

Hebrews 4:12-13

¹² Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

Mark 10:17-31

¹⁷ As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ¹⁸ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.”’ ²⁰ He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’ ²¹ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ ²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ ²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ ²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’

²⁸ Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’ ²⁹ Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, ³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’

All Those Things That Hold Us Back

“The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword,” says the author of the Book of Hebrews. That can kind of scare you, can’t it, make you not want to open it up for fear that it might bite you or cut you. There are those lovely verses that we hear about God loving us and about the Lord as our shepherd, about the place where there will be no more tears and a huge banquet. But then there are the verses that really do cut us, scare us, shame us, convict us. **To the credit of any Christian** who has not studied the Bible but nonetheless attends church and professes faith, at least you take God and the Bible seriously enough to spend time worshiping and listen, and you make an attempt at serving him. You are at least bucking the trend, because there is a growing number of people in the United States who have never read scripture, never attended church, and have no interest in ever doing so. It used to be that people left the church because they considered it nothing but a congregation of hypocrites, or because they read just enough scripture to see God as cruel and unjust. Now there are

people who have no feelings at all toward the church, who consider it to be something totally irrelevant to them; Sundays are for sports or the beach or shopping or cleaning the house or sleeping. There is an entire generation coming up in this nation that does not see the Christian message as any special revelation of God but just as some ancient religion. But I believe that the unspoken reason why so many people do not want to come to church or read the Bible is that there is a fear of what they might hear or of what they might learn. I think that's the same reason why many people who attend church don't want to go too deeply into scripture; they're afraid of what they might hear.

Take, for example, today's Gospel lesson about the rich young man, a man who I think like us in so many ways. Here's a man who believes in eternal life; I think that's quite natural. I've done so many funerals for people who are or are not religious, but at the most basic level what people want to hear is that Uncle Fred is with God, enjoying eternal life, and they want to have such a life themselves. That's what this rich young man wants; eternal life. And he, like us, sees that there's some connection between our present and our future, between how we live now and how we will live eternally. We come to church, we pay our taxes, we tip the waitress, we say "please" and "thank you," we don't steal or lie, in part because we think there's something beyond all this. Perhaps that's the reason some people come to church; they *wonder* if that's enough. "Is living a clean and wholesome life enough to qualify me for eternal life?" He wants what we want, some certainty that he's made the cut, that he's passing the test and that the gates of heaven will open just enough for him to squeeze through, because he knows, like we do, that there may be more that we can do – we could be kinder to our neighbors or tip the waitress a little more or give a little bit more to the needy. We just want some assurance that we've done enough – not too much, and not too little.

O how we long for that sort of certainty, someone to tell us we are passing the test. Perhaps that's a reason you might like to listen to me; I'm a firm believer that God loves all of us, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, *Atheists*, so much that he invites them all to dwell with him eternally regardless of what they professed or failed to profess while they were living and breathing. God loves the sinner, and we are all sinners. I believe that God's grace is available to whoever, whenever. Think of the criminal on the cross who was assured by Jesus that "today you will be with me in paradise." There really is no deadline for a person to receive Jesus Christ and have that assurance that we will be with him in paradise.

But you know what the funny thing is? You can tell someone this, you can pray with them, you can show them Scripture that attests to it, but it doesn't stop them from being afraid. I can sit down and pray with a person and together we can ask God to assure him of salvation, and as soon as we stop praying together that person goes right back to fearing and doubting about his eternal life. And the reason for the fear and doubt is quite simple; **The person has asked for the assurance of eternal life to start sometime in the future but is not willing to let that eternal life start *at this very moment*.** Eternal life starts the minute you turned your life over to Jesus Christ. The problem is that so many Christians are postponing that moment; they *haven't* really turned their lives over. They've turned their Sunday mornings over, they've turned some of their income over, they've turned some time during the Cranberry Festival over. They've refrained from slandering other people, from committing adultery, from murdering, from gossiping, from running red lights, from drunk and disorderly conduct, and like the rich young man in today's gospel reading they're asking, "Is this enough?" And Jesus says, "Almost. All you have to do now is give all those things that bind you and come and follow me." **COME AND FOLLOW ME.**

Jesus makes the criteria for eternal life crystal clear; if we want eternal life, which we should assume is eternal life with the God of all creation, shouldn't we be following God's only Son when we're inviting

to? And we're all invited to, aren't we? The problem is not in God being at all unclear about the criteria for gaining eternal life; he's quite clear about that; at the Transfiguration a voice from heaven says to the disciples, "This is my Son, by beloved. *LISTEN TO HIM.*" And when Jesus says, "Follow me," we should follow lest we live our lives like this rich young man who Jesus loved, but who went away sad because he possessed many things...or might I say he was possessed by many things, things that were keeping him from experiencing eternal life NOW. My brothers and sisters, if we are sincere about our desire to enjoy eternal life, shouldn't that joy begin at this moment? Eternal life begins the moment we commit ourselves to follow Jesus, who declare, "I am the Resurrection and the Life; though they die yet they shall live." (John 11:25)

The problem is that we refuse the invitation when the invitation is presented, and so we live in fear and doubt. One of the problems that occurs when we refuse Jesus' invitation to follow him at this moment, when we decline that assurance that we have eternal life starting now with Jesus Christ, is we start comparing ourselves to others. When you're not certain that you have eternal life you start to think of heaven as a restricted zone, you start engaging in mental gymnastics to rationalize how you qualify for eternal life because so many others do not! We slander, we gossip, we put people down because we need to raise ourselves up to make us feel that we are in tight with God. And why do we do this? Because we are uncertain about our destiny, and seeing ourselves as better than others helps us rationalize that we stand a better chance of making the cut. Sadly these kinds of rationalizations can lead to social isolation because our need to think of ourselves as better than others is hard to disguise. And when others know that you think you're better than them, they get very tired of your company very quickly. We're much better off if we just confess that we don't know whether or not we make the cut for eternal life. Or perhaps we should accept that we haven't gained eternal life, like the rich young man who walks away from Jesus, sad because he has many possessions.

Today is a real challenge to us as a church. We are blessed to have two teenagers (*and Eric and Serena, when grownups say "teenagers" is usually not said in a positive way, because we've all been there, and it's a very challenging time*) who are prepared to affirm their faith in Jesus Christ, and they know that faith means following. Hence, they are embarking on a journey into eternal life. That's a little scary, because we know that there will be so many "things" out there that will try to stop them from following Jesus Christ, the same things that cause us to stray. But we, the church, are making a promise that we're going to help them. Now I went to a normal church with normal people, like many other churches, and after I made my confirmation vows, I began to slip away from church, and I didn't go back for a long long time. And my experience was no different from so many other teenagers making their confirmation vows who also left the church, and many of them never did return. It was a normal church, filled with normal people, but normal was not enough to keep me there. That's why today is a challenge for us. We can't simply be normal. We have to be exceptional. We have to be committed to following Jesus, and we have to be honest about our own shortcomings and we have to be striving to be better followers all the time. Why? So that Eric and Serena will be encouraged to follow Jesus, so that, even though they're young and hopefully have a long life to live, that they will know what eternal life is all about, a life, as our Service of Word and Table puts it, "freed for joyful obedience." That's right; following Jesus Christ is the only path of joy that I know of, because I walk with the eternal God.

Eric and Serena; I'm going to ask you to do something before you make this affirmation of faith. I'm going to ask that you forgive us, the grownups, for the times that we will surely disappoint you. We are all in need of God's grace, and as you've likely discovered, grownups are people, too. But even if and when we do let you down, please do not doubt God's love for you. Never doubt his desire to forgive as

he forgives us. And help us to help each other to put aside all those things that hold us back so that we may follow Jesus, that we may accept his invitation for us all to walk with him every day in eternal life.