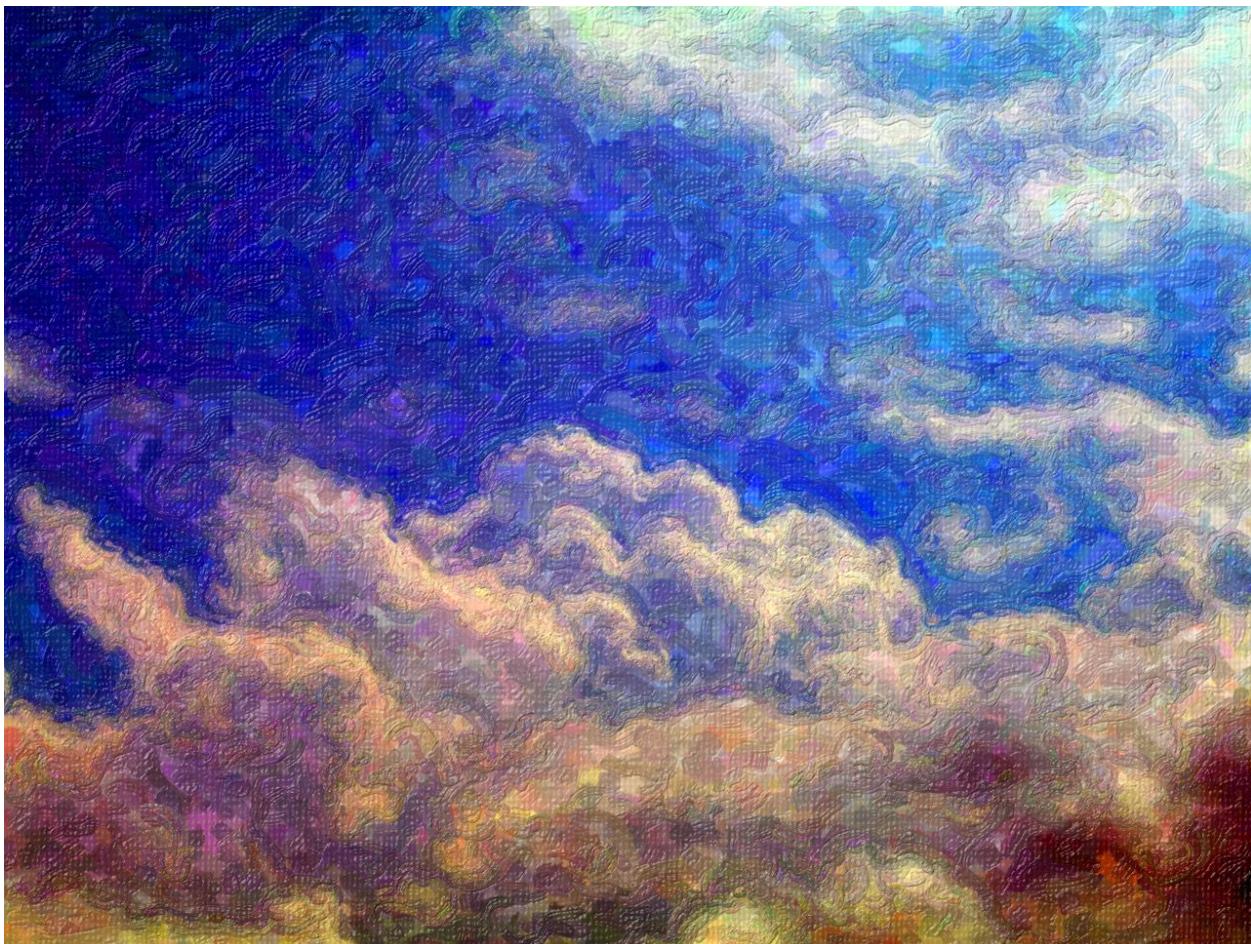




Upside Down, Feet Up, and Head Down

-Rev. Sage Cole

A sermon delivered at the Swedenborg Chapel in Cambridge, MA



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Readings

Psalm 90:12-17

So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants!

Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil.

Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children.

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands— O prosper the work of our hands!¹

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Mark 10:17-21

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.”

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² Ibid.

Emanuel Swedenborg, *Divine Providence* §217

Eminence and wealth are blessings for people who do not set their heart on them and curses for people who do. To set one's heart on them is to love oneself in them, and not to set one's heart on them is to love the service they can perform and not oneself in them.

If people attach importance to themselves or their image, when this is portrayed in the spiritual world they seem to be upside down, feet up and head down.³

³ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Divine Providence*. West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.

Upside down, feet up and head down. The manner in which people are portrayed in the spiritual world who attach importance to themselves or their image. I wish I could do a hand stand for you to give you a visual image, but I'm sure you can draw this picture into your mind, a crowd of people walking on their hands, feet in the air, full of self-importance. Emanuel Swedenborg had the ability to glimpse into the spiritual world, and of the things he came back to report, some of my favorite are these wonderful depictions of how the different manners of sin we are caught up in this world are portrayed in persons in the spiritual world. Whereas on earth our inner lives are most often hidden from each other, in the spiritual world that Swedenborg describes no such subterfuge is possible. Everything on the inside, everything, is visible on the outside. And so, those like the young man with many possessions in our gospel reading this morning, those attached to wealth, to their sense of self-importance, sense of success, or ability, walk around on their hands, heads down, with their feet in the air.

This image, while colorful, and kind of humorous to consider, actually gives a very clear, straight forward depiction of what is wrong when we are attached to our own merit, our own skill, strength, importance, ability, you name it, instead of giving gratitude and acclaim to God for these gifts. When we are caught up in our own sense of merit we are placing our lowest self, our feet, in the highest position, our most natural selves are leading and controlling and naming our experience. Our minds are hanging, low down, near the earth, taking in information only from our senses, our bodily needs and desires. What will help me, satisfy me, strengthen me, and give me acclaim, accolades, glory, or even, eternal life?

The man with many possessions, who we hear about in Mark's gospel this morning, is an example of one such character who we would likely find in the spiritual world walking on his hands, feet in the air. While his concerns portray someone striving for the good, there is something inherently self-referential in his striving. He asks Jesus "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" almost as if eternal life is something he could claim, own, or possess like any of the many other material goods he is said to own. And Jesus wastes no time in naming the perversion of this 'good seeking' behavior, chastising the

young man for calling even him ‘good’ saying “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”

The remedy for this type of attachment to our own goodness, our own strength, is drastic. Jesus calls him to sell all that he has and give it to the poor and come and follow me. On a spiritual level the young man must sell not just his physical possessions, but all of his attachments to his own self-image, positive and negative. He must sell his sense of being the source of his own life. He must let go of his need even to achieve his own goodness.

This is a seemingly impossible task for the young man, and I would argue that it is also a seemingly impossible task for most, if not all of us as well.

I spent the day yesterday down in Duxbury with the SCYL, the Swedenborgian Church Youth League at their annual Columbus Day Weekend retreat. The theme of the retreat was Teens in the Bible, and one of the sessions I presented was on Cain and Abel, the first teens it seems to appear in scripture, as Adam and Eve we are told were formed straight off as adults. I bring this up because the conversation that emerged during the session centered on how this need for merit, this need for possessing a sense of success, acclaim, or most directly favor with God, is actually what motivates the first murder in scripture. It is Cain’s jealousy of the favor Abel receives from God that drives him to kill his brother. If Cain had been unattached to his own self-image, if he had understood himself to be a recipient of life, this kind of comparison, this kind of competition would never have happened, or the drastic violence that results. But our human nature is such that our first instinct, the ground of our being is attached, very much attached to our own self image. This is the source of much anger, discord, and lack of cooperation, violence and strife. This is our spiritual heritage, this is what we are born into, but it need not be where we settle forever.

We do not have to spend our eternal lives with our feet in the air walking on our hands! It is tiring to walk that way! And the truth is it is tiring to carry around, care for and maintain all of these possessions, all of these things that we think are ours to manage. The truth is for all of the positive attributes or successes that we cling to maintain our self-worth there are most likely a whole host of negative attributes that we hold to just as tightly. What if we were able to let it all go, and just accept

ourselves as beloved children of God, and in freedom, unattached actually follow the Lord, instead of seeking to earn our way into heaven?

Jesus doesn't ask the young man to sell all he has, give what he earns to the poor and then to be poor himself. He asks him to do this and then to come and follow him. He invites this young man to enter the grand adventure, to be among his disciples, to be close to him, to be filled in body and spirit, and to do the great work of proclaiming and living into the Kingdom of God. This is the invitation that many of us likely proclaim we are looking for, but also very likely refuse, in just the same way.

We need not be perfect. We CANNOT be perfect. But we can allow God to be perfect, and devote ourselves to doing what we can to allow God's life to work in us. It is a paradox, which requires a constant returning, because as life flows through us, as goodness or badness results we have to let whatever merit or blame go, and return again to seeking to be of service, seeking to be a vessel, seeking to sell all we have and follow Jesus.

I for one, want to go. And for me, it means there is almost always a new, large sale each weekend as the new possessions I've accumulated must again be released. But perhaps each time the sales are getting a bit smaller. And thankfully the Lord is very enthusiastic to have me with him, and always excited when I return. May we continue to return. And may we eventually stand straight, and tall, our heads in the air our feet on the ground ready to walk in the footsteps of our Lord wherever he would take us. Amen.