

The next time you are in St. Augustine, Florida, you can visit a fifteen acre park "The Fountain of Youth." The site is claimed as the place where Juan Ponce de Leon landed in 1513 in search of legendary waters containing the power to reverse the process of aging. The explorer is credited with naming the territory "La Florida" for the Spanish "Pascua Florida," the Easter feast of flowers. In 1901 Dr. Louella Day McConnell purchased the estate and capitalized on the fountain of youth legend by charging admission to drink from the spring waters. Today, "The Fountain of Youth" has become a theme park where tourists can drink the water as they drink in the mythical history in the founding of America and as they drink in the mystery of life.

Immortality is a universal human quest. The ancient myth of a fountain of youth is only one of many legendary accounts in the history of the human quest for immortality. The connection of Florida to Easter and the legendary fountain of youth seems farfetched unless you read in the Gospel of John about the encounter of Jesus with the woman of Samaria at Jacob's well. In the story, Jesus asks for a drink of water from the well. Then the conversation shifts (4:13-14) to theology: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." In John, the water of life is not a fountain of youth; it is a gift that flows from the grace of the eternal God.

Life, *zoe* in Greek, appears some sixty-six times in the Gospel and Epistles associated with John. *Zoe aionios*, eternal life, occurs seventeen times in the Gospel and six times in 1 John. In the Gospel, the only adjective allowed to qualify the word *life* is "eternal." Most of us have encountered the girl's name *zoe* without any awareness of its root, but all of us are familiar with the association with the zoo where live animals are displayed for our education and curiosity. The Greek word has no special religious or mystical meaning. Zoologically, life is a limited event bounded by birth and death. Acceptance of the limit, death, is an important lesson of growing up that most of us meet in the death of a pet long before we have to deal with the death of a significant person in our lives. Farm children come to terms with the death of animals as a necessary part of the family vocation; they are advised to avoid involvement with the animals as pets. All of us who have loved pets and interacted with them as "persons" in our lives have experienced the childhood pain of grief when they come to the end of life.

I was about ten years old when my friend Bobby gave me a rabbit for attending to his large family of rabbits while he was on vacation. Dad helped me to build a cage and the bunny quickly became an adult rabbit, as it turned out, a doe. The discovery sent me back to Bobby's house for a liaison of my doe with one of his bucks, and I began to learn one of the lessons about life. Dad helped me to replace my one-rabbit cage with a much larger one that would accommodate an entire family. At first, the bunnies were nurtured by their mother. Then it became my job to feed and water the little animals. I especially enjoyed turning them out into the back yard on a spring afternoon to play with them while they sampled the clover. The day arrived when Dad announced that it was time to harvest the young rabbits for the table. I reluctantly participated in the slaughter and dressing of the animals, but my usual ravenous appetite disappeared when Mother served fried rabbit for dinner. That was my first encounter with the reality that my diet was tied to the death of living beings. I have been told that the lessons on the slaughter houses in American history classes in high school results in large numbers of students suddenly adopting a vegetarian lifestyle.

The key to our concern about the question of immortality seems to be tied to the personal dimension of life. Thousands of strangers die in earthquakes, storms, tsunamis, or from starvation without radically affecting our lifestyle. We may care and even act with compassion, but we can accept that nature and death seem to be companions. But the death of a pet or the death of a significant person in our lives throws us into the process of grief that is often associated with depression, insomnia, and fear. I recall the somewhat casual comment of Arch Heady, the owner and CEO of several Louisville funeral homes, that death is a normal part of life which we must simply learn to accept. That is one of the facts of life that we are supposed to incorporate into our

encyclopedia of lessons learned, but everything changes when the death we experience is a spouse, a parent, a sibling, a close friend, or even a family pet. Something about the death of a person we love is contradictory. It does not fit casually into the mental compartment that we have labeled "normal."

As a gift of the eternal God, life is eternal. The universal human experience with grief has sent people of every generation and every religion and culture out in search of something more. Platonic Greek theology found hope in the natural immortality of the soul. Our Jewish forebears saw life as a gift of God and all of nature functioning under the authority of the Creator. Life came from God and was always contingent on the continuing vitality of the breath of God. The priestly writer of Genesis 1 declared that persons, male and female, were created in the divine image. The Creator was before all things and after all things, therefore, eternal. Made in the divine image, something of the character of the eternal God was in human being. For most of the Old Testament death is the end of life and, at best, sheol the realm of the dead was a twilight state. The hope for immortality was largely a family matter. The future rested with the continuity of generations even with the Patriarchs. God's promise to Abraham was not earthly immortality, but the continuation of his family as a great nation and the multiplication of his seed like the stars of the heavens and the sands of the seashore. Jews could not imagine life without a body; the development of an afterlife gradually emerged as the resurrection of the body, the teaching of the Pharisees and of Jesus in the New Testament.

John seems to be the late Gospel, following the Synoptic Gospels by some twenty years. Time has lapsed. Gentiles have come into the church. John writes of eternal life like the other Gospels speak of the Kingdom of God. It is the life of God imparted to followers of Jesus. Even when John does not qualify *zoe* life as eternal, the quality of eternity is implied in the context. Thus, for John, life tied to the gift of God is eternal. If God is eternal, the life that God gives is also eternal. When Jesus identifies himself as the good shepherd who gives eternal life to his followers, he also says, "The Father and I are one."

Furthermore, eternal life, is more than the possibility for immortality which comes after death. For John, eternal life is the present possession of the followers of Jesus. The life we live now in the face of suffering and death is rooted in the eternal God Who gives both meaning to the mystery of existence and meaning beyond the mystery of death. We do not lead two lives, one here and one hereafter; we lead one continuing state of being rooted in the sustaining grace of God.

Finally, the only evidence of eternal life is in the bond of faith to the eternal God. We do not get a certificate of authenticity that we can present at death's door to verify our hope. Our only evidence is that we become the dwelling place of God. I forwarded an announcement from the Rationalists of East Tennessee about their annual public lecture this afternoon, "Is there Evidence for Life after Death?" I get a hint of the tone of the lecture by physics professor Victor Stenger in the note on his bestselling book *God: the Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows that God Does not Exist*. I confess that I have not read the book, but I vigorously protest the assumption that science can "show" either the existence or absence of God. I further doubt that science can demonstrate any real conclusion about eternal life.

Christians like all of the other children of God on this planet have been affected by our bonds of love and dependence on one another. Something inside of us demands that the gift of life from the eternal God is too precious to toss aside like an old movie when death comes. Could John be on the right track? Life as gift from the eternal God is in itself eternal.