended by their rejection. But instead, he continues addressing the crowd, and embedded within his discourse is the statement, “Whoever believes has eternal life.” (v. 47) Now, there’s a whole heck of a lot of information in that seemingly simple five-word statement, and I want to share some of it with you.

First, there are the words at the end of the sentence: eternal life. Although many of us have grown up understanding “eternal life” to mean “heaven,” it means more than that in the Gospel of John. Closer to the end of the Gospel, right before his arrest and crucifixion, we find Jesus praying for his disciples. And in that prayer, he makes clear that eternal life means to know God (17.3). Eternal life isn’t something that

happens after we die, then. But eternal or everlasting life means to know God or to be in relationship with God. And that's something that happens right now in this lifetime.

And the way that you experience this relationship with God, he says, is to believe. Again, many of us seem to be confused about the meaning of this word, too. "Believe" doesn't mean to accept a certain doctrine as true. Regardless of what you have heard or been taught, it doesn't mean to accept as true that Jesus died for our sins. That may be true, but that's not what Jesus is saying to the crowd of people.

The roots of the word in both Greek and Latin mean to give one's heart and one's self at its deepest level to something or someone. In short, the pre-modern meaning of the word "believe" is to love. And in this context, it seems to mean to love God.

And finally, the first word of the sentence: Whoever. "Whoever" is all-inclusive; it means no exceptions. It means gays, and lesbians, and bisexuals, and heterosexuals. It means transgender people and cisgender people and people who prefer no label at all. It means people of all religions and those who choose not to affiliate themselves with any religion. It means people with PhDs and those who dropped out of high school. It means the person on the street corner asking for a handout as much as it means a corporate executive. But most importantly, it means you and it means me.

So "whoever believes has eternal life" doesn't mean whoever accepts as fact that Jesus died for our sins will go heaven. That may be true, but that's not what Jesus is saying in this text. He is saying everyone, no exceptions, who loves God, anyone who gives their heart to God, has an ongoing relationship with God. And what that means is you don't have to believe this doctrine or that creed. No rites, rituals, or requirements are necessary to experience God's love and grace.

So next time you hear someone say that you can't be in a full relationship with God unless you do so-and-so or unless you stop doing this or that, just remember that you are a "whoever." And whoever loves God is in relationship with God.

For many in the crowd this would have been pretty upsetting because they, like most of us, would have been taught that there are certain requirements that must be fulfilled to be in right relationship with God. But Jesus says no, that's not true.

Our relationship with God isn't dependent on our ability to fulfill rules and regulations. Our relationship is simply a gift from God. Returning to the first chapter of John, in which I mentioned the rest of the book can be summarized, it reminds us that "the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (v. 17) And that's what Jesus is talking about in this morning's text: grace. Unearned grace. Grace upon grace. The gift of eternal life – a relationship with God – that comes if we give ourselves over in love to God.

It's a beautiful message that I don't think we hear enough of today. We try to qualify it with things we have to do and believe. But it's not grace if it comes with strings attached.

It's a beautiful message to receive. But it's also a beautiful message worth sharing with others. And the best way we can share it is by living it out. Accepting others in all their ordinariness, and embracing them the way God accepts and embraces us, without any conditions.

May that be the message we proclaim: one of love and grace for everyone, no exceptions. Amen.