

“Come to Jesus – Eternity is Now”
John 3:14-21
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Listen carefully tonight! This may be the one and only time you hear me preach a “Come to Jesus” sermon within these four walls. With rare exceptions, Sunday is not the best time for a preacher to play Billy Sunday, the early twentieth century revivalist preacher whose famous altar calls may have literally brought forward more than a million people to accept the invitation to eternal life in Jesus Christ. Indeed, Billy Sunday was estimated to have preached an average of 42 sermons a month during his heyday, and you can be sure his sermons lasted more than an hour, so they couldn’t all have been preached on Sundays. And although Billy Sunday was sometimes preaching to the choir, which is to say, those who already knew Christ, his main audience was those whose regular Sunday morning habits were practiced somewhere else than their local church. Billy Sunday was what they called an evangelistic preacher, whose purpose was to share the invitation to eternal life, moreso than to lead people into deeper faithfulness once they had accepted that invitation. In that respect, he was not unlike the Reverend Billy Graham, who also encouraged those who responded to the message to become active in the local congregations of their own towns and cities. But I am pretty sure than most of you already believe in Jesus Christ, and so I generally see little value in preaching to the choir a message to which it has already responded.

But tonight, even though we won't be having one of those old-fashioned altar calls, I still want to bring you a "Come to Jesus" message. Now, to hear those words, "Come to Jesus," you may be thinking that I am going to bawl you out for doing something wrong, that your day of reckoning has come, since that is how that phrase is often used. I think it is safe to say that the President of the United States of America has been preaching a "Come to Jesus" message to the country about the unsustainability of its economy, and whether or not you agree with the economic Gospel he is preaching, the diagnosis is the same. Employees who have been underperforming, or students who have been underachieving, will often have a "Come to Jesus" meeting with their bosses or teachers. "Come to Jesus" messages are those that confront you face to face with the error of your ways, or the crookedness of your path, and present the truth with a call for you to do something differently in light of that truth. In the truest sense of a "Come to Jesus" message, we have, of course, tonight's passage from the Gospel of John, from which comes perhaps the most commonly used evangelistic passage in the entire Bible, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life." Maybe you've seen the signs at sporting events? I thought you might.

Our verses tonight from the third chapter of John are part of a longer story about someone who had not yet decided to follow Jesus, that famous character of Nicodemus who sought out Jesus by night to ask him some questions, because he

was too afraid to be seen talking to Jesus by day. Jesus and Nicodemus have this back and forth conversation in which they are not quite connecting, so much so that Nicodemus, an intelligent man who knew his Scriptures, must finally ask, “How can these things be?” and Jesus goes on to tell him, and gives him a “Come to Jesus” message about what life is all about, and how “all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed,” an in-your-face message to someone who has come to Jesus precisely *in the dark*. As powerful as the message was that night, there is no resolution to this confrontation recorded for us by John, no altar call during which Nicodemus responds to that message of truth. Maybe Jesus needed Billy Sunday even way back then. But even though Nicodemus didn’t take full advantage, this conversation gives us something to think about and respond to tonight, and as we go forward together as Christ’s heart, hands, and voice in our community.

So the “Come to Jesus” message I want to share with you tonight has to do with this thing called “eternal life,” and what those words do, and can, mean, both in the Gospel of John, and to those who may need to hear them today. I want to start by drawing your attention to the opposite of eternal life, to the way Jesus describes those who are not saved. “Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned *already*, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” “Those who do not believe are condemned *already*,” Jesus says. It is this word “already,” and the way eternal life

is described later in the Gospel of John that give us a clue about the nature of eternal life, and how we might bring that same message about eternal life to those who need to hear it.

The idea of “eternal life” among Christians has commonly been understood to mean life after mortal death, to the experience of everlasting, soulful communion with God in heaven. The opposite, the condemnation which Jesus mentions, is commonly understood as everlasting torment, as the unending weeping and gnashing of teeth described elsewhere in the Bible. The sheep go to heaven, the goats go to hell. The contrast between sin and righteousness can’t be more starkly drawn than in this image. It was this conception of heaven and hell, of eternal life or eternal damnation, that was the basis of many of the sermons that came from Billy Sunday’s pulpit. The hundreds of thousands of people who responded to his messages probably came forward at least as much to avoid an eternity of suffering as to gain an eternity of heavenly communion. He was appealing to their sense of concern about the *futures* of their souls, and in that era, that was a message that worked quite well. Preaching the avoidance of hell as a motivation for accepting Christ, and coming to church, had been a well-cultivated technique throughout the history of the church, especially in the frightening periods of the Middle Ages, and amidst the wars that ravaged Europe. And even into the early twentieth century, Billy Sunday could point to the industrial

revolution's roaring, steel making furnaces and make a compelling case for wanting to avoid that, and for embracing a far better alternative.

But here we are in the twenty-first century, a period in which images of hell, and the concepts of sin and damnation are quite different than they were a hundred years ago. These days, I think most people are not particularly concerned about their futures beyond the moment of their deaths; if there is a heaven, that's great because God's love is immeasurable, and there will certainly be enough love to cover me, whatever my few sins may have been, because, you know, I've lived a good life. And of course, there is no hell, because that is just silly superstition used to manipulate people into coming to church. So, when I die, if there is no heaven, that's not so bad, because there's probably no hell either, so I'll just be dead and never know the difference. I think people these days are a lot more concerned with the state of their investment portfolios, or the future of their children, or of getting to work tomorrow than they are about their eternal destination. But you know what? I think that is right where Jesus is, and right where he wants them to be, thinking not so much about the life to come, but about the life they are already living. Or not living. And so I want to return to that word, "already," and to the definition of eternal life that Jesus himself gives us in the seventeenth chapter of John.

In John 17:3, Jesus is praying to God and he says, "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

“That they may know you, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” This then is the content of salvation, the essence of life and life eternal. Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus is very clear that the moment eternal life begins, is not the moment when the believer dies, but the moment when the believer believes, the moment when the person who is confronted with the person of Jesus begins to do his or her deeds in the light rather than the darkness, when the state of their investment portfolios, or the future of their children, or getting to work tomorrow takes on a new significance, and a new ethical imperative, when he or she experiences a true communion with their Creator and their community. As one helpful interpreter put it, “John does not state that knowing God precedes or is necessary for eternal life, but that knowing God is eternal life.” Knowing God is eternal life, and participating fully in the life God has given through Jesus Christ. Those who do not believe have *already* condemned themselves to a life without life. They are already living the absence of a life, as Nicodemus surely was experiencing. But those who believe, like the Samaritan woman at the well, whom John placed carefully in the very next chapter to witness to this truth, experience the fullness of life that God intended from the very beginning, even despite the still difficult circumstances of her daily existence. You see, knowing Jesus means there is still healing in the midst of a disease even when there is no cure for it. It means that there are other people who try to do something about the quality of the lives of others even if they aren’t able to fix everything. It means that even when our most important, but

broken, relationships can't be mended, that true community can still be experienced. It means that life can be lived with purpose and direction, and not just with toil and trial. All of this begins today, or the day we "come to Jesus," and isn't reserved for the moment we pass through the pearly gates.

That is why the Gospel of John is especially good news for the twenty-first century and for its people, who, even if they are not worried about the long-term futures of their souls, are surely challenged by the present condition of their lives, and so often find themselves seeking solutions that only drive them further from the authentic life and community they so desperately seek, and that God desires for them. How else can we explain the popularity of addiction and infidelity, or maxed-out credit and living beyond one's means, or violence and humiliation? This is not to say that those who know Christ are immune from these life-draining temptations, but it is to affirm that at least we have a fighting chance of holding on to the anchor of Christ to keep us from drifting into a life in which we are already condemned. And that we know where to seek help when we find ourselves drawn there.

It is also good news because it is a Gospel we can preach by how we live. I don't know about you, but I find it more than a little challenging to describe abstract things, and despite how much we know about the glory of heaven and or the torments of hell, those are still pretty abstract concepts. But I can certainly show someone the life I'm already experiencing in Christ by the compassion I

offer, or the invitation I make, or the injustice I do something about. I can help a fellow traveler make their way safely home, to know the Christ they see in me, and to live in a way which then draws in others of our fellow sojourners. I think this is the essence of what ECF's vision of "A World of Travelers, Safely Home" calls us to do, to demonstrate that eternity is now, that coming to Jesus is arriving safely home now, that this homecoming happens before our mortal days are through, not when they come to an end. As people transformed by our experience with Jesus Christ, as people who experience the abundant and eternal life that so many people lack, and as Christ's very body on earth, we have the power to help those who come to us at night, and uncertain, and afraid, and hurting, as Nicodemus did with Jesus, find the life they seek and that God has already given them in Jesus Christ, who came not to condemn the world, but to save it. May God help us to guide our fellow travelers safely home to the eternal life and grace offered to us now and forevermore.

So, my friends, come to Jesus. My altar call to you tonight is not to come forward to the front of the church to accept Christ, but to go forward into the days and years ahead and live life in Christ, and to go forward with our vision in the forefront of your heart and mind, and to ask yourself, and one another, every day, "Who have I helped arrive safely home with God?" Those are the people who will know God, and who will have eternal life. Amen.