



Thoughts in my Garden

-Rev. Jane Siebert

A sermon delivered at the Church of the New Jerusalem in Bath, Maine on May 19, 2019



May 2019

Readings

Isaiah 40:28-31

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.¹

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Matthew 13:1-17

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’ With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

‘You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.
For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.’

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.²

² Ibid.

Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell* §114

We may now say something about the knowledge of correspondences and its use.

We have just stated that the spiritual world, which is heaven, is united to the natural world by means of correspondences; so it is through correspondences that we are given communication with heaven. Heaven's angels do not think in terms of natural phenomena the way we do, so when we are absorbed in the knowledge of correspondences we can be in the company of angels in respect to the thoughts of our minds. So we can be united to them in regard to our spiritual or inner person. In order that there might be a union of heaven with humanity, the Word was written in pure correspondences. Absolutely everything in it corresponds.

So if we were steeped in a knowledge of correspondences, we would understand the Word in its spiritual meaning and be enabled to know hidden treasures in it that we do not see at all in its literal meaning. The Word does in fact have a literal meaning and a spiritual meaning.

The literal meaning consists of the kind of things that are in our world, while the spiritual meaning consists of the kind of things that are in heaven; and since the union of heaven with our world is maintained by correspondences, we have been given a Word in which the details correspond, even down to the last jot.³

³ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Heaven and Hell*. Translated by George F. Dole. West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000.

I want to share with you a book I found a couple weeks ago while at the Central Office of our denomination in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was sitting on a bookshelf with a variety of different books and pamphlets and paraphernalia that has landed there over the years.

Do you ever find a certain book draws you to it? It may have set in your library on the shelf for some time, or you may have picked it up, started reading and put it back. You were not in the right receptive place to receive the book, until the time is right, and you pick it up and read the gift God has set before you.

This is a precious book that called out to me with the title, “Thoughts in my Garden” by Mary G. Ware, published in 1863. I found out from Dean Jim Lawrence that she was a favorite Swedenborgian writer in the 1860’s. The first quote in her book was from Swedenborg: “The human mind is as ground, which is such as to be made by cultivation.”

I was hooked, thinking of our minds as ground with the need for cultivation. It makes sense when we are fixed in our mind about something, that is like the ground being dry and hard. It is almost impossible to plant new thoughts or new seeds in our mind. Also, when it does rain on us, coming across deeper truths and understanding, if the ground is dry and hard the needed rain (truth) cannot soak in, but rather runs off the hard dry untilled ground. We have to cultivate the ground (our mind), prepare it to receive the seeds or new thoughts, and make it open to receive new ideas and information and grow. And it seems it is often God that cultivates our dry minds with things that happen or books we read.

Mary G. Ware’s Introductory Essay prepares the mind to receive what is to come in her little book about her garden. “Those among the readers of this little volume who are not familiar with the doctrines of the New Church, as taught by Swedenborg, may look upon the explanations contained in it of the correspondence of things natural with things spiritual, as fanciful or poetical merely, instead of being what the writer intended, strictly scientific.”

She goes on, “There has always been a class of minds not willing, or not able, to rest patiently in the external knowledge of the material world, but seeking earnestly to find some meaning hidden

within, informing with wisdom the dead matter of which earth is made, and the living organisms, vegetable and animal, that cover its surface.”⁴

Do any of you relate to this? I do. It is what drew me to Swedenborg when I married into the church decades ago. I love correspondences.... in the Bible, in the world around us and lighting up life with messages from God....if and when (and this is a big if and when for me), if and when I cultivate my mind, open my awareness to receive.

Mary G. Ware said she wrote this little poem to show us, “every word and work of the Divine Being must have a meaning and a purpose,” as explored in her garden. Or as she says, “All the processes of gardening are full of suggestion to every mind that loves to think.” So here we are. We live on this earth which the Lord creates, just as God creates each one of us. There is so much to learn from all God’s creation. And the more we open to receive and understand the spiritual aspects of creation the closer we are to God. Each little thing that God creates has a purpose and a value to our own spiritual journey.

I was given my own sign, or for what was to me a sign, last November, when I was searching for a new apartment in Wichita. There were several good options and one I was leaning towards. When I stepped out onto the small patio, I looked to the sky and my sight was drawn to a big bird circling. As it came closer I noticed the distinctive white head and tail feathers, and the smooth, gliding flight with dark wings spread straight out, a bald eagle. The spiritual correspondence that Swedenborg mentions: “a flying eagle signifies knowledges from which understanding is given, because when they fly they know and see things (Eagles have incredible eyesight), and this is to perceive and instruct.” I looked no further. Did I doubt? I am sorry to say, later I wondered is there really a connection or is this just happenstance? And true to form, we are always left in freedom to choose to accept or reject. I chose to accept. I did not ask or pray for a sign, but I was in a space where I could accept God’s soft support and affirmation.

Birds offer one of my favorite correspondences to thoughts. Like spiritual thoughts they can soar through our vision totally unnoticed. But when we pause and look at the bird or the thought, we

⁴ Ware, Mary G. *Thoughts in My Garden*. Boston: Massachusetts New Church Union, 1907.

can perceive the beauty and it is a reminder to also notice those spiritual thoughts that can flit through our minds unnoted. God is always knocking, and we can open the door or ignore the knock. And it is not that we need to find exactly what Swedenborg offered as a correspondence or go look up in a book; we can sense connections. Eagles are rare to see, especially in Wichita, in the middle of the day. It was special for me, a gift, an assurance, an affirmation that moving was a right decision and this was a good place. We just need to be aware of connections to our world around us, like our friends the native Americans. We have lost much of this connection. It is sacred.

As we grow in our spiritual life and pay attention, we can cast out some of our natural doubt that makes it hard for us to feel the Lord's love and connection with us. Sometimes we feel too insignificant for God to be "bothering" with us. Sometimes it is our self-love that blinds us, thinking we have things all figured out, not trusting the Lord, but relying on our own actions and thoughts. This is when the soil of our minds and even our hearts is hard and dry.

It is the same with how we see our neighbors. Are we holding onto stigmas of who or what we think Muslims are? Or Jews, or blacks, or gays, or other those in the political left or right? Stigmas cause hardened hearts and dry soil of the mind. They block us from seeing someone as an individual, as our neighbor; and we grow fond of attaching our thoughts to the negative of this group or person. We can even experience glee when something bad or negative is connected with them. We are learning to hate the neighbor instead of loving our neighbor as the Lord teaches.

Mary Ware speaks of the importance of knowing ourselves, cultivating ourselves. "And this is the reason the Lord created the world around us to be like a vast mirror, in which our thoughts and affections, are reflected."

This brings us to the chapter on sowing seeds. From Mary Ware, "There is no garden process more instructive than the sowing of seed. Our whole lives are a continual sowing of seed." Everything we say, everything we do, even our silence or inaction plants a seed. "We scatter words carelessly around as if nothing were to come of them; but they are ever liable to find a place where they may take root in the mind of some person who hears them, and we should beware that the seed we thus sow is such that good fruit may be its result."⁵ Looking back at our sowing of seeds, we must admit they are

⁵ Ibid.

not always good seeds. There may be thistles in our gardens and the idle words we sow that come from our judgmental and negative thoughts may cause harm and cause more thistles to grow in us and in others.

And one last example from this little book fits our seasons of life. We are so ready for spring right now after a long winter that just won't quit. Often that is the season we look forward to the most or look back as the best time of life – the springtime of our life. autumn leaves. We have had a beautiful fall, with vibrant colors and leaves wafting down upon us and filling our paths and roads and yards. Now as they lie withering on the ground, they are turning brown and the sky is wintry; we may feel moody and disgruntled with things around us, wondering is God really in control? Is the Lord's providence truly governing what is going on in our world today?

Leaves correspond to truths and withered leaves to those truths we know but may have forgotten but are still available to us when we want to recall them. We know that nothing nourishes the growth of plants as well as its own decayed leaves. Once again Mary G. Ware relates to the correspondences between the plant and the human being. "It is the accumulation of truths or facts filling the thoughts day by day that produces experience, and it is our own person experience that builds up our mental strength and gives the most perfect growth in wisdom. The thoughtful person is like a careful cultivator, who gathers up the fallen leaves and uses them to nourish his plants; but the thoughtless person is like one who "allows" the idle winds to blow away the leaves, or perchance sets fire to them. The one is constantly gathering into the garden of his experience truths taught him by the successes and even by the failures of today, whereby to guide his life tomorrow; while the other, reflecting upon nothing adds nothing to his mental stores, and taking no thought about the mistakes of today, repeats them again tomorrow."

What happens in our past can be a good teacher if we ponder it openly without undo regret and pining over what might have been. Like running a race. Every race can be a teacher to improve how we run the race. But if we get stuck in the disappointment when things don't go as we wish or if we are overly proud of our success and don't look to the future, the lessons are lost and the leaves, the lessons, blow away.

The leaf falls from the tree when a new bud grows on the end of the stem and it pushes the leaf off the branch. The old leaf has done its work and now a new leaf will grow.

One last analogy, it is good to remember that our external truths are constantly changing and hopefully the change leads to spiritual growth. This is part of the cultivation of the mind and it happens if we keep an open mind and heart which allows for new or deeper truths to enter as we hold to the essential truths that God is love and only wants what is best for us in our spiritual lives leading to eternity.

Amen.