



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

March 27, 2016

The Life Everlasting

“Sixth in a Series on the Apostles’ Creed”

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

The Life Everlasting

"Sixth in a Series on the Apostles' Creed"

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

© 2016 by Dr. Jim Gilchrist and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: March 31, 2016

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ (1 Corinthians 15:2-22).

Nearly 500 years after the start of the Reformation it's a striking thing that the world has a Pope of the Roman Catholic Church so widely admired among Protestants, and even among agnostics, in part because of his great emphasis on the mercy of God. In fact Francis's newest book, in the form of a long interview with an Italian journalist, is called *The Name of God is Mercy*.

I read a lot of the Pope's writings because I like his spirit, and I hear in what he says so much of the voice of the Holy Spirit. On this Easter Sunday we welcome seventeen new members into the life of our congregation, and about half of them come from a Roman Catholic background. I take that as yet another sign that we all belong to the "holy catholic church" with a small "c," mentioned in the Apostles' Creed: the one universal church of Christ in every time and place.

All of this focus on mercy and unity points toward the vision of God's peaceable kingdom and the communion of saints, which will be fully realized when God makes all things new in "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting"—the final words of the Creed. What makes this communion possible, and what makes everlasting life worth living, is precisely the mercy and grace of God.

Francis says his own episcopal motto is a Latin phrase that describes Jesus as *miserando atque eligendo*, which he translates with a made-up word in English, “mercifying and choosing.” Jesus is mercifying. He is the one who extends mercy to human beings, fills us with his mercy, and chooses us to live in love and joy and peace with him and with one another.

Francis tells about a young priest he knew in Buenos Aires who was so moved by the grace of God that he found himself offering forgiveness very frequently in the confessional. He wondered, in fact, if he was forgiving too much, and he went to see an older priest who, years later, would become Pope Francis. Asked what he did when he had those doubts, the young priest answered, “I go to our chapel and stand in front of the tabernacle and say to Jesus: ‘Lord, forgive me if I have forgiven too much. But you’re the one who gave me the bad example.’”¹

Part of what got Jesus into trouble with the sterner religious types of his day was the way he seemed so indiscriminate in showing mercy to just about everyone. Like the sower in his own parable, Jesus spread grace everywhere, as if he were broadcasting seeds in the hope that faith and the fruits of faithfulness would spring up all around him. And in fact, that’s just what happened—which is how a movement that started out with a dozen rather dubious disciples has become the faith of billions of people all around the world today.

The human heart has a longing for grace and mercy, especially when we look honestly into the depths of our own

¹ Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy* (New York: Random House, 2016), 12f.

being. Anyone willing to shine a light into the darkest recesses of his or her own soul finds things lurking there that cry out for mercy and can only be liberated by the grace of God.

It's true that many people don't yet see the need of grace. They tell themselves that they're just fine the way they are. They set their own moral and spiritual bar low enough that they can easily step over it, and they think they're already good enough that God should be satisfied without wanting anything else from them.

But there's a shallowness in that way of seeing ourselves, a lack of spiritual depth perception masked by a certain vanity. Francis calls that self-satisfied state a kind of "corruption," which can be far more dangerous in the long run than some of the ordinary sins we're all so familiar with.

When people sin—that is, when they fail to love God and love their neighbors as themselves, doing things they shouldn't do or neglecting to do the things they should—if their conscience is alert, they know they've done something wrong and now they're in need of mercy and forgiveness.

Guilt is a kind of moral pain, and like a pain in the body that says, "There's a problem here; you'd better find out what's wrong and do something about it," the purpose of guilt is to say to the soul, "There's something wrong here, and you need to make things right." Even our sin, when we recognize and confess it, drives us to God, where we find mercy and grace, which in turn bring gratitude and joy. In that way, Francis says, even shame is a gift of grace, because it drives us into the outstretched arms of our merciful God.

But corruption is a more serious thing altogether. A corrupt person refuses to see himself as he really is, even when others can see so clearly all the faults that he denies. Once a soul becomes corrupted, it usually takes some catastrophe, some great ordeal, to crack open the shell that's been so carefully built up, in order for the grace of God to find a way in.

We all want to love and be loved by others. We need to be accepted by at least some other people, and sometimes we can be desperate to do whatever it takes to find acceptance. That's part of why we divide ourselves into cliques in school, and then into all sorts of factions and tribes that bring us identity and acceptance over and against those we think of as outsiders, as others who are not like us.

Young people especially clamor for approval, as they try to figure out who they are and crave any confirmation that whoever they turn out to be, it will be all right. That's one reason why social media have become so wildly popular. People want as many "Likes" as they can get, and some will go to almost any length to get them, even putting images of themselves in cyberspace that they wish they could take back later on, when somebody uses them for their own selfish purposes. Lots of people also want to be part of what's "trending" these days, even though popular trends, like flocks of birds in flight, can change direction in a heartbeat, and leave those addicted to approval behind, feeling empty and abandoned.

A resurrection of the body and life everlasting, of the sort proclaimed on Easter and professed in the Creed, is only something to look forward to if life itself can be enjoyed honestly and openly, free from the compulsion to hide our true self and to seek passing approval from some fickle

crowd. The gospel is powerful because it promises everything we need, all that our hearts really long for, as a free gift from the One who alone is so merciful and good that we never have to earn his acceptance.

Some of us recently came back from the Holy Land, and one of the things that struck us was how completely ordinary it is in so many ways. You get these images in your head from Christmas cards and Christian artists, and you might expect to see some sort of holiness breaking out all around you in that biblical place. But then you discover that the Holy Land, like every other land, is full of ordinary people going about their lives with all the ordinary combinations of good and not-so-good inclinations and behaviors. We came to see that that's the point after all. Jesus comes into our midst to heal and forgive and redeem and save us in all the messy details of ordinary life.

God is not fond of sin, but God surely loves sinners. That's why Jesus' parables are filled with images of extravagant love and a wild commitment to seeking and saving the lost, like a father who throws a feast when his prodigal son returns, or a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep in the fold to set out in search of the one who wandered away. "There's joy in heaven over every one who returns," Jesus says, whether they ran off and squandered their inheritance and came crawling back home barely hoping for forgiveness, or whether they stayed home all along, like the elder brother, doing what was expected, but stuck in a kind of sulky self-righteousness.

Either way, as Francis says, God never tires of forgiving, even long after we've grown tired of asking for forgiveness. That's the kind of God we have, the Maker of heaven and earth, the love behind all creation. We don't

have to earn God's love. In fact, we can't earn God's love, any more than we can make a body that's lain two days and two nights in the grave come back to life.

But God can do that. God is powerful, and God is good. And the Son of God whose resurrection we celebrate today comes mercifying and choosing, filling us full of his own grace and calling us to join him in the only life worth living for all eternity. Which is why, on this Easter day and always, the whole church proclaims: Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org