

SERMON TITLE: "Know You Have Eternal Life"
SERMON TEXT: 1 John 5:9-13
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: May 27, 2018, at First UMC (Heritage-Memorial Sunday)

INTRODUCTION

In a recent conversation at bell choir rehearsal, Anthony and Nora Costello were telling the rest of us what was happening at their school. Anthony is a sixth grade teacher, and Nora is a teaching assistant at Voyage Academy. Instead of having normal end-of-the year parent-teacher conferences in which the teacher tells the parents how their child had been doing, their particular charter school does things differently. At the end of the school year, each sixth grade student has to make a poised and confident presentation to their family and teacher about how and what he or she has learned and why they should be moved on to the seventh grade. In the presentation of their portfolio, the student has to state clearly and convincingly, "Here's what I know that I know."

In this season of passages from one grade to the next and graduations from high school and college, it's natural for us to think about the acquisition of academic competency. But knowledge isn't just for subjects like reading, writing, arithmetic, history, and science. There's also a kind of knowledge that has to do with our Christian faith. And this kind of knowledge is especially pertinent in this weekend when we remember our loved ones who have died before us. As we prepare ourselves for that day when we too will cross over from earth to heaven, I invite you to consider our scripture reading from First John, chapter five. As we focus our attention on verse 13, let's see what it means to know you have eternal life.

1—KNOW you have eternal life

The phrase "know you have eternal life" begins with the word *know*. Besides the common definition of to possess knowledge or information, *to know* can also mean to possess assurance,

certainty, and peace. When the author of First John says he writes this letter so that we may know, he's projecting a positive and hopeful feeling.

In verse four, we see that "our faith", "born of God", is what "conquers the world." These are all words of confidence that everything is going to be alright in the future. They are also words that give us courage for living our lives today. By indicating that he wants us to *know* you have eternal life, the writer is saying that such assurance is possible. We don't have to live in doubt, fear, or anxiety. We can be upbeat and strong because we are certain that we know.

2—Know YOU have eternal life

The next word in our phrase is *you*. In First John, chapter five, this *you* refers to those persons who believe that Jesus is the Christ, who love God and obey his commandments, who believe Jesus is the Son of God, and who have this testimony in their hearts.

Because we all have some doubts sometimes, we might wonder if such expectations might rule us out. Maybe this letter wasn't written to people like us at all. Maybe this *you* means someone else whose faith is stronger, whose faith is more pure, whose faith is less wavering.

That kind of concern reminds me of an experience I had when my kids were in elementary school. All the time, they were bringing papers home from school asking for parent volunteers. The teachers needed volunteers to help with field trips, class parties, or paperwork. Even though the requests came home to me, I always wondered, did they really mean *me*? I always wondered if maybe those requests were directed at someone else, someone who was a stay-at-home parent and had more time. But then, one night, I got a phone call from one of those parent volunteers. She knew my phone number and my name. She asked me specifically to bring a bag of chips and 12 cans of pop to an end-of-the-year school party. I understood that request very clearly. When she asked, "Can *you* bring?" I had no doubt she meant me. And I responded positively. Of course, I will.

That's the kind of direct communication First John is attempting here. He's writing so that you and you and you and you and I will know that we have eternal life. This isn't an offer or request just for those *other* people who might have the ability or the time or the resources. Eternal life is for every one of us. Eternal life is for every *you*.

3—Know you HAVE eternal life

The third word in our phrase is *have*. This word is important because it tells us that eternal life isn't just something we *will* have in the future, but it's something that begins now in our present time. Our salvation is a current reality. If we believe in the name of the Son of God, we have eternal life already.

Just because we already have eternal life doesn't mean that we should take it for granted, however. What we have is only worth what we make of it. You can have the sportiest car in the world, but if you never take it out of the garage and drive it around, then what good is it to you? You can have beautiful clothes hanging in your closet, but if you don't ever wear them, what difference does it make that you own them? You can have a sizable bank account, but if you never allow yourself to spend any of it, what benefit do you gain? You can have the most loving and supportive family anyone could ever wish for, but if you don't devote time to them and enjoy their company, what value is that family to you? In fact, if you don't nurture that family that you already have, you might, in fact, find that the relationship is gone when you need it.

It's an amazing and wonderful thing to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you already have eternal life. But that doesn't mean we just file it away or lock it up for some future day. And it doesn't mean that we can be careless. It's our responsibility to nurture the eternal life we already have.

Another note of caution is in order in regard to the word *have*. Sometimes when we're confident that we have eternal life, we start to think of ourselves as different from or better than other people. We become smug separatists. Sometimes we even justify our thinking by quoting scriptures.

But that wouldn't make the writer of First John very happy. This letter, which is 90% about love, calls us to claim our possession of eternal life by loving one another and testifying to the life of love that God offers to all who will accept it. The eternal life we have is meant to be shared. The more eternal life we give away, the more we have.

4—Know you have ETERNAL LIFE

And that brings us to the words *eternal life*. Because eternal means forever, we usually think of eternal as a word about time. But, in the Gospel of John and the Epistles (or letters) of John, there's an emphasis on eternal life as a quality of life, just as much as—or even more than—a quantity of life. One Bible commentary puts it this way: “‘Eternal life’ is not future survival beyond the grave, but an accomplished reality for those within the community whose love for one another demonstrates their crossover into life that is real and indestructible.”* To state that another way, eternal life is a hopefulness that persists in the face of opposition. Eternal life is a determination for good that continues in the face of evil and hardship. As Romans 8 suggests, eternal life is the belief and the reality that nothing can separate us from the love of God—neither death nor the on-going assaults of life. Eternal life overcomes and conquers.

Some people—maybe all of us sometimes—like to think about eternal life as an existence of ease and pleasure. Our days of misery can be brightened considerably by contemplating eternal life as heavenly bliss. What could be better than a joyful family reunion, singing with the saints, fishing that never ends, or eating bonbons all day every day and never gaining weight? And who really knows? Maybe that's what eternal life will be like on the other side of the grave.

But I have a hunch that the biblical vision of eternal life has a lot less to do with heavenly streets of gold in the future and a lot more to do with aligning ourselves with the will of God now, while we are still walking this earth. I think there's a lot to be said for imagining the quality of life in the kingdom of God and then making choices of attitude, belief, and behavior that will help make that heavenly vision

real in this world—for our own generation and for our collective great, great, great grandchildren. When we order these days of our lives according to the loving perspective of God, that’s when we already begin to experience eternal life.

CONCLUSION

Thursday, May 24, was the 280th anniversary of John Wesley’s famous heart-warming experience. Even though Wesley had been raised in a very devout Christian home, studied theology at Oxford, was ordained as a priest in the Church of England, and served a mission to the colonists and Native Americans in Georgia--by the time he was 35 years old, John Wesley was depressed and uncertain about his spiritual well-being. His mission in Georgia had ended very poorly, his love life was a disaster, and now, back in England, he was fearing for his own salvation.

Fortunately, John Wesley had a good friend named Peter Bohler who invited John to attend a Bible study at a house on Aldersgate Street. Because he was depressed, John wasn’t eager to go. But Peter urged him, and John went. And while he was there, listening to someone read from Martin Luther’s commentary on Paul’s New Testament letter to the Romans, John had a spiritual experience. Later that night, John wrote in his journal that he had felt his “heart strangely warmed.” John wrote, “I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given to me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

In other words, John came to the realization that his salvation wasn’t dependent on his own success. His salvation came by trusting in Christ, who had the power to conquer sin and death and give eternal life. This new realization, this new confidence, this new knowledge warmed Wesley’s heart and gave him spiritual peace. As United Methodists, it’s been our joy to follow in the path of John Wesley ever since. Yes, it is possible to know you have eternal life!

*C. Clifton Black, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. XII, p. 419.