

Title: Encountering the Life of God

Text: John 5:19-30

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This Gospel passage arises out of controversy and it reflects a Sabbath controversy in Jesus' own ministry, but also a later controversy about Christ in the late first century when this Gospel was written. In this Gospel Jesus and God, the Son and the Father, have the most intimate and personal of relationships. The Son and the Father are one in mind and heart. Jesus does the will of the Father and the Father delegates to Jesus the authority to act on the Father's behalf. To honor the Son is to honor the Father because the Son represents the Father. This passage emphasizes two functions in particular of the Son representing the Father. The Son acting in behalf of the Father is authorized to bestow life and to act as judge.

The life that Jesus bestows is eternal life—life in relationship with God. Jesus knows God and reveals God and so makes available to those who embrace Jesus a relationship involving communion with God and cooperation with God's purpose and will.

Jesus lives this relationship. And in living this relationship Jesus incarnates—embodies—in his life—his words and deeds, his character and conduct, his reactions and relationships—the very life of God. It is a life of self-giving. God gives the Son and the Son gives his life to God and to the world.

This Scripture says that the one who hears the word of Jesus and trusts the God who sent Jesus into the world has eternal life—that is, he or she comes to know God and experience God in his or her relationships and experiences. Because Jesus acts on behalf of God for us to trust the word of Jesus then is to trust the word of God, to model the life of Jesus is to model the life of God, because Jesus and God are one in heart and mind and purpose. This is the basic theological framework for John's Gospel

Lest we think that this all has to do with mystical experience—with prayer and meditation and inner personal experience—we need to remember what Jesus' life and ministry was about. To know God and experience eternal life is to engage the world the way Jesus engaged the world. That means engaging the ignorance, injustice, and evil of the world in positive ways in order to redeem the ignorance, injustice and evil through love, forgiveness, and grace. That is the way of Jesus and eternal life.

If faith or belief or trust in Jesus does not lead us into the kind of life Jesus lived then what good is it? Perhaps the most important aspect of faith in Jesus is faithfulness to Jesus, faithfulness to the way of Jesus, who was sent into the world by the Father to show us how

to love and forgive and care for one another—how to create a community of love. I know that we are a long way off from creating that kind of community on earth but such is the life of God and the will of God as it is manifested in Jesus.

Faith is not mere belief in some doctrine about Jesus; it is about following the way of Jesus in the world. To trust in Jesus and know God is to share the life of God expressed through Jesus—that means caring for the world and loving the world. God so loved the world that he gave his Son, in order to redeem the world. To share God’s life is to give our life for the good of the world.

The reason faith is important is because what we believe at the core of our being shapes and influences what we do. I don’t know if you picked this up in the reading of this passage but the criterion on which the future judgment that is described here is based says nothing about faith. The passage says that when those who are in the graves come forth those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be judged. (Our translation says “condemned” but the Greek word is the basic word for judgment that is so translated in its other occurrences in this text.) The judgment is rendered not on the basis of belief (what one believes about Jesus), but on the basis of the life that is lived, whether what is done has been good or evil.

What ultimately matters is what we do, or the way I like to say it, what ultimately matters is the person we are becoming. And the reason faith is important is because what we believe about God and our relationship to God and God’s relationship with the world deeply shapes and influences what we do; it impacts and forms the person we become.

I’ve been debating this point with my evangelical brothers and sisters sometime now. Why would belief in and of itself make any difference to God? Think about this. (Why would what one believes about God or Jesus, or anything else make that much difference?) God is so much greater and larger than what we believe about God. Our beliefs about God are based on our understanding of God and for human beings to understand God is like jelly fish trying to understand human beings.

The real issue is this: Does our beliefs about God empower us to be like God? Does our faith in God inspire us and lead us to share God’s love and compassion for the world? If not, if our faith or belief does not lead us to share in God’s love and concern for the world then what useful purpose does our faith have?

Having a theologically correct faith is irrelevant; what is relevant is having a healthy, productive, transformative faith that empowers us to share God’s love and mercy and forgiveness and God’s sense of what is right and good and just in the world. We were created to reflect God’s image, to bear God’s likeness in character and conduct. We may have little understanding of God or much understanding of God, but what matters is

whether or not we live like God and act like God by loving the world the way God loves the world.

So in one sense what we believe doesn't matter that much; but in another sense it does, because what we really believe in our hearts shapes who we are and what we do. It matters because what we really believe impacts how we live. So in this sense belief matters a great deal.

And sometimes it's not the belief that we profess to have or claim to have that matters but what we really believe in the depths of our heart that we may not even be conscience of.

For example, here is a child whose father is in prison and his mother is in no condition to be a mother so he bounces around in foster homes. Finally he is adopted by parents who want to love but don't know how to love. They are stern and demanding and he never feels love and acceptance from them. Rather, he feels like he has to earn their love and he keeps falling short of their expectations. At some point in adulthood he becomes part of a Christian community that preaches and seeks to embody the grace and acceptance of God. So he professes his belief in the grace of God, he claims that God loves him and accepts him, but in his gut, in his heart he doesn't really feel it, so his operating belief, the belief that is really governing his life, is not his professed belief. His operating belief is still that God is a demanding Parent and he can't quite measure up. You see, beneath what we profess to believe, even beneath conscience awareness, we may have deeply ingrained beliefs that are guiding our lives.

This is why belief is so important. Because what we really believe in the core of our being shapes and guides and influences what we do and the persons we become.

In this passage Jesus is given the authority of God to bestow life and he is given the authority to judge. I believe this is good news. If Jesus is the judge then the judgment he renders is not a judgment to be feared, but a judgment to be welcomed, because Jesus' goal and purpose is to save the world. In John 3:17 John says that God did not send Jesus into the world to judge the world, but to save the world. But here Jesus is given the authority to judge, but the reason Jesus is given the authority to judge is so that he can save the world.

We all need this kind of judgment because there is still evil in us all. The ancient dualism of those who are good and those who are evil is not all that clear is it? We still struggle with pride and unforgiveness and envy and selfishness. Judgment starts right here in our own hearts—with our own attitudes and actions, with our words and deeds, with our goals and aspirations, and with our desires and passions.

And I believe that whatever we suffer in judgment God suffers as well. Loving parents who have to judge or discipline their children hurt as much as the children from the

judgment. The love of a compassionate parent is a suffering love that suffers with the child. You know this. When you have had to impose some kind of discipline on your children you suffer with them do you not? When your children do things that requires judgment it breaks your heart doesn't it? You hurt with them and for them. Would God hurt any less?

The discipline or judgment is given not to harm the child, even though the child may suffer from it, but it is given to heal and help and mature and develop the child. Should we expect at least as much from a loving God? God is no cold deity on a power trip taking delight in vengeance. The God of Jesus loves all God's children, even the bad ones and wants to redeem them all.

United Methodist Bishop Will Willimon tells about the time his father-in-law was attempting to comfort a grieving family whose son had just died while committing a crime. The family was not only in grief that their son had died, but in greater grief at the way he had died and what people were saying about him. This wise pastor said to the family: "Just remember, that when your son is judged, neither I nor anyone else in this town will be making the judgment. The judge will be Christ, the one who is the embodiment of mercy."

That Jesus is our judge is good news. He is the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep. He is the one of whom it is said in John 13: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." In the prologue we read: "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." Even those of his own who rejected him, Jesus loved them to the end and gave his life for them. Jesus, the judge, gives his life for the world.

Judgment is a means of correction and redemption. The pain and suffering of judgment is purposeful. Soon many of us will be glued to our televisions as we watch the Olympians, these marvelous athletes compete for gold, silver, and bronze medals. These athletes endured much pain and suffering in preparation for these games—either self-imposed or imposed by their trainers. They went through rigorous training programs that brought physical and emotional suffering into their lives. But they did it in order to reach their potential as athletes. The pain and suffering imposed by Christ, our Judge, will be for the purpose of enabling us to reach our potential as human beings created in the image of God. I have no idea what this judgment will consist of or how it will be imposed, nor does any one else. But we do not need to fear it, because the Son, the one who gave his life for the world, is our judge.

Jesus, who is our judge, is the one who gives life to the world. Whatever judgment he renders will be for our ultimate good.

Gracious God, give us a fresh vision of the patience, persistence, and greatness of your grace that never gives up on us, but always make a way available for our redemption. Help us to trust in your grace and live in your grace and reflect your love and grace in our life together as a church family and in the carrying out of all our responsibilities and in all our relationships. Redeem us to be partners with you in bringing in your kingdom of peace and righteousness. Amen.