



Pentecost 10 – Proper 12 (B)

Things Eternal

[RCL] 2 Kings 4:42-44; Psalm 145:10-19; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

Today's Collect really gets to the heart of the matter.

“O God, the protector of all who trust in you . . . Increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that, with you as our ruler and guide, *we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal . . .*”

With these words, we pray that we might pass through this temporal realm without losing sight of the eternal realm. In other words, we pray to live out our earthly lives without forgetting the truths of eternal life—those things that always have been and will be forever. We might think of it this way: As we walk the earth, we pray for the promise of heaven to be ever fixed in our sight.

This is not to say that we should focus on eternal things as an incentive. We were not created to begrudgingly trudge through life, motivated solely by the promise of a heavenly reward as if we are horses chasing a dangling carrot.

Rather, we pray to remember things eternal because they can give us much-needed perspective in this life. Eternal things—the things of God and of Jesus, of the religious and the spiritual—remind us that the lives we live day to day, week to week, and year to year are but the blink of an eye in the sight of the one who is everlasting to everlasting.

One of the virtues of such an eternal perspective is that it keeps us aware of the fact that God is God and we are not; that God's ways are not our ways; that there just might be a different way to respond to present circumstances or envision future possibilities than the way we typically do.

This is the idea behind those popular 90s-era bracelets that asked, “WWJD?” *What would Jesus do?* Implicit in the question is the reminder that Jesus' eternal perspective is worth contemplating.

So, when we pray that we may pass through things temporal without losing sight of things eternal, we are asking God to keep us mindful of the very thing God did—and still does—in Jesus Christ. That is, God enters this realm, sanctifies it, and reminds us that the ways of this world won't get the last word.

We need a reminder of that. So often, aspects of the temporal world bring us down, whether it's the divisiveness of partisan politics, the crassness of a coworker, or the backed-up sewer line.

Through any and all of the messiness of day-to-day living, our relationship with Jesus makes it possible for us to see things from an eternal perspective *now*; to glimpse the Kingdom *now*; to walk in eternal life *today*.

This is what God has always been doing: in the wisdom spoken through the prophets, in the psalms sung by congregations of the faithful, in the Red Sea waters lifted at the hand of Moses, in the bow that Noah saw set in the clouds, in the sacred covenant made with Abraham, in the creation fashioned from a formless void.

All of these things are signs that God has, since before time began, been showing us glimpses of eternity. We may not be first-hand witnesses of signs as big as some of these. But we witness things that are just as important. If you have ever known someone who has overcome an addiction to narcotics, taken steps toward forgiving someone who has egregiously wronged them, or eventually come to a place of peace after the sudden loss of a loved one, then you have seen the inbreaking of God's eternal perspective at work in the temporal world.

It doesn't only happen in dramatic ways. You can participate in eternal life by reading a bit of scripture, praying with the psalms, or naming God's activity in the world around you.

And don't worry. Even when you lose sight of things eternal—as we all do from time to time—God will find a way to reach toward you in covenant loyalty, as if to say, “I am here, and I will never go away. No matter what you do, no matter what you say, I am in this for keeps.” You just have to keep an eye out for it. You just have to remember that the one who formed you in your mother's womb, who knew you even before you twinkled in the eye of some unknown beholder, is constantly calling you into eternal relationship even in this midst of this temporal world.

That eternal relationship is not a testament to something old or new, but to the one thing that is constant: the faithfulness of a God who never ceases to work the wonders of eternity. And so, we pray to behold those very wonders by recounting not only God's saving deeds long past, but experiencing them today.

Have you seen any lately?

Maybe you have heard the story about the man who was extremely leery of doing too much for others? He said things like, “If you give these people too many handouts, they’ll get used to it and be back for more before you know it!”

One Sunday, some of his friends were able to convince him to tag along as they made their monthly visit to a large downtown parish where they helped serve a free community meal. As they arrived, he saw hundreds of people lined up around the block waiting. “What difference will one lunch make?” he asked. “Most of them still have to sleep outside tonight.”

Despite his initial attitude, his friends got him to go back again. And again. After they had taken him four or five times, he got to know a few of the folks who remembered his name. But it wasn’t until he began to remember their names that he finally started to understand the difference God was making in that place.

It was a difference that had very little to do with lumpy mashed potatoes and weak lemonade and much more to do with being named and claimed, with being called into relationship, with being there for someone you didn’t even know needed you.

It was a difference, the man finally realized, that had to do with his willingness to take an eternal perspective in the midst of a temporal world.

It’s so easy to say things like, “*My salary could never buy enough food for all these people.*” or “*There’s a kid here with a couple loaves of bread, but I don’t know what good it’s going to do in a crowd this size.*”

But that kind of attitude isn’t going to help us see through a lens of eternity. We can do that only if we show up and faithfully start passing out what’s there. Once everyone’s had enough, we just might find that we are glimpsing the Kingdom of Heaven. Not only that, but we can make quite a nice meal from what’s left over.

The Rev. Warren Thomas Swenson is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Chester, where his research focuses on queer theology and homiletics. Warren also serves as associate priest of Southeast Tennessee Episcopal Ministry (STEM), a system of yoked congregations in the Diocese of Tennessee. He lives in Sewanee with his husband, Walker.