

The Picture of Eternal Life

**A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 21, 2011 by the Revd Dr Jennifer E. Copeland
Maundy Thursday footwashing service
John 13:1-17, 31-35**

A picture is worth a thousand words. That's what they say. But let's start with some words, maybe not a thousand, and then end up with a picture to make it all crystal clear.

The words come from Jesus telling us what to do so that we might have eternal life and some more words from Jesus carefully explaining what eternal life looks like when we have it. It's surprisingly void of pearly gates and golden streets. That image comes later when the author of the Book of Revelation needs to strike a different sort of theological tone than Jesus is trying to get across to us in these last few hours before the crucifixion. When we focus on what Jesus has to say about eternal life, we should be struck by how very ordinary it is.

- Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal. In other words, share.
- Do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be yes, yes or no, no. In other words, tell the truth.
- Do not judge so that you may not be judged...for the measure you give will be the measure you get. In other words, be kind and understanding with one another.
- Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. In other words, don't fight. And by all means, don't kill each other.

The results of such ordinary behavior would produce a world with no hungry children, no homeless families, no bank collapses, no state sponsored violence. Imagine such a world. Imagine if that were the normal world.

- I wonder what we would do all day if not try to measure our worth against our neighbor,
- scramble to get ahead of the other guy at work,
- secure our possessions against all those trying to steal from us,
- and devise new forms of airport security? My favorite past-time...

Those are the things that are normal in our world, our world revolving on an axis of fear and greed, while Jesus is offering us tools for eternal life. Simple ideas like generosity, honesty, kindness, and peaceableness.

Jesus told us with his own words what it takes to live into eternal life. But there are even more words we can use to fill out the picture. We can use the words recorded by the Gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—those people who captured glimpses of Jesus doing what he told us to do, thus proving that it could be done. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Who can do that? Jesus can do that. Watch and he will show you how. And then you can do it, too.

You'll notice in all these stories told about Jesus that he never played favorites.

- When he ate with sinners, he ate with sinners that were Pharisees at the top of the pyramid and sinners that were tax collectors on the bottom rung,
- when he fed hungry people, he fed harlots and handmaidens,
- he healed lepers and leaders,
- he visited the mighty and the meek.

Jesus didn't restrict his involvement to a select crowd claiming that only some people matter or other people matter more. Read the words about Jesus. There are thousands of words in these four Gospels offering pictures of what eternal life looks like.

Jesus told us; Jesus showed us. And yet, we only have to wake up and start the day to see the difference between Jesus' picture of eternal life and the lives we call normal. You'll notice the world plays to our strengths. Our strengths are fear, anger, revenge, protectionism. Humans are very good at these things. Threaten me and I'll become afraid. Insult me and I'll become angry. Wrong me and I'll look for revenge. Steal from me and I'll protect myself with a stronger security system or a bigger gun. The world expects me to react this way; if I don't, I'm not normal. These are our strengths and Jesus abhors them all. These are the things that rob us of eternal life.

Listen to him again:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit
- Blessed are those who mourn
- Blessed are the meek
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness
- Blessed are the merciful
- Blessed are the pure in heart
- Blessed are the peacemakers

Tonight of all nights, we get a study in contrasts.

- Jesus will be convicted of blasphemy for telling the truth,
- of false prophecy for remaining silent,
- of insurrection for refusing to fight.
- Tomorrow he will be killed for embodying eternal life.

So, going forward from here, we need to fix the picture of eternal life firmly in our sight. Before we leave this room we will know what eternal life looks like. It may surprise you.

"Jesus, ...knowing that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel."

A picture is worth a thousand words. Come be in the picture. Amen.