



OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

The Lord is Good to All

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A sermon delivered at the Church of the New Jerusalem in Bath, Maine

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Readings:**Psalm 107:1-9****Revelation 21:1-7****Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell* §399**

This morning, I want to resume the effort to put some of the principal teachings of our church in brief and simple statements, into something like sound bites. Two weeks ago, the simple statement was “There is no wrath of God”; and today’s sentence follows closely upon it—“The Lord is good to all.” Again, we have six very common little words, and again, the implications are immense.

It is sometimes said that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath in contrast to the God of love of the New Testament. The only way to maintain this figment is to ignore the beautiful descriptions of the Lord’s love in the first and the terrifying descriptions of divine wrath in the second. The images of judgment in the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew come immediately to mind, as does the wine press of the wrath of God in the book of Revelation. Psalms such as the one hundred and seventh and the one hundred and forty-fifth come to mind, as does the longing of God over a wilful Ephraim in the midst of the judgments proclaimed by Hosea. “How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I deliver you, O Israel?” (Hosea 11:8) Turn a few centuries ahead, and we can hear Jesus weeping over Jerusalem.

In The Doctrine of Sacred Scripture (§55), the literal sense of the Word is described as being like a person clothed but with face and hands bare. It is a rich and evocative image. It tells us that in places, but not in most places, the face of God shines through. There are statements about the Lord that we can take literally; and our teachings would insist that our text is one of those statements. “The Lord is good to all.” It means exactly what it says. There are no exceptions to it. The Lord intends and does nothing but good to absolutely everyone.

What we find in the Gospels, then, is not a revision of the teaching of the Hebrew Bible. After all, the Lord did say that he had come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, not to destroy them (Matthew 5:17). We might then say that the Lord came to show which were the places where the face of God was showing through; and it has struck me only recently that a very familiar passage gives us that principle of interpretation. When a lawyer tempted Jesus by asking him to identify the greatest commandment, Jesus answered with the commandment to love the Lord above all and the neighbor as oneself, and added, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:40).

The first thing to observe is that these two great commandments are not new. They are drawn from the Hebrew Bible, from the Torah, one from Deuteronomy and the other from Leviticus. The second thing to observe is that the Gospels tell us of two other similar incidents. There is an account in Mark (12:28-34) where the same question is asked and the same answer given. In this instance, the scribe answers, “Well, Master, you have said the truth, for there is one God and no other, and to love him with all the heart and all the understanding and all the soul and all the strength and to love the neighbor as oneself is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” In Luke, we read of a time when Jesus turned the question back. “What is written in

the law? How do you read it?” In this incident, it is the lawyer himself who chooses these two commandments.

Evidently, then, there were Israelites who saw these two commandments as central to the law. When Paul wrote to the Romans that “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10), he might well have been saying something he had been taught in his years as a Pharisee.

We can afford to love the Lord with all our heart and mind and soul and strength because “the Lord is good to all.” It may be disquieting to think that the Lord is just as good to the terrorists as he is to their victims, but again, there are no exceptions to this rule. It means that no matter what we do, no matter what choices we make, the Lord will continue to do whatever can be done for our well-being, for our salvation.

It also means that the Lord is sending this same message to everyone. The basic principle of the goodness of God is central to all religions. In preparing this sermon, I was struck by the wording of two verses of the one hundred and forty-fifth Psalm for one particular reason. In Hebrew, the statement that “The Lord is gracious and full of compassion” is ‘hanun werahum adonai’, and the statement that “his tender mercies are over all his works is ‘werahamav ‘al-kol-ma’asav’. The root of the words for “full of compassion” and “tender mercies” is rhm, and that is the same root that we find at the very beginning of the Qur’an. “Praise be to God, Lord of the universe, the merciful, the compassionate—arrahamani -rrahim. When the Imam Lawrence Muhammad described Islam as a religion of peace and charity, he was on solid ground. Those who use the religion to justify violence can of course find texts to support themselves. We might think of them as following the example set by all too many Christians. Think of it for a moment. The whole purpose of creation, the whole purpose of the incredibly vast, intricate, and beautiful universe, is a heaven from the human race. There is a beauty of true human community that is worth all of this. That beauty rests in the fact that we are of such immense value to each other. We matter immensely to each other. It is sad, pathetically sad, that it seems to take tragedy to awaken us to how much we matter.

I was just sent a collection of quotations, and would like to share parts of three of them at this point. From Gary Zukav, “If you can look with compassion upon those who have suffered and those who have committed acts of cruelty alike, then you will see that all are suffering. The remedy for suffering is not more suffering.” We might revise this to read, “If we can look at those who have committed acts of suffering through the eyes of a Lord who is good to all” the second quotation is from Deepak Chopra: “And I asked myself, Why didn’t I feel this way last week” Why didn’t my body go stiff during the bombing of Iraq or Bosnia? Around the world my horror and worry are experienced every day.” The third is from Martin Luther King, and it is the briefest of all: “Darkness cannot put out darkness. Only light can do that.”

“The Lord is good to all,” and the Lord is good to all of us all at once. The goal of divine providence is not just a countless number of happy individuals, it is “a heaven,” a community. I am convinced that the vehemence with which the prophets denounced Judah and Israel is in direct proportion to the clarity of their vision of what might be, of what should be. cynicism accepts evil as inevitable. “That’s just the way things always have been and always will be,” so there is no point in getting all worked up about it. But all it takes is one experience of true community and the foundations of cynicism crumble. If life can be like this for a moment, why not for two moments, and if for two, why not for four?

The difficulty, as our theology points out, is that the blessedness of heavenly community is on a higher or deeper level than that of our normal, everyday consciousness. We get hints of it only occasionally. In my own experience, such hints often come at memorial services, when all the little frictions of everyday living are set aside and we catch a glimpse of what one whole human life means. They may come at totally unexpected moments, when a husband or a wife does something that has been done a thousand times before, and we suddenly glimpse the faithfulness that lies within it. We, too, are clothed—clothed with our everyday preoccupations—but every once in a while the inner face shines through.

These are all times of relationship, and that is important. The times when we are most alone are our times of self-examination. Then we necessarily turn our attention away from what others are doing and feeling and try to understand our own hearts. I need not say that these are not likely to be happy times. No, true happiness involves the presence of others. It involves looking outside ourselves. Sometimes we talk about “needing to be drawn out of ourselves,” and there is a kind of spiritual literalism to the image. Listen again to part of our third reading.

We may gather the magnitude of heaven’s pleasure simply from the fact that for everyone there it is delightful to share their pleasure and bliss with someone else; and since everyone in the heavens is like this, we can see how immense heaven’s pleasure is. There is, in a sense, a price to pay for this happiness. The same nerves that feel pleasure also feel pain. To be open to the joys of others is to be open to their sorrows as well. If from time to time the troubles of the world seem to weigh down upon us, this may be a very good thing. It may be reminder that spiritually we are not isolated from each other. Whether we know it or not, we are praying that everyone in the world will participate in this sharing, for the Lord is good to all.

Amen.