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WE ARE THE LORD'S

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

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"If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord;
so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."
Romans 14:8

Last Sunday I referred to a recent prediction that before long scientists will extend the average human life to eight hundred years. Students reflecting on this possibility forecast the demise of the churches because they felt that people would lose interest in a hereafter. In my sermon I did not mention that marriage was also viewed as a likely casualty of such longevity. However, after the service I asked a well known couple what they thought of being married to the same person for seven hundred and fifty years. The wife pondered the question. But the husband spoke up. "Well," he said, "if they're as good as the first sixty-two..."

One suspects that even if the human life span does stretch to such lengths, the issue of life after death will remain on the human agenda. The possibility of death will remain, every century, every day, every moment, and when death does come it may seem more terrible than now because it is more rare.

In any case, the issue is very much on all our agendas now. Last Sunday I said that if we are going to look at this issue of life after death from a Christian perspective we need to ask what it has to do with our chief business, which is to say, the love of God and neighbor. The mere prolongation of some part of us is not what is essential. Surely the Christian hope is not summed up in the thought of you and me just going on in the same old way. I said that eternal life is life lived in unity with God's love. That is something that can begin to happen here and now.

Some people are content to stop with that affirmation. "That is enough for us to believe and to live by," they say. In a little passage by Alan Paton that I quoted last week, the author says that he believes he has entered into eternal life whenever he becomes an instrument of God's peace in the spirit of the prayer by St. Francis. Then he goes on to say:

What happens to me after I die, I do not know, nor do I really want to know.

The Anglican bishop John A. T. Robinson says much the same thing in one of his books. He speaks of eternal life being "A quality of life here and now." He then observes that he can identify with the attitude of those who say, "Death may be the end. So what?"

But then in the last analysis, Bishop Robinson really does not stay with that "so what" attitude. Philosopher John Hick notes that like a lot of contemporary Christian writers, Dr. Robinson begins to engage in a kind of double-talk. On the one hand he says eternal life is a quality here and now and let's be satisfied with that. On the other hand, he makes statements that indicate he believes eternal life really does extend beyond death. For example, in the same book he says this:

As a Christian, I know my life to be grounded in a love which will not let me go. It comes to me as something completely unconditional.

If it could really be put an end to by a bus on the way home it would not have the quality I know it to have. From such a love neither cancer nor the H-bomb can separate. Death cannot have the last word.....

Comments Professor Hick: "Here, if words have any stable meaning, he is saying that eternal life is a relationship to God which is not terminated by bodily death." I must say I get the same impression.

Well, this ambiguity is hard to avoid. It is easy for those of us who are fundamentalists to talk in a very straightforward way on this subject. It is easy too for those of us who are pure materialists. For those of us who do believe what Bishop Robinson testifies about the love of God and yet who hold a modern view of human nature it is not so easy.

Let me say that I want to avoid double-talk on this matter. I want to affirm as I did last week that for me eternal life is a special dimension to living here and now. But although I do not know any more than Alan Paton or John Robinson what this means in any detail - I also want to affirm with John Hick that eternal life outlives death itself.

In making that affirmation two considerations come to mind. The first consideration has to do with the broken, fragmentary nature of human existence.

Here I must acknowledge the possibility that I am biased. Someone I know rather well accuses me of holding a tragic view of human nature. My response is to say, "That's right, and you are an excellent case in point." I am not blind to the beauty, the joy, the ever-renewing possibilities present in human life. I tried to make that clear last week. I am not blind either to the fact that often human behavior falls far short of tragedy, that much of the time it is simply pathetic or sordid or "gross" as the young people say. But the longer I live the more deeply I am persuaded that there is a tragic thread running through all of human existence and which gives little hope of running out on this side of the grave.

So you must discount that personal bias of which a certain tragic person I know accuses me. But even after you have done that you must acknowledge that many thousands of lives have been lived from beginning to end in pain, loneliness, crime and degradation. Perhaps if you are brave enough you will acknowledge too that even the brightest and best of lives have suffered from estrangement from God, from neighbor and from self, that often they have looked on the world with despair and that in the end there were strands hanging loose. We hardly need be reminded in this place that the best of lives ended prematurely on a cross. Nor can we dispute that a very promising life may end rather absurdly in just the way Bishop Robinson suggests, "By a bus on the way home."

Many lives are anguished and fragmentary, hardly given a fair chance. On that, at least, I think we may agree. We wonder if there is still hope for fulfillment for such lives.

This is not entirely a selfish consideration. Toward the end of his life, Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote:

I can say.....that I never have discerned in myself any clamorous desire to go on beyond death, as though I thought the universe de-

manded my individual continuance. But when love, that great discoverer of values, comes, I cannot be so nonchalant. I may say that I do not mind what happens to me, but when a well-loved soul, nobly worth the loving dies, I may not say, 'I do not mind what happens to you.'

Which is to say, not incidentally, that the great commandment of love to neighbor does tie in to this question of life beyond the grave.

No, I do not think we can dismiss the human concern for life beyond death as but the ultimate in human egotism. It is that to be sure. But it is more than that. This concern is bound up with our love for others and with our search for meaning and purpose. We want to believe, as Fosdick said, that life is more than "a brief, blind flicker between two oblivions."

Of course, that desire does not prove anything. But suppose we do believe in the kind of God that Jesus believed in. Suppose we do believe that the ultimate power in the world is the power for good and that this power is working out its purposes toward that goal Jesus called "the kingdom of God." Can we share Jesus' convictions on those matters and not share as well his faith that God will fulfill his purposes for each person?

Of course, we can reinterpret Jesus' hope for the future in purely historical terms. We can see it as the hope for a just and peaceful society that some day by the love of God and neighbor will come into being on earth. That is a noble vision and one toward which we all should strive. But it does not answer the question about all those unfulfilled, fragmented, individual lives.

This week I heard of the sudden death by accident of a seventeen-year-old girl. Perhaps she has made some contribution to the kingdom still to come. The effect of her life will continue down through time like the ripples in a pool reaching out. But that fact hardly compensates for the loss of herself.

Writes John Hick:

There would be an intolerable contradiction in affirming on the one hand that God knows, values and loves each of his human creatures as unique individuals and evokes in them the desire to realise the highest potentialities of their nature in response to his claim upon them, and yet on the other hand that he has ordained their extinction when they have only just begun to fulfill the divine purpose which has endowed them with these potentialities and aspirations.

My first consideration then is the fragmentary and often tragic nature of human existence. The human condition raises the question of a fuller destiny. If one believes in a righteous and loving God one is led to answer that question in the affirmative.

My second consideration takes us back to that statement of Bishop Robinson that is cited by Dr. Hick. The bishop writes that he knows his life "to be grounded in a love which will not let me go."

We may well ask, "How does this heretical bishop know what God's love will or will not do?"

That same little book by Dr. Fosdick which I quoted says something that may help us answer that question. He is discussing the matter of religious certainty and wishes to make the point that the knowledge of personal relationships is of a different order from that of science. He writes:

I know some persons whom I completely trust and love. For over fifty-six years I have been married to the same girl, and, believe me, I know her.

Well, Dr. Fosdick did not have quite as much experience as Mr. Matter, but there seems to be no reason to dispute his claim. He goes on to say, "Love is not simply an emotion; it is one of our most important means of cognition; some things, especially persons, we never can know unless we love them."

Now I would say that this is pre-eminently true when it comes to knowing God. We know God through our love for God, but even more through God's love for us. Think of those great, thunderous "I know"s and "We know"s that we find in the New Testament:

I know whom I have believed

We know that we have passed out of death into life.

We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, eternal in the heavens.

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him.

Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears /meaning Christ/ we shall be like him.

These tremendous "We know"s! They do not arise from belief in some doctrine. They arise from a personal relationship. They express the assurance of lives that were lived in unity with that eternal love that is wholly trustworthy and invincibly strong.

And so it can be for us. In so far as we discover for ourselves that love that Christ came to reveal, we know too that there is something here that "will not let us go."

This is not a matter of inference. It cannot be proven. It is a matter of deep, inward experience.

These then are two considerations that lead me to believe that eternal life does mean that whatever is worth keeping in any of us will be kept and fulfilled despite the barrier of death. What such a life might be like beyond the fact that it is life in unity with God's love, I do not know. Like Alan Paton I do not care to speculate. But with Paul I will make that affirmation which says all that matters:

Whether we live or die we are the Lord's.