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Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel-St. Thomas More, NYC
May 24, 2020, Streaming Mass
Easter 7th Sunday of Year A John 17:1-11a

For centuries, a dream that has driven humanity has been the quest for the "Fountain of Youth". It was in pursuit of that dream of living forever that the Spanish explorer, Ponce de Leon, discovered Florida. And those who have abandoned the hope of finding it in a place, have instead tried to look for at least the appearance of perennial youth, hoping to find it in a bottle, in a tube, or under the knife. And, to live a longer, or healthier and presumably happier life, people will submit themselves to strict regimens of dieting, jogging, exercise, etc. Still, no one has dared utter the promise such as Jesus has made, the promise of "eternal life."

In the Gospel of St. John, however, "eternal life" is more than the hope of going to Heaven when we die. It is something that begins right now. In today's Gospel we hear Jesus say, "Now this is eternal life, that they should know You, the only true God, and the One whom You sent, Jesus Christ." But what does it mean to "know" God and to "know" Jesus Christ? It is more than knowing about God or Jesus, something different from what one learns in parochial school or Sunday school or a religion course taken in college. Knowing, in the Jewish sense of the word, means "having an intimate relationship with" who or what is known. It is more of an experience than it is a head-trip. It is like what we mean when we speak of "knowing pain" or "knowing love." Only by actually undergoing that pain or actually being in love, do we understand what those words are all about. It is not something one "knows" by reading about it in a book. So, to "know" God, to "know" Jesus Christ is to have an actual relationship with God and with Jesus Christ, God's messenger, God's revealer. Knowing the religious vocabulary is helpful, but only up to a point. Knowing about God and about Jesus Christ is useful because it gives us a framework, a kind of mental scaffolding for certain types of experiences that otherwise might not be fully appreciated for what they really are—fleeting glimpses of God's own Self.

People sometimes ask me "Is all that stuff true, the stuff we read in the Bible, the Creed, the dogmas, the stuff the Catholic Church teaches?" And I answer "Yes, it's true, but in a very specific, albeit limited way." I like to use this comparison. I'm not sure if meteorologists, weathermen, weather women, still do this, but at one time they used to send up balloons to detect the direction and velocity of wind currents. The balloons helped them see what they could not see with the naked eye, viz., the way the air masses were moving in the upper atmosphere. They weren't looking just at the balloons, but at what the balloons indicated, what the balloons showed them about the

air currents, what the balloons revealed to them. Still, the balloons, served a very useful purpose. Without them the meteorologists would have little knowledge of what they were investigating. But the balloons were not what the whole experiment was about; it was about what was going on in the upper atmosphere with the winds.

The same applies to the "truths of our faith," the words of the Creed. They are a means to an end, but we should not stop with them, but go to where those words point, to a life that is centered on a genuine relationship with the living God. We should not get so focused on the words about God, about Jesus, that we never enter into the experience toward which these words are pointing. If we just stay with the words, then we are like people who are always reading maps or travel brochures and never visiting places, or people who are always reading recipes, but never actually cooking or baking anything. Theologians speak of "orthodoxy," about right belief, but the Christian message is really about "orthopraxis," right action. All the words are about how we might live rightly in relation to God, to the world God has made, to our fellow human beings, and to the deepest parts of our selves--and how we find God in the very midst of doing that. The words are a just a help to get us to that place in our lives.

That is why Jesus taught in parables, not so much to give people information about God, but an experience, however limited, of God. When people heard the parables of the Prodigal Son, of the Good Samaritan, and many others, they were invited in, drawn into those stories about forgiveness and compassion by Jesus with the hope that they would stay in those stories, that they would make those stories their own story, that they would say to themselves in so many words, "Yes, I like what it means to feel forgiven, to experience mercy, to have a sense of what it is not to be judged by anyone;" and then say, "Yes, that's how I want to live my life; Yes, I want that world to be my world."

Jesus announced that these parables indicated, pointed to--just the way that weather balloons indicate, point to--what the Kingdom of God is all about, what it means to live in the conscious awareness of God's presence. It is to live in God's world, in God's reality, as the real world, as the only world that counts, and not simply in what passes for the real world, the world of our everyday experience--the world of cynicism, of selfishness, of retaliation and expediency. Faith, then, is the acceptance of the invitation to enter into God's world, God's kingdom, to make that world one's own. It is more than just saying "yes," more than saying "I believe," to a set of words and leaving it at that.

In St. John's Gospel we don't find many parables, at all, except for that of the

Good Shepherd, nor do we hear mention of the Kingdom of God that we find in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. But it is the phrase "eternal life" that runs throughout St. John's Gospel, and it is the very same thing. Again, it is an invitation to find God at the center of our lives when we actually do the God-thing--and not just talk about it--when we live a life distinguished by forgiveness, compassion, justice and love.

The reality of God--who and what God is--is something that our limited, human minds are unable to grasp or comprehend. I would suggest that God is better understood as a Verb, an action word, than as a Noun, a substantive. So, rather than pay metaphysical compliments to God—all powerful, all good, all merciful, all knowing—better than trying to describe God, is to live consciously, deliberately, intentionally, in the manner that Jesus showed us by incorporating into our lives those values Jesus spoke of and lived in the Sermon on the Mount. Again, it is by doing the Godly thing, rather than just talking about it, thinking about it, that we come close to God and God comes close to us. Then God is not simply an abstraction, but an Abiding Presence dwelling in the depths of our soul.

In a few moments we will recite the Creed. Let us pray that they be not just words, but that we may go to where those words lead—to live lives of forgiveness, fairness and compassion, and therein find the presence of the living God.