

10.11.09 What must I do to have Eternal Life?

Job 23:1-9, 16-17 Then Job answered: "Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. O that I knew where I might find him that I might come even to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me. There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge. If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him. God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!"

Mark 10:17-31 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. □ □ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Last Friday my first Zen teacher, John Daido Looi, died.

Today is my birthday. It is also, I recently discovered Thich Nhat Hanh's birthday--- or, as he would say, his continuation day.

Today is also National Coming Out Day, the day when lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people are encouraged to make their sexual orientation known.

And our scripture lesson for today asks the question, “What must I do to have eternal life?”

That, in essence, is what links Daido Looi, Thich Nhat Hanh, National Coming Out Day and my birthday: the question, “What must I do to have eternal life?” Because if you seriously ask this question, you will find your entire life purpose and direction challenged and you will know in your gut—in your belly—that you are on a road that you are not in control of, taking you places you never dreamed of, even places that you really didn’t want to go. To ask the question of eternal life is to put yourself in the presence of He who calls you to Himself, He who says, “Come, my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” That same Jesus also says, “one thing you lack: go and sell all you have and give it to the poor, then come and follow me.”

To ask “what must I do to have eternal life” is to ask the most important question of your life: it is to ask the ultimate question of life: what’s important? What is life all about any way? We’re born, we live, we die and then what? What’s the point? What happens after we die and how is our living connected to our dying?

T.S. Eliot said “Beware of the Stranger who knows how to ask questions.” Jesus puts a mirror to our face and asks, “Who are you?” “What are you living for?” what is your life’s purpose? All these questions are versions of one thing: the Spiritual Imperative. The Spiritual Imperative is to give up everything in order to engage the question, “What must I do to have eternal life?”

John Daido Looi and Thich Nhat Hanh followed their spiritual imperative. Daido founded Zen Mountain Monastery, where I first rained, outside of Woodstock, NY. Thich Nhat Hanh was an activist Buddhist monk in Vietnam, helping refugees leave the country when it was in the chaos of war. They were called the Boat People. A constant peacemaker he has written over 40 books on Buddhist teachings, many first translations into English of 3000 year old Buddhist texts. He established Plum Village in France where people could find refuge; learn how to live authentic lives.

Because eternal life and authentic life are the same thing. You may think that eternal life is about what happens after you die, but it is a question that reaches back from the future into today and questions what you are doing with your life, here, now.

The man who asked the question of Jesus had kept all the commandments. He was a good Jew, but that wasn’t enough. You may be a good citizen and a good Christian, but that isn’t enough. You will not have eternal life here and now and after, if you have not realized that your life is not your own. Your life belongs to the one who made you, called you into being, and breathed life into you. You are flesh and bone, but without breath, without spirit, you are a walking carcass.

The Heidelberg catechism asks, **Question 1.** What is thy only comfort in life and death?

Answer: That I with body and soul, both in life and death, (a) am not my own, (b) but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; (c) who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, (d) and delivered me from all the power of the devil; For none of us liveth to

himself, and no man dieth to himself. Rom.14:8 For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's.

For we know that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose.

Without Daido Looi's life, teachings and his establishment of Zen Mountain Monastery, I would not be here today. I first went into Zen practice because nothing in my life was working. My Christian faith was flat. Empty. Zero. I could not pray and I could not stand any traditional talk about God or the Bible. I had reached a point of burn-out big time with Christianity. 19 years ago this past August, I walked into Zen Mountain Monastery and I fell apart—I let go of everything because I found a place where I didn't have to hold it together. I felt safe. I felt I had come home, because I found a community of people all of whom had suffered deeply and were dedicated to a spiritual path for the sake of which they had given up everything. In that surrender I found peace, meaning and joy. And it was through my Zen practice that I recovered a path back to Christianity, to Jesus and the church. When I told Daido about my possible return to the church, he said "There's no problem with that; there's no conflict between Christianity and Zen Buddhism. But you'll be asking people to take their lives to a deeper level.

And so I do. And here I am.

Before I was able to let Daido be my teacher, however, I had to know where he stood on my being gay. I read a story in the Mountain Record, the journal of the monastery, about an interview a student had with him in dokusan (formal private encounter between student and teacher). The student said, "I need to tell you something important about me: I'm gay." And Daido replied, "Won't it be great when you won't have to tell me?"

I was furious when I read that. The student had worked up the courage to bare her soul, and he lithely skipped over her angst into a possible future. It took several friends to make me see that actually he was not only affirming her, but envisioning a future when people wouldn't have to worry about telling others they're gay because it would be just a variation of normal—nothing out of the ordinary, just a variety of ordinary.

Today is National Coming Out Day, when lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people are urged to find a way to let others know about who they are. Nearly twenty years after Daido's comment to the student and forty years after Stonewall, we are not yet at the point where it can be assumed that it is okay to be gay--- where, in Daido's words, "you don't have to say so."

As conversations have been going around our church reflecting different points of view about Marriage Equality, I have felt more and more that a serious problem in the discussion is that not many people in this church know personally any gay people well enough to know what life is like for us, to know why the freedom to come out is so important, and how much shame and fear dictate our lives until we declare our personal truth.

The spiritual point here should be obvious: Jesus loves me. Do you know how many years of my life I sang that with a "yes, but"? Jesus loves me except for the gay part. That's how gay people hear the gospel until such a time as someone in the church, someone representing the church and the gospel of Christ, says, Jesus loves you as you are and we love you as you are. As you may have heard recently the Pope has decided to ease the transition for Episcopal priests to become Roman Catholic priests, even if they are married. That would be noble and generous were it not for the fact that the motivation for his opening the doors wider is because he knows some Episcopalians share the same prejudice against women and gay people's being ordained. Jesus loves you but not quite as much as he loves straight people or, at least, straight men.

How many times have wives told their husbands, "I know you love me. I just need to hear you say it." Gay people need to hear that they are loved just as God made them; they need to hear it from Christians, from the followers of Christ, for we are the voice and body of Christ in the world. They--- we need to hear it because so many voices of the church have been saying "yes, but" for centuries. We need to hear there is GOOD NEWS; that the church has reached a deeper and clearer understanding and now openly welcomes those whom so many reject and condemn.

We all need to hear it. We need to hear that there is no secret bad enough to keep us away from the love of God in Christ and his church. We need to hear and feel and believe that we are loved just as we are. It is not just gay people who hide who they are. Everyone has a secret place inside themselves that they fear letting be known. It is not easy to believe that you are truly made in the image of God: everyone has done things, thought or felt things, and said things of which they are ashamed. No matter how good we appear on the outside, each of us struggles with the part of us that we think other people don't know: our fears, our guilt, our shame, our inadequacy, our manipulations, lies and the ease with which we walk by on the other side of so much of the world's suffering that we know we are NOT good Samaritans. In Alcoholics Anonymous there is a saying, "you're as sick as your secrets." What are your secrets? What are you afraid for others to know about you? If you know clearly that shadow side of secrets, you have just a glimpse of what it means to be gay.

And if you're still too shy to say the gay word, you don't yet understand the problem. National Coming Out day is still necessary because many gay people still live in fear—fear of rejection, fear of job loss, loss of friends. They fear or hate going to church because everything in their personal experience tells of a gay-hating homophobia in the church and who would want to be apart of that? Which is why it's important for the church to be open and affirming and to make it publicly known. We have to tell people: here you are safe. Here you can be who you are. And we have to know what we mean when we say that.

Now, lest anyone leave here thinking that all they heard was a gay sermon, let's get back to the Bible. A man asks, "What must I do to have eternal life?" And after checking him out on the Ten Commandments, Jesus says, "Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor, then come and follow me."

This is not a metaphor. This is not a "nice idea" or an abstraction.

Unless you are ready to give up everything seriously ready to let go of it all, you are not yet ready to inherit eternal life. Think about everything you have: homes, cars, savings, investments, IRA's (no matter how diminished by recent economics); children, spouse, parents, family, and friends. If you don't know deep in your heart that your love of God is greater than all these, then you are not ready for eternal life. Not because you are not worthy: after all, none of us is worthy on his own merits. You are not ready for eternal life, because you are still thinking that what you have is what is important, rather than realizing your very life itself is a gift, and it is only out of gratitude for this most precious gift that what we have has any value at all.

Do I need to repeat the stories about the man who was self-satisfied, congratulated himself on his affluence and built more barns to hold his grain. He went to bed happy, feeling important--- and then died in his sleep.....Or the story of Job who lost everything: or the story of all the people whose lives have been ruined by the economic debacle of today....

Do you have a faith that would withstand the trials of Job? Do you know what's important in your life and are you honoring God by how you manage your money?

Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will

not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”