

# Eternal Life

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Yesterday morning, as Naomi and I were on our way to the Farmers' Market, the topic of my sermon today came up.

"I'm going to be talking about the immanence and transcendence of God," I proudly declared. To which Naomi responded, "Oh, that sounds amazing! I can't wait!"

Well, no. What she *actually* said was, "what?" Apparently my sermon topic was not self-evident.

Well, another way to describe it would be as the experience of tension in the life of faith, between "up" and "out." But maybe even that still sounds confusing. So I'll try to explain by way of a few pictures.

This is the Almudena Cathedral in Madrid, Spain. I visited here in the fall of 2019.

As far as cathedrals go, it doesn't have the history of some of the truly magnificent structures of Europe (Milan, Cologne, Paris). This one is a relatively recent construction, beginning in 1879 and continuing off and on for much of the twentieth century.

But it is beautiful. It is designed to inspire awe, to lift our gaze, to lead us to contemplate the majesty and the grandeur of God.

And these cathedrals do their jobs well. At least for me. I haven't visited very many, but the ones I have seen have been breathtaking and awe-inspiring. [slide]

The architecture, the iconography, the candles, the artwork, the history, the scale and the scope and the sheer *size* of these buildings are monuments to the creativity and resourcefulness with which God has endowed human beings.

Even though there is all kinds of touristy stuff going on in most cathedrals, even though there is much of Roman Catholic theology and practice that is not my own, even though there is some sadness in knowing that in overwhelmingly secular Europe many of these places function more like museums than actual houses of worship, I am invariably moved in spaces like this.

At their best, these structures are themselves expressions of worship. And when I seem them and walk through them, I somehow feel inspired, transported, lifted just a bit closer to God. .

Well, after my gaze and my heart was lifted in the Almudena Cathedral in 2019, I walked outside the cathedral and saw this.

There is a sculpture known as “Homeless Jesus.” It was actually made by a Canadian sculptor Timothy Schmalz, and depicts Jesus as a homeless person, sleeping on a park bench.

The original sculpture was installed at the University of Toronto, in early 2013. There are now “homeless Jesuses” around the world, from Israel to Australia to South Korea to Spain.

The contrast between the view *inside* the cathedral and the view *outside* the cathedral was jarring. I think it was meant to be.

The resources required to construct even one wing of a cathedral could surely feed thousands of people sleeping on park benches for quite some time.

It’s not hard to imagine innumerable labourers throughout history toiling in relative poverty and oppressive working conditions to build these monuments that tourists “ooh” and “aaah” over each year.

The plaque on the bench quotes, in Spanish and English, Matthew 25:40: “Amen I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me.”

(If the wording sounds a bit odd, many English Catholic bibles are still based on the translations from the later Latin Vulgate, from the late fourth century, instead of directly from the Hebrew or Greek).

But translation issues aside, we get the point. We know the verse well. It's a Mennonite staple.

We are followers of Jesus and Jesus seemed to care far more about the poor than about opulent structures.

In Matthew 24, for example, Jesus seems fairly unimpressed by the Jerusalem temple that his disciples were in awe of (he knew it wouldn't last and that he himself was to be the new temple of his people).

And my guess is that Mennonites are drawn more to the homeless Jesus *outside* the cathedral than to royal exalted Jesus *inside* it. It speaks to an appreciation for simplicity and service that is kind of hard-wired into us.

Contentment, generosity, the suspicion of riches, the pursuit righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness—all these things that Paul commends to Timothy—these are all baked into our core Anabaptist conviction that the life of faith is not about appearances but about pursuing the path of Jesus in ordinary life.

There are no Mennonite cathedrals or icons. We don't really do big scale. We don't really like hierarchy (or at least we claim not to); we are suspicious of flashy and showy.

We're just humble farmers who try to follow the teachings of Jesus. We're sort of like hobbits from the Shire (for any *Lord of the Rings* aficionados out there!)

We can appreciate a nice cathedral (maybe), but we tend to go back to passages like this one from 1 Timothy that urge the pursuit of a simple, quiet life of godliness. This is our lane and we try to stay in it.

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Even though Mennonite spirituality is eminently pragmatic and leans more toward "homeless Jesus" than "cathedral Jesus," I think I've described a tension that many of us at least recognize.

It is the tension between being drawn upward and outward in the life of faith.

I think that each one of us, in our own way and to varying degrees, simultaneously longs for the God who beyond us/above us and the God who is within us/among us.

(If cathedrals aren't your thing, perhaps it is mountains or oceans or some of the many visual marvels of creation.)

Philosophers and theologians describe this as the tension between God's transcendence and God's immanence. Both are responses to the question, "Where, in the world, is God?"

Is God in the cathedral (or the majestic mountain view)? Or is God sleeping on the park bench? Is God in what takes our breath away or is God in ordinary, everyday attitudes and acts of service?

Is reverent awe or simple contentment the appropriate posture of faith? Is it celebration or renunciation? Exaltation or endurance?

I suspect it won't surprise you to hear me say that this is one of those areas where I think as Christians we don't have to choose. It's not either/or; it is both/and.

God is *both* immanent (within us and among us) *and* transcendent (beyond us and above us).

If we emphasize the transcendent at the expense of the immanent, we walk around with our head in the clouds, always seeking newer and more exotic experiences. We chase "spiritual highs" and mountaintop experiences.

"God" becomes the word we use for an aesthetic or emotional experience.

We can fail to see that God is present in everyday experience. We forget that character matters deeply to the God who made us, that righteousness, patience, generosity, endurance, contentment—these things are forged in the furnace of ordinary life.

And we can easily become calloused and indifferent to the poor, those who are close to God's heart. We can neglect mercy and justice in pursuit of our own spiritual experiences.

But I suspect this is not the temptation for many of us. My guess is that most of us more easily prioritize the immanent at the expense of the transcendent. Many Mennonites are more comfortable with “out” than with “up.”

Some are fine with this. And I get it. If you’re going to err in one direction, why not make it the more practical one?

But when we emphasize *only* the immanent, when we reduce faith to little more than a project of doing good things, being good people, adopting the right postures, serving and being generous enough in the right directions, we risk becoming what psychologist and writer Richard Beck calls “functional atheists.”

According to Beck, who describes himself as a “progressive Christian who is critical of progressive Christians,” this is the path that many churches in the West are taking. We too often reduce the gospel to nothing more than “loving care, social action, relational support, and therapeutic encouragement.”

Beck is a big believer in doing good works. But he says the church has to be about more than just us and our efforts. Listen to what he says:

[N]arrowing the focus on human agency can lead the church into a functional atheism. You don't need God to do good works. Non-profits also do good works...

[A]s the culture slides deeper into post-Christianity, and as the church struggles to hold the attention of the younger generations, the more the church drifts into describing itself as a non-profit the more it contributes to its own disenchantment. All that is spooky, strange, supernatural and weird about the church is stripped away and all that is left behind is a collection of social initiatives.<sup>1</sup>

While I would quibble with Beck’s assertion that you don’t need God to do good works (I think even the desire to do good is a function of our creation in God’s image, whether we acknowledge it or not), I think he’s right.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://richardbeck.substack.com/p/notes-on-a-godless-church-726?utm\\_source=profile&utm\\_medium=reader2](https://richardbeck.substack.com/p/notes-on-a-godless-church-726?utm_source=profile&utm_medium=reader2)

We desperately need a spirituality that incorporates both the “up” and the “out,” both the immanent and the transcendent.

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I think we see evidence of our need for both all around us.

Yesterday, I read an article by Sarah Wildman in *The New York Times* called “I Don’t Need My Life to Be Remarkable.”<sup>2</sup>

I had been pondering Paul’s words on contentment, so I couldn’t help but click on a title like this!

She begins her article with these words:

Many years ago, before we had children, an old family friend who was a therapist offered a gentle bit of advice to my partner, Ian...: Don’t look for every moment to be a 10, she told him. Sometimes you have to celebrate the fours, fives and sixes.

Wildman, who is Jewish, goes on to talk about their experience walking with their young daughter through multiple treatments for cancer.

It sounded like an absolutely brutal experience. But through it, she spoke of learning a form of contentment, through the many days that were twos, threes, fours. She has learned patient endurance, even gentleness.

But the main thing that stuck with me in the article was that first paragraph. Don’t look for every moment to be a ten. We have far fewer tens anyway. So learn to celebrate and seek God in the fours and the fives.

Appreciate the simple things in life. God is immanently present in these.

By contrast, on Monday, I dropped in for a few minutes on the Queen’s funeral. I suspect for most people present, it would have been closer to a “ten” than a “four” day.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/23/opinion/rosh-hashana-cancer.html>

I don't typically have much use for anything related to the monarchy, but I found it strangely moving. It was an ornate, meticulously choreographed, no doubt horrendously expensive affair. Nothing simple or humble about this.

But in a somewhat similar way to visiting a cathedral, I found that the pageantry, the dignity, the formality, the religiosity (it was a very traditional Anglican service) lifted my gaze.

In reflecting on the experience and the way that it seemed to captivate so many otherwise secular people, English author Paul Kingsnorth (who has a fascinating conversion story that I've told in a previous sermon in May, 2021) wrote that the funeral reminded us of a world that we miss even if we can't say why.

We claim to have moved beyond God, he said. We claim that moral authority comes from the people not from some special person endowed with a sacred charge from heaven. We claim that politics is mostly about jostling for power and managing resources, that it doesn't have any deeper meaning beyond this.

Except, when the Queen dies. Then, maybe a bit of space opens up for us to ponder. *Is this really all there is?* Kingsnorth writes:

And yet: watching the vast, snaking queue that all week has spreadeagled across London, as the crowds came to bow their heads before the coffin; watching the emotions on display today, and the massed crowds again across the country, bringing something to this event that perhaps they didn't even understand themselves, I thought: *no. We don't really believe that there is nothing else. It is just what we think we have to say. Look: we believe in a bigger story. It is still there. It never left.*<sup>3</sup>

I think at the queen's funeral, we witnessed transcendence interrupting immanence.

We want to believe in more than we do. We crave order instead of the chaos we have created. We long for a bigger story than the smaller ones we so often settle for.

Even the most secular among us, I believe, have a desire for God, even if we would never describe it this way, even if we barely understand it.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://paulkingsnorth.substack.com/p/intermission-last-post-for-christian>

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So, God is immanent and transcendent. God is in the 4/10 days, the unexciting everyday days where the divine seems absent; and God is in the 10/10 days, the days when eternity interrupts the everyday, giving us even a little glimpse of beyond.

We see this in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is our teacher and our example in pursuing a life of simplicity and contentment and generosity and patience. In seeking to live lives like the one Paul commends to Timothy, we are doing nothing less than emulating the path that God Incarnate walked while here on this earth.

Jesus Christ is also the one who, as Paul says later in our passage this morning, is “the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the one who “alone who has immortality,” the one who “dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see,” the one to whom belong “honor and eternal dominion” (1 Tim. 6:15-16).

(How interesting that some of the most exalted language for Jesus in the entire New Testament comes in a passage commending simplicity!)

Jesus is the Suffering Servant and the Man of Sorrows on the park bench inviting us to love and to serve in humility. Jesus is Risen Lord and Exalted King in the cathedral inviting us to worship in reverence and awe.

It is not either/or. It is both/and.

And in pursuing both we take hold of the “life that really is life” (v. 19.) The life that incorporates all of who we are and all that we were made to be as human beings.

Head, heart, body, soul, hands, feet.

May God help us to take hold of the life that is eternal.

Amen.

