

April 10, 1966 (Easter)
Luke 18:28-33
Norman S. Ream

To Know God Is To Live

"And this is life eternal, that they should know thee,
the only true God."

John 17:3

One cannot talk of life without also talking of birth and death. Birth initiates our entrance into life; death marks our exit from it.

Few object to a discussion of birth. Many books have been written about it and some have become best sellers. We all seem interested in the processes of birth and thousands of women have studied what is called "natural childbirth", or "childbirth without fear". Birth is looked upon as something wonderful, miraculous and beautiful, which it is. Great preparations are made for it by parents expecting the advent of a little child.

On the other hand, a great many people shun death. They look upon it as a morbid thing and seek to avoid its consideration. We know very little about the development of life before birth and a great deal about life after birth. With death, however, quite the contrary is true. We know a lot about life before death, but very little about life after death. It is this ignorance that often causes many to fear death. We don't much enjoy talking about it, and we feel there is no joy and beauty connected with it.

How one reacts to birth and death depends of course upon one's attitude and faith. This morning I would share with you what I believe to be Jesus' attitude and faith concerning these matters. If we understand the real significance of life, we will not have to be concerned about its beginning or its ending. In the Christian philosophy life is eternal; it has no beginning and no ending. Birth and death are physical transformations and their effect upon life itself, the real essence of life, is only apparent, not real.

II

First, we must concede that this physical existence does come to an end. The Hassidic philosophy contains a story which illustrates the inevitability of death.

In the East there was a certain man who was walking in the market of Damascus when he came face to face with death. He noticed an expression of surprise on the spectre's horrid countenance, but they passed one another without speaking. The fellow was frightened and went to a wise man who asked what should be done. The wise man told him that death had probably come to Damascus to fetch him away next morning. The poor man was terrified at this and asked how he could escape. The only way they could think of between them was that the victim should ride all night to Aleppo, thus eluding the skull and bloody bones. So this man did ride to Aleppo. It was a terrible ride which had never been done in one night before, and when he was there he walked to the market place, congratulating himself on having eluded death. Just then, death came up to him, tapped him on the shoulder, and said, "Excuse me, but I have come for you." "Why?", exclaimed the terrified man, "I thought I met you in Damascus yesterday." "Exactly", said death, "that was why I looked surprised, for I had been told to meet you today in Aleppo."

Carl Sandburg has made the same telling point in his little verse, "Death Sends a Radiogram":

"Death sends a radiogram everyday,
When I want you I will come for you;
And then one day he comes,
Lets himself in with a pass key, and says,
We'll go now."

Inconceivable as it may seem, there may possibly be some utopian day in the future when there shall be no taxes, but the time will never come when there shall be no death. Consider for a moment what it would mean if that time should come. The elimination of death would also require the elimination of birth. The mere lengthening of human life has created vast problems which have our greatest minds working day and night to solve.

III

The Christian faith as it was held by Jesus accepts death as a reality-- as the incident which marks the end of physical life in this world. But in Jesus' philosophy there is no room for fear of death. There is room for only one kind of fear and Jesus told his disciples what it was:

"Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill
the soul; but rather fear him which is able to destroy both
soul and body in hell."

Now the fact that the Bible translates this word as "hell" does not mean that Jesus believed there was a geographically fixed location filled with fire and brimstone where men would be physically tormented through all eternity for their temporal misdeeds. This was a figure of speech and the only point, but the supreme point, which Jesus was making was this: the physical body is not the essence of life. There is within man a soul, a spirit, which is divine, and neither birth, nor death, nor anything in between can ultimately destroy that which is the real essence of being.

This is indeed the attitude and the faith of Jesus Christ. It is what he is saying in our text from the Gospel of John; "This is life eternal, that they should know thee, the only true God." Eternal life has nothing to do with these arms and legs, this countenance, this blood and bone. This physical shell is only the temporary habitation of a spirit which God keeps eternally in His care and concern.

Speaking in spiritual terms, Jesus said this: "A man who seeks God and God's will above everything else will discover that this pilgrimage has two consequences. The first is that it will enrich his present existence. He will gain courage and fearlessness. He will overcome adversity and difficulty. Nothing will be able permanently to hurt him because he knows that he belongs to God. The second consequence is this; he shall overcome death and the fear of death, for that which belongs to God and is a part of God cannot be destroyed by death. It has already gained eternal life.

For this reason I have made my own personal faith and conviction the title of this sermon, "To Know God Is To Live". The converse of that faith is this, that those who do not know God are already dead. They cannot die because they have never

lived. They are fulfilling the apothegm of Henry David Thoreau when he said of those who live small, mean and petty lives, "They talk of dying. I defy them to do it. There is not enough life in them."

IV

One hundred miles north of here in the city of Neenah, there is a man, a friend of mine, whom I consider to be one of the most thoughtful and deeply dedicated Christians I know. After almost a year of non-communication, I received from him a few weeks ago a letter which began in this fashion:

"Dear Norm:

All is well here. I don't want to borrow money, I'm not in deep spiritual or moral trouble, and this is not a subtle way of getting you back into the Methodist Church. I am sending you a poem. It isn't a very good poem, but you might be interested in how it came into being."

Now, this friend of mine is one of the country's experts on water pollution. He pointed out in his letter that he had recently been in Washington, D. C., dealing with some government officials, trying to work out some improved techniques for purifying Wisconsin's waterways. He continues his letter in this fashion:

"It had been a trying journey and session, and I got home about midnight. I never remember feeling so frustrated and disgusted with it all. The people with whom I had been meeting and who were supposed to be leaders of this great society had left me with a feeling of disgust bordering on nausea. I went right to bed, very grumpy, so my wife says. I woke up about three in the morning, turned on the light and took the pad that always is by my bed to record any ideas that I may come up with in the night, and wrote down the first half of the poem almost exactly as it is given here. You can see how bitter I felt about things. I put it back on the shelf and it lay there for several weeks."

Now let me share the first half of his poem with you. It is entitled, "Knowledge":

"All is vanity," said the prophet,
And I know that this is so
In this modern day of marvels
Just as centuries ago.
For the Pharaohs and the Caesars
And the Kings of Orient are
Dancing specks within some dust storm-
Swirling idly, drifting far.
All the freshness of the morning
And the brilliance of the noon
Is a fading, sighing spectre
In the night-light of the moon.
E'en the heartiest of laughter
Has no timber to its tone,
For death couches at each doorstep
Waiting but to claim his own.

You will catch in those lines the pessimistic, depressed, discouraged mood of the author, typical of that mood which seizes all of us at times. It is this precise attitude, says Jesus, which is the real death of man's spirit. For in this attitude man reflects his separation from God. The first part of this poem which I have read to you is indeed a partial truth, but it is not all of the truth, and unless man can find something more, he is indeed a dying man.

Well, my friend goes on in his letter to say that for several days this poem bothered him. He knew it was not the final answer. He knew that there was something else that needed to be said. So he goes on to write:

"I picked it up several times and then threw it down again as it bothered me. I knew that there must be an answer and I figured that some night I would wake up and know what it was and would write it down. But I didn't. I couldn't forget it and it bothered me more and more. So finally I started to try to figure out the answers. It was very slow in coming. I guess the still small voice seldom overwhelms us or bursts upon us."

Now I would share with you the second half of his poem. The first half was entitled "Knowledge"; the second half is entitled, "Wisdom":

"Vanity has its only being
In a narrowness of mind.
Life is never pale and empty
To the helpful and the kind.
Pity all the worldly Caesars-
All their vanities forgive
As they snatch at light and shadow
In the duststorm where they live.
And God's promise of the morning,
Is just as warm and gay
When the shadows fall around us
As at dawning of the day.
If we keep our laughter tauntless-
If we're honest, kind, and bold-
If our faith in God is dauntless-
Let death claim, it cannot hold."

Now, perhaps that does not mean as much to you as it did to me because you do not know the man out of whose mind and heart these thoughts come. But to me he is saying just what Jesus said: real life is an attitude and a faith, not an existence in this physical environment wherein we spend a few short years. And if with the right attitude and the right faith you and I can find God and develop our oneness with Him, we will have gained a life which nothing in heaven or on earth can ever destroy.

V

May I close by sharing with you another letter, a letter which demonstrates that not only can you have this kind of eternal life now, but you can share it with others. It is a letter which was received by Dr. Paul Scherer, written about a young woman in his church, by a young sailor, and this is, in part, what he said:

"Dear Sir: I'm a sailor and I'll be pulling out in a few hours, but first I've got something I want to say. I came into your office this morning, lonely and scared to death about sailing again. I wanted to talk to somebody pretty bad. So when the girl at the desk said hello, I went in and asked her if I could see you. She said to sit down for a few minutes, so I did. I told her maybe that if a fellow could only be sure something would come through worth dying for, it wouldn't be so bad. She smiled and said, 'That's easy. Christ is coming through, and he's worth dying for.' I just looked at her and she talked as if he were alive and a good pal of hers. I sort of expected to see him walk in the door, it was so real. I was only there about ten minutes and I don't know why, but her talking like that sort of did something to me and I'm not lonely anymore and I'm not scared. It was like she had said, 'I want to make you acquainted with my friend, Jesus. You ought to get to know each other since he'll be going your way.' I'm 19, and I never knew before that there was a God like that who would go along with a fellow. It don't matter so much now if my ship goes down and I go down, as long as there's a God that no sub can sink, and that won't ever change from what's right, even if the war goes on forever."

Do you want an eternal life of joy, and fearlessness and victory? Then get to know God, for to know God is to live.