

“Life Everlasting”
1 Corinthians 15:50-58

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In the Cradle of American Protestantism

Many of you know that I, along with most other staff members at Corinth, wear multiple hats. One of the ones I wear and love most is missions. I get to keep in touch with our missionaries and hear their joys and struggles. I get to coordinate mission trips all across the country and all around the world. I have the most hands-on role in our missions program, and it's an amazing privilege. This past week, I was with a small team of folks doing mission work in Vermont. Over the past few months as we've been planning and preparing for this trip, I've seen a lot of puzzled looks. “Why would we do missions in Vermont?” I've heard over and over again. To be honest, I asked the same question when the possibility of this trip came up, and the answer I found was two-fold.

The first reason we took a mission trip to Vermont is because we have family there. Josh Moore was an intern at Corinth about 10 years ago, and was ordained here at Corinth. Josh and his family moved up to Vermont shortly after that, and he accepted a call in South Royalton. He serves the United Church of South Royalton (aka the Red Door Church), and they are a Faithful and Welcoming Church of the United Church of Christ. Josh was one of the people staffing the Faithful and Welcoming booth at the UCC's General Synod in Milwaukee with Pastor Bob and Linda and Pastor Lori a few weeks ago. We helped the Red Door Church with a one-time financial gift toward their Food Shelf ministry a few years ago. Josh asked us a few months ago if we could bring people to help his church put on a soccer camp VBS for his community. Josh is one of our people, and when your family asks for your help... you help!

The second reason we needed to do mission work in Vermont was less obvious to me at first. Over time, as we planned the trip and traveled, I saw that Vermont can be a spiritually dark area. Sometimes, I get very comfortable here in the Bible Belt, and I forget that Christians and churches in other parts of our own country don't have it quite so easy as we do here. Vermont is a largely secular area. There are definitely people all along the political spectrum everywhere you go, but on the whole, Vermonters tend to be more socially progressive and politically liberal than your average North Carolinian. There's a widely-held notion that churches and Christianity are synonymous with rigid conservatism, narrow mindedness, judgmentalism and bigotry. Even people in the churches aren't necessarily all committed believers; there are a lot of curious skeptics who just want to dip a toe in the water. A place that needs the gospel needs people who are familiar enough and comfortable enough with the gospel to proclaim it. That's what we were asked to do. When you see darkness and you have light to share... you go!

Most of our week revolved around a soccer camp VBS. About 40 elementary-aged kids showed up, many of whom do not regularly attend the Red Door

Church. We ran drills, played scrimmages, fed them a snack, and shared a Bible lesson. But camp was only two hours each evening. During the days, we were able to help the church by doing some painting and cleaning projects. We explored the local community. On Wednesday, we took a day-trip down to Massachusetts. New England is home to the first American colonies and is the site of our nation's earliest history. There's a lot of national and political history in places like Boston, but we focused more specifically on the religious history. Much of American Protestantism and evangelicalism traces its roots through New England.

In the Shadow of Giants

Our first stop was the Forbes Library in Northampton, Massachusetts. There we saw some original documents from Jonathan Edwards and his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard. I remembered both of their names from an American religions class that I took in college, but it was a treat to revisit their lives and learn more about them. Jonathan Edwards is probably the more familiar name to most of you. He was one of the key figures of the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 40s. He preached countless revival services through the colonies and helped to spark American Evangelicalism. He's the kind of preacher that even non-Christians know about. His sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, is frequently cited as one of the most powerful pieces of American rhetoric of its time — possibly all of American history. I remember reading it in English class in the public high school I attended. It is powerful writing and seems to have been delivered even more powerfully. It is said that as Edwards preached this sermon about the fires of hell, people were jumping up into their seats, convinced the floor was about to open up beneath them. They cried out while he tried to preach, begging him to tell them how to be saved from the fires of eternal damnation. But that came later in his career. Before he got to that point, he served in Northampton. His grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, had a 60-year-long pastorate in Northampton, and was widely loved and respected. He also had tremendous influence in the church and in the town. Solomon Stoddard took his grandson on as an assistant shortly before his retirement, but Jonathan Edwards never enjoyed his grandfather's place of privilege in Northampton. He didn't have his grandfather's influence or power or security. Eventually, he was run out of town over some church squabbles. It has been said that Northampton was Jonathan Edwards' "refiner's fire." It was hard and trying and the fruits of that season were limited. It was only years later, after he lived through those conflicts and discouragements that he became the powerful, influential preacher that we hear about today, the one who helped to spark the Great Awakening.

The next giant of American religious history that we learned about was Dwight L. Moody, who lived about a century after Edwards. D.L. Moody was in some ways the opposite of Jonathan Edwards. Whereas Edwards is said to have one of the most brilliant minds of his time and could write beautiful and powerful prose; Moody barely achieved a 5th grade education and had terrible grammar and spelling and penmanship. Edwards pursued scholarly achievement; Moody went straight to work and started his career as a shoe salesman in Boston. He became a Christian in Boston, thanks to the persistence of his Sunday School teacher. After his conversion, he spent the next two decades in Chicago, where he started a Sunday School, organized and

pastored the Chicago Avenue Church, and was instrumental in the growth of the Chicago YMCA. In the 1870s, he headed back home to Northfield to make it his permanent residence. From Northfield, he began making evangelistic campaigns to the British Isles and around the United States. His evangelistic campaigns were hugely successful, and some estimates suggest his work may have led over a million people to profess Christ. Our own local evangelical hero, Billy Graham, counted D.L. Moody as one of his major influencers. But the part of Moody's story I like the most is his passion for education.

Moody was well ahead of his time, and in 1879 founded the Northfield Seminary for Young Women. (It would be another 2 years before he founded the Mount Hermon School for Young Men.) It's not just remarkable that a man who had almost no formal education himself founded multiple schools; he founded a school for girls first, in a time when girls were not necessarily guaranteed an education or encouraged to pursue one. It was on the site of the Northfield school where I saw a fairly innocuous memorial. Just a hundred yards or so from Moody's gravesite is a grove of blue spruce trees. Trees in New England are a dime a dozen, and there was at first glance no reason to assume these were any different than the tens of thousands of other trees I had seen during the week. But these trees came with an incredible story. These 26 trees were planted to commemorate 26 graduates of the Northfield school. They represented 26 women who felt God's calling on their lives, got an education, and then set off for the mission field. I can tell you from a lot of first-hand experience that women in ministry is a concept that makes some people balk today. Imagine how many more people would have resisted the idea of women in ministry 100 years ago! And yet, these women went. Many of the women took their own pine boxes with them, knowing the likelihood was that they would never come home. They were right. The women went, and each was martyred on the mission field. And now, all that remains is a quiet grove of blue spruce trees on a hill in Massachusetts.

The Life Everlasting

Somewhere around this point, you're probably wondering if I have forgotten about 1 Corinthians 15, or if this is just a compilation of my favorite scenes from New England. Let me assure you that I haven't and it isn't. This is the last of our sermons on the Apostles' Creed, and we have just five words left — "...and the life everlasting. Amen." The concepts of death and resurrection and life everlasting are all pretty closely wrapped up in one another. You can't have eternal life without the resurrection and you can't have a resurrection without death. The Apostle Paul apparently realized the same thing. Today's passage is rich with imagery about what the resurrection looks like and what the relationship is between the perishable and imperishable, the temporal and the eternal. But if you were here last week, you already heard Pastor Bob or Pastor Paul preach about the "the resurrection of the body." We're not going to do that again today. We're not going to talk about how resurrection happens or when it happens or why it happens. Today, we're just looking at the life everlasting.

There are some things in the Bible that are very exact and described in vivid detail. One example that comes to mind is Solomon's temple. Go back and read 1 Kings 6. The exact measurements are given, specific building materials are listed. If you

wanted to, you could almost create an exact replica. But the Bible talks about other things in more abstract terms. The afterlife and the nature of God fall into that category. Instead of detailed technical writing that would allow us to exactly recreate them, the nature of God and the afterlife tend to be described in more poetic ways, painting for us a variety of pictures that each capture a portion of the realities they portray. As we move throughout the Bible, the pictures may change slightly as they emphasize and reflect different angles. But in both cases, the certainty of their existence is never in question. As surely as God exists, life after death exists. When the Bible gives us poetry and abstraction and illustrations, I often need to pause and pay more attention. My brain is more comfortable with exact measurements, with rules and orderliness, with plans and details. I tend to struggle with the abstract stuff that doesn't fit quite so neatly into boxes. But, as is often the case, the stuff that makes me uncomfortable is usually where God is working on me.

I would like to know exactly what moving from death to eternal life feels like. I would like to know what happens right after we draw our last breath. Is there a white light? Where's my checklist? What is the first thing I'm supposed to do after I die, and then the second, and then the third...? And frankly, some days I'm not so happy that we don't get a detailed 1 Kings 6, Solomon's Temple style explanation of this. After all, pretty much everyone in all of history is going to experience death; almost none of us are going to try to rebuild Solomon's Temple. If I were in charge, we'd have specifics about the things that impact everybody! But thank God I'm not in charge. The places I get uncomfortable are where God needs to work on me. This is one of those areas.

In this passage, Paul doesn't describe clearly what happens or how. He simply says we will all be changed (51). We know it will be dramatic and complete. We know that whatever body we have at the resurrection will not be subject to sin and death. We know that pain and suffering are gone. And that's about it for the facts and figures that I can pull out. The rest is left in paintings and pictures. The rest of the details — the details I so badly want to know — are left for us to ponder in what Pastor Paul has called "holy wonder." When we consider heaven and eternal life, there's no expectation that will be unmet, no good thing that will be missing. I think there's great value in pausing to contemplate the vastness of God, the depth of his love and justice, the length of eternity, and the particulars of eternal life. Ponder those things, pray over them, but don't get stuck in them.

Throughout history, Christians have been tempted to embrace to too great an extreme the idea that our ultimate citizenship is in heaven and therefore, the things of this earth don't matter at all. One commentator writes, "If one is convinced that one's salvation is already accomplished, already secure in its fullness, then one might conclude that moral restraints no longer prevail, that one is free to eat, drink, and be merry in whatever way one sees fit, and that one has no need to labor or exert one's self -- especially if doing so might land one in difficult circumstances."¹ I have faced that temptation, mainly because it's a pretty easy "out," but it's not actually all that compatible with Christian teachings. If we believe that God created this world, and if we believe that God created us, and if we believe that God put us in this world, and if we

¹ Leander E. Keck, *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 993.

believe that God sent his Son to live on this earth and to die on this earth, I don't think it's such a big leap to believe that the world we live in now matters to God. If we believe that God hears our prayers and intervenes in any way with our lives, I think what we're doing here matters. If the world we live in now didn't matter... why create it? Why enter into it? Why bother to pay so great a price to redeem it?

Life Begins Now

After sending us into the realms of "holy wonder" about resurrection and our new bodies, the Apostle Paul does something kind of surprising. He brings us back to earth, back to now. After spending the second half of chapter 15 answering two questions — "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" (35) — he hits the brakes rather abruptly. Rhetorically, the word "therefore" signals that some kind of significant conclusion to what has just been said is coming. Paul's "therefore" in 1 Corinthians 15 is not "therefore, you can mentally check out and coast through this world, because God has already claimed victory through Jesus." That's not what God has called us to.

"Therefore," Paul writes, "stand firm. Let nothing move you" (58). What's he talking about? We know from studying the letters of 1 and 2 Corinthians and from a variety of historical sources that the city of Corinth in Paul's day was a city of trade and travel, filled with all kinds of people from all over the known world who had all kinds of opinions and ideologies and religions. It's possible he was telling the Corinthians to stand firm against outside sources that would sway them away from the certainty of Jesus' death and resurrection and the promise of eternal life. We also know that the church at Corinth was full of conflict and division, and that this internal strife is what spurred Paul to write this letter. He may be telling them to not allow internal conflicts to shake their shared foundation. I think it's most likely a both-and rather than an either-or. Whatever winds of change or trials might threaten them from without or within, Paul encourages them to steadfastness. There are many building and foundation metaphors throughout the Bible, and I'm pretty sure they all have the same basic point -- a good foundation is the starting point for a good building. You need a foundation before you can have anything else, and Paul is encouraging them to not be moved from the foundation they have built by believing in his message about Christ.

Interestingly, he doesn't encourage them to "stand firm" by hunkering down in a safe place, or by building up walls to keep all threats away.² No. The way Paul tells them to stand firm and be immovable is by "giv[ing] [them]selves fully to the work of the Lord" (58). Other translations say things like "always excelling in the work of the Lord" (NRSV), "always abounding in the work of the Lord" (ESV), or "always work[ing] enthusiastically for the Lord" (NLT). There's something really interesting happening in Paul's choice of words here, and it's easy to gloss over. He tells the Corinthians that they (plural) should always give themselves (plural) fully to the work (singular) of the Lord. He's not encouraging each person to go off and work on their own. He's not suggesting each person needs to work to earn his salvation. He's saying that the community as a group stays firm and steadfast by continuing to do the singular work of

² Keck 991.

the Lord. Does that mean that we all do the exact same thing? Of course not! In multiple places Paul uses body imagery when describing the church. Not all the parts do the same thing, but they all work together for the same purpose. He's hinting at something similar here.

He's saying that, because of the certainty of Christ's resurrection and God's victory over sin and death, we have a firm foundation. We have security and assurance and confidence of the life to come. And that certainty should prompt us to action. Paul knows better than most that the work of the Lord doesn't come without challenges or consequences. In his next letter to the Corinthians, he will describe some of those hardships:

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (2 Cor 11:23-27)

And still, he encourages them to continue working for the Lord "because [they] know that [their] labor in the Lord is not in vain" (58). That sort of security in Christ, that assurance of eternal life, that confidence in the value of our work changes everything. It doesn't just change our future; it changes our present. It's the sort of thing that made Paul endure all his hardships, yet continue to plant churches throughout what is now Turkey and Greece. It's what makes a pastor who was run out of town get back to work and keep on preaching. It's what leads an uneducated shoe salesman to preach crusades and start schools. It's what inspires two dozen women to go to the mission field with their own caskets in tow. When you believe in the life everlasting, you know that life begins now, and that - even if the results aren't what we want or on the timetable we want - no part of life that is dedicated to the work of the Lord will ever be in vain.

What about you? How will the certainty of life everlasting change your life in the present? Will you do the work of the Lord in Nicaragua, Moldova, Kenya, London, or Vermont? What about the work of the Lord here in Hickory, by serving with Habitat for Humanity, Safe Harbor, Forgiveness Ministry, the Hickory Soup Kitchen, or the HOPE Garden? What will you do if you don't see results immediately? What if you never see results? And what will that work require of you? How much will you sacrifice? It may sound harsh, but I hope that the work of the Lord stretches you and forces you to make hard decisions about your time or your money, and puts you in an uncomfortable spot. After all, uncomfortable spots are where God tends to grow us. My prayer for you, for us, church, is that we give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord, knowing that our labors are not in vain. May we stretch ourselves together, using our variety of gifts, to do the work of the Lord right here right now, grounded in the certainty that all we do now is not in vain, and will be fully realized, fully completed in the life everlasting. Amen.