

NOVEMBER 2009

SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

OUR DAILY BREAD



THE LORD'S KINGDOM

Invitation

You are invited to use *Our Daily Bread* as a source of inspiration and as a guide for personal meditation and reflection. It is also a resource for home, small group, and church worship. Each issue has a theme, with weekly sermons focusing on various aspects of that theme. Daily meditations provide food for thought throughout the week.

Our Daily Bread has been published by the Swedenborgian Church since December 1949. May you be fed with spiritual nourishment as the Lord gives us this day our daily bread.

Prayer

Take not, O Lord, our literal sense.

In Thy great, unbroken speech
our limping metaphor translate.

- C.S. Lewis (1898-1963)

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From the Editors

Dear Readers,

As winter approaches, many of us think more often about the passing of time. The waning year beckons us to look backward and reflect on things of the past, but perhaps we do it for a more noble reason than mere nostalgia. Perhaps we do it because we are thinking about the direction in which we are headed. Reflection helps us rededicate ourselves to the ultimate purpose of our lives: creating and inhabiting the Lord's kingdom. This month's issue reminds us that eternity, heaven, and even the future are not distant locations, but states we inhabit right now.

The Reverend Rachel Rivers reminds us that now is the time to cultivate deeper care for ourselves and others if we expect to feel closer to the Lord. The Reverend Kathy Speas offers us insight into how the Lord's Prayer opens the door to inner transformation. The Reverend Richard H. Tafel, Sr. reminds us that through the life of the Lord we are given the gift of a perfect example to follow in our own journey. In a classic sermon about Swedenborgian spirituality, The Reverend Erwin Reddekopp shares with us the truth that heaven is an attitude we have the ability to foster in our own hearts. As a capstone, the Reverend Sarah Buteux reminds us that the beauty of our faith means little if we do not share it with the world.

We wish you an abundant and happy Thanksgiving.

Blessings,

Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

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NOV **1** Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God

The Reverend Rachel Rivers

Jonah 1-4

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish." The sailors said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" "I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so.

Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon

you." Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. Then they cried out to the Lord, "Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you." So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, "I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?' The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God. As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!"

Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the

decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

The Jonah story is well-loved partly because it is so easy for us to relate to. We can all imagine being called to do a particular task that we do not want to do, and running as fast as we can in the other direction.

Sometimes we run the other way because we don't think we can do what has been asked of us, or we fear that it will be too hard or require too much of us, or it is just plain unpleasant and we'd rather not. Sometimes we run the other way because we are afraid to do what we are being called to do, or it doesn't fit with our conception of who we are and what we want.

Jonah was a prophet: it was his job to hear the Word of the Lord and to communicate it. What was different about the assignment given him in the story we heard this morning and what was usually asked of him was not the message, but the recipient, and that's why he ran. He is not being asked to preach to his own people, but to the Ninevites. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, Israel's worst oppressor. Jonah doesn't want to give his enemies the chance to repent. He hates and fears them, and wishes them dead.

*Sometimes we run
the other way.*

As is to be expected, Jonah's mad dash away from where he is being called doesn't get him off the hook so easily. There is a terrible storm at sea, and Jonah knows that the only way to save his fellow passengers is for himself to be thrown overboard. He knows that he is guilty of disobeying God and he is prepared to die.

But it is not time to die. Jonah still has a mission to fulfill.

In the belly of the big fish, Jonah has time to reflect. He is able to calm his fears and refocus his attention on seeking first the kingdom of God. This enables him to give up his limited self-will to God's greater will.

God returns him to land, and once again the Word of God comes to Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah obeys. The Ninevites repent amazingly quickly. And now Jonah is really unhappy. What he feared has indeed occurred: the Ninevites are being spared.

Jonah is basically a good and loving person, and in this story we see God expanding Jonah's ability to love. Hating kills our own souls. God is helping Jonah to release the hatred he has for Nineveh, that he may be freed to love more deeply.

In the story Jonah goes now from wishing that the Ninevites would die to praying for his own death. Psychologically speaking, he is reclaiming his projections, recognizing his own internal self-hatred and feelings of unworthiness.

At the root of hate, or our inability to love, is very often fear. Our fears tend to have incredible power over our lives—like causing Jonah to head as far away from Nineveh as he can get. And our fears lie to us all the time. And that is in fact what Nineveh represents in the Bible: untruth, lies, from a place of ignorance—a lack of enlightenment. Not being in a good place because we don't know any better than to believe the lies that come at us.

What kind of lies do we tell ourselves? Lies like "I'm no good. I don't deserve to enjoy life to the fullest. If people really knew me they wouldn't love me, or even like me. I'm a rotten person. I can't do anything right. I'll never succeed. I'm a loser. Nothing good will ever happen to me."

These are lies. It is true, of course, that we all have lots to work on in ourselves to become better people, but that doesn't make any of these blanket lies true. We are each created in the image and likeness of God. We each deserve to live life deeply and happily. And if we knew ourselves as we truly are—as God knows us—we would recognize the spark of divinity in us, and know that God is indeed our Creator, and how lovable and loving we really are.

Our fears lie to us all the time.

Our fears feed us lies that this is not so, and we project this awful lie out onto our world. We then act in ways that may not be so lovable, and fear what comes from others as a confirmation of the lies we have fed ourselves. Really, though, our worst persecutor lives inside ourselves. If we are able to recognize this liar in our interior, able to recognize the untruths that it tells us, then it will have less power to rule our lives.

As a result, we will have less fear and hate, and more compassion for ourselves and for those who do sling arrows at us from the outside, arrows that come from their own fears that feed their own lies and prejudices. The Book of Jonah ends with the sense that it is this transformation that Jonah is finally able to make:

“God said to Jonah, ‘Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?’ ‘I do,’ he said. ‘I am angry enough to die.’ But the Lord said, ‘You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand, people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?’”

*Our deepest fears
are like dragons
guarding our
greatest treasure.*

Our deepest fears are like dragons guarding our greatest treasure.

There is one more piece in the Jonah story I want to touch on this morning. It is another reason why people tend to relate to Jonah's running away from God's call, but one most of us are less aware of. And that is our fear of success.

Dr. Abraham Maslow, a pioneer thinker in modern psychology who focused on the human yearning for growth, said that we have within us a fear of our own greatness, an evasion of our destiny, and so we tend to run away from our own best talents. It is one of the factors that keeps us from the kingdom of God, that holds us back from letting in the fullness of life. Maslow calls this the “Jonah Complex.”

He writes, “If you deliberately plan to be less than you are capable of being, then I warn you that you'll be deeply unhappy for the rest of your life. You will be evading your own capabilities, your own possibilities.” Dr. Maslow challenged his students to reach for greatness. He used to say to them: “If not you, who?”

When Jonah did turn around and preach to the Ninevites, he accomplished a great feat: helping a huge number of people to recognize their faults and begin to turn their life around. So in

addition to hate and its accompanying fear, we also run from what we are called to do because of the fear that we might actually succeed.

Why do we fear success? It's a big question. I think part of the answer is that, just like letting go of hate, it is opening up to life more fully. And to live life more fully is to be more exposed, more vulnerable. To be open to success on this level, too, is not simply following some formula we have for who we think we should be—it is being like Jonah, being open to the Word of God, and going in a direction we, from our smaller sense of self, would not perhaps choose.

We fear what will be asked of us if we say to God, to Life: here I am, to be all that I can be. We might get sent to Nineveh. Risking success on that level requires acknowledgment that there is someone other than our little selves at the helm of this great Earth-ship.

The only way I know to withstand the uncertainty, the giving up of control, the vulnerability and openness that release from fear and reaching for fulfillment entail, is to have a deep and abiding belief in the Heart of Life itself—that God is present in all that is—and faith that if we follow and live God's truth the best we are able, then we are on the pathway to God's kingdom.

It is not easy work to treat others and ourselves with love. It is not easy work to allow ourselves to reach out with our special gifts and talents. It is spiritual work. If we will strive to be open and generous to ourselves and one another, if we will strive to follow the tuggings of our own soul even when we do not know where this will lead, we will find life opening up to us in a whole new way. We have been promised that, if we seek first the kingdom of God, we will be given everything in addition.

The Reverend Dr. Rachel Rivers is a pastoral counselor in the San Francisco Bay Area. This sermon was preached on July 25, 1993.



Daily Meditations

Monday, November 2

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.

Mark 10:13

Love is like the sun's fire, and the derivative truth is like the light from the sun. By reason of correspondence, "fire" means love and "light" means truth that flows from it. *Heaven and Hell 13*

Tuesday, November 3

But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." *Mark 10:14*

The divine good we have compared to warmth is the good of love with and among angels, and the divine truth we have compared to light is the means and the source of this good of love. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, November 4

"Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. *Mark 10:15-16*

There are two quite distinguishable loves in heaven—love for the Lord and love for our neighbor. *Heaven and Hell 14*

Thursday, November 5

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?" *Mark 10:17*

We become likenesses of God and are united to him when we make what is good and what is true matters of our daily lives by doing them intentionally, since intending something is loving to do it. *Heaven and Hell 16*

Friday, November 6

Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." *Mark 10:18*

Love is receptive of everything that is in harmony with it. *Heaven and Hell 18*

Saturday, November 7

"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!" *Mark 10:19-23*

Heavenly love is love for the Lord, and spiritual love is thoughtfulness toward one's neighbor. *Heaven and Hell 23*

The Lord's Prayer

The Reverend Kathy Speas

8 NOV

Psalm 4

Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer. How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame? How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies?

But know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for himself; the Lord hears when I call to him.

When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent.

Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord.

There are many who say, "O that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!"

You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound.

I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.

John 17:6-26

"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

"And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the

scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

“Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. “Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

I loved saying the Lord's Prayer with you. It was such a personal, comforting part of the service. Often, saying the Lord's Prayer in church is a very important touchstone in my week. Sometimes I let the prayers wash over me. Sometimes I focus on one or another individual voice that is familiar, and I am so grateful to join my prayer with this group, with everyone who says this prayer, everyone who has ever said it. Sometimes I throw my prayer on out there with all my strength, hoping it lands as a lifeline for someone, somewhere. I

am deeply grateful for this prayer and for this group that sends its words into the universe every week.

The Lord's Prayer is also the little prayer I recite in secret, in the dark, when, as Thomas Merton puts it, "Prayer has become impossible and my heart has turned to stone." It was the first prayer most of us ever learned and memorized. It's the one we remember when the turbulence over Denver gets really bad. And it is deeper and more meaningful than those three traditional prayers we all know: "Help me Help me Help me Help me," "Thank you thank you thank you thank you," and "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry."

*Sometimes I throw
my prayer out
there with all my
strength, hoping it
lands as a lifeline.*

Swedenborg says the Lord's Prayer is read daily in heaven. He writes, "In the contents of this prayer, there are more things than the Universal Heaven is capable of comprehending," and describes how, as he read the Lord's Prayer, wonderful things flowed in from heaven, and those gifts from heaven varied from day to day.

We all say this prayer, maybe so often and so automatically that we don't even think about its significance and power. And the words we say were translated from the Aramaic that Jesus spoke, to Greek, to Church Latin, to everyday Latin, to German, to Old English, to Middle English, to New English. As with much of the Bible, the Lord's Prayer has been handed down in kind of a "Telephone Game"—you know, the one where one kid whispers a sentence into the ear of another kid, and so on, until the message at the end of the line bears little resemblance to the one that they began with. Jesus said the prayer in Aramaic, but it was originally written down in Greek, and we actually do have a fairly close approximation of the original words. So I looked up the Greek words as best I could, and delved more deeply into this meaningful text. Boy, is Swedenborg ever right about the complexity and beauty of this prayer. I'm eager to share with you what I found underneath these familiar words.

But first, a minute of history. The Lord's Prayer as we know it appears in Matthew, which wasn't actually written by Matthew, but probably by a Jew around 70 or 80 AD for Christians of Jewish origin,

as it focuses on Jesus as the Messiah, in fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures. There is a real effort in Matthew, and in this prayer, to keep some continuity between the ancient God of Israel and the teachings of Jesus. In Matthew, Jesus tells us the Kingdom is *at hand* (that is, here with us, not reserved for a few, and not way off on some far-away high peak). He taps a few guys out fishing to join up, he heals a lot of people, and he really gets everybody's attention. He gives us the Beatitudes. He tells us to turn the other cheek, to pray for those who persecute us, and not to make a big loud scene of our prayers. "Prayer is secret," he says, "quiet, dark, the still small voice." "Pray like this," he says, and gives us the Lord's Prayer.

It is important to be conscious about our prayers.

So what? Is this of spiritual importance, or is it just an academic word game?

It is important to be conscious about our prayers. Our lives are our prayers. Kathleen Norris echoes a Swedenborgian perspective when she says, "While prayer may originate in our own desires, it quickly moves beyond them, into our life with others, and toward the greater society." Ursula Groll, author of *Swedenborg and the New Paradigm Science*, commented on each of our contributions to the universal collective unconscious when she said, "Every individual co-determines the history of humankind in a negative or positive sense, either unconsciously or consciously; and every individual will collaborate further in history through his or her thoughts and level of individual consciousness. Our greatest responsibility for all living things and everyone who comes after us lies in this phenomenon." Maybe the Lord's Prayer that we say together really does swirl around in the air and descend where it needs to land. Again from Kathleen Norris, "Prayer is not asking for what you think you want, but asking to be changed in ways that you can't imagine."

Swedenborg says that "essential divine worship consists in the life, and not in prayers." Worship is not what we say, or how much we understand about Greek or about Biblical correspondences, but how we live our prayers. God sent us not only the ability to pray but

also this particular prayer, which has somehow survived the wildest telephone game in history. Ours is to live it wisely, with love, and with great joy.

So let me share with you what I found as I looked into the Greek words of the Lord's Prayer. Let's start at the beginning and go through it.

OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN: This word for "Father" was used not to describe a patrilineal relationship, but to refer to the source, the origin. The Greek word for "heaven" implies not a realm far away, but the fundamental infinite, absolute, and eternal nature of the Firmament itself. Meditate on that. It's beyond words, the Firmament itself, Infinite, Absolute, Eternal.

HALLOWED BE THY NAME: The name of God is holy, sacred, dedicated. In the Hebrew Scriptures, people aren't even supposed to mention the name of God. Swedenborg says "Scarcely anyone in the Christian world knows what is meant by the name of God," and tells us that names in heaven are the essence of the thing itself. The name of God is all things of love and faith. As Divine Human, Jesus is the "Name of Jehovah."

THY KINGDOM COME: "Kingdom"—that's pretty much literal from the Greek, kingdom meaning "a dominion, all over which a king rules." But in this case it is God's Kingdom, the infinite, absolute, eternal Firmament.

The verb means more than just "to arrive." It means "to come within a little bit of, to be near" and also "to return or come back." It's more than just asking paradise to descend now, if you please. There's a longing to be nearer to something we can hardly understand, a sense that there is a returning to what is God's dominion.

***Worship is how we
live our prayers.***

THY WILL BE DONE: "Will"—that's a pretty clear-cut translation too. God's will. But the "be done" word is "genetheto," from the same root as "genealogy" or "genesis," meaning "to be born, to happen, to become, to grow to fruition." Isn't that wonderful? To think of God's will being born, becoming, growing to fruition in us.

Something will bring you back to the Mystery, at least until tomorrow, and sometimes that's all you need.

ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN: The Greek text mentions heaven first. It literally says “as in Heaven, so on Earth.” The human-centered consciousness that has put Earth before Heaven in every translation ever recorded is another sermon in itself.

GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD: The interesting Greek word in this phrase is “daily.” It means “sufficient for the day” or “for the coming day.” Like manna, it is sustenance enough for that day—no more, no less. And

it is the very sustenance we need—physical food and spiritual food. When Jesus says in John, “For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world . . . I am the living bread which came down from Heaven; if anyone eats of this bread he will live forever, and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh,” I think of times when something unexpected has diverted my spirit from a, shall-we-say, “less than celestial” mindset. Next time you are in a bad humor, discouraged, or anguished in spirit, watch carefully around you. Someone in the line at the grocery store will make you laugh, or you’ll see an act of touching kindness that restores your faith, or nature will bring you back to the Mystery—at least until tomorrow, and sometimes that’s all you need.

AND FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS: The actual Greek word is “debts,” not “trespasses.” It means “debt, what we owe, what we are bound by, what we are obligated to do, what is binding upon us.” Bigger than that \$20 you owe your brother, even bigger than your mortgage or your Visa bill. I understand this to mean the obligations and debts that we do not choose, the strings we get ourselves tangled in, the debts we incur from getting something and thinking we’ll pay later. As in “I’m doing this *on account of* something or someone.” Not the obligations we choose, not our commitments to love and work.

And “forgive”? The Greek word means “release, let go, discharge, send away, set free.” All that stuff you’re tangled up in? Put it in a

balloon and let it go. All that old resentment, anger, disappointment tied to others? Put that in another balloon and let it go.

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION: The phrase describes a leading, a bringing forward, but the Greek word for “temptation” implies a trial, an ordeal, being put to the test. Even our word “temptation” is related to the word “attempt,” not to the word “fun” or “chocolate.” Swedenborg’s concept of temptation includes all that would take us away from, rather than bring us closer to, God. Anxiety, fear, guilt, expecting too much of ourselves or those around us, giving ourselves a hard time. We’re not just praying that they don’t come by with the dessert tray, we’re asking God to guide us away from the kind of consciousness that keeps us separated from Love.

BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL: “Deliver us.” This Greek word means “draw us out of harm’s way, rescue us, free us, redeem us, protect us, and defend us.” It can also mean “to draw down the scale, to outweigh, or counterbalance.” I hope for that every day—that the Divine forces will outweigh the things that keep me separated from Love.

“Evil”—one of the most loaded words there is. The Greek word doesn’t conjure up some outside force of diabolical satanic evil that is coming at us headlong. The word implies pain, distress, anguish, a sorry plight, exhaustion from toil, hardship. Keep us from just being worn out by the horrible things that can happen in life. Keep our pain from overwhelming us.

God’s is the kingdom. This is not our kingdom. God’s is the power, not ours.

FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM AND THE POWER AND THE GLORY FOREVER. AMEN: This phrase is not actually part of the original text; it probably was part of an ancient liturgy that was added a few decades later. But it reminds us whose is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever amen: God’s. God’s is the kingdom. This is not our kingdom. God’s is the power, not ours. God’s is the glory; ours is not the glory. But Jesus tells us, “The Kingdom of God cometh

not with observation, neither shall they say Here it is! or There it is!, for behold, the Kingdom of God is within you.”

So, I offer a translation of the Lord’s Prayer that may light up the Kingdom of God within us, as we take this beautiful prayer to heart.

Let us pray.

Source of the Infinite, Absolute, Eternal Firmament,
All that your name implies is sacred.

May we return closer to your dominion;

May your will be born, and grow to fruition in us;

As in heaven, so on earth.

Give us today whatever we need to be close to you this day;

Free us from that which has bound us

As we release those whom we have bound;

And do not bring us into ordeals of separateness

But let your divine love outweigh anguish and distress,

For the kingdom is yours, the power is yours, the glory is yours,

God.

Amen.

The Rev. Kathy Speas is a hospice chaplain in Marin County. This sermon was first preached at the San Francisco Church.



Daily Meditations

Monday, November 9

O Lord, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your holy hill? *Psalm 15:1*

Conscience, with the man of the church, is formed by the truths of faith from the Word, or from doctrine out of the Word, according to their reception in the heart; for when man knows the truths of faith, and comprehends them in his own manner, and then wills them and does them, he then acquires conscience.

The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrines 131

Tuesday, November 10

Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart. *Psalm 15:2*

Reception in the heart is reception in the will, for the will of man is what is called the heart. Hence it is that they who have conscience speak from the heart the things which they speak. *The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrines 131*

Wednesday, November 11

Who do not slander with their tongue,
and do no evil to their friends,
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors. *Psalm 15:3*

In a true conscience is man's spiritual life itself, for there his faith is conjoined to charity. On which account to act from conscience is to them to act from their spiritual life; and to act against conscience is to them to act contrary to that life of theirs.

The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrines 133

Thursday, November 12

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Psalms 51:1

Conscience, with those who are in charity towards the neighbor, is the conscience of truth, because it is formed by the faith of truth.

The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrines 135

Friday, November 13

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Psalms 51:2-3

For those who are in love to the Lord, it is the conscience of good, because it is formed by the love of truth.

The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrines 135

Saturday, November 14

Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. *Psalms 51:4-6*

They who for the sake of any gain make what is unjust appear as just, and what is evil appear as good, and vice versa, have not conscience. Neither do they know what conscience is, and if they are instructed in what it is, they do not believe; and some are not willing to know. Such are those who do all things for the sake of themselves and the world.

The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrines 137

Toward Perfection

The Reverend Richard H. Tafel

15 NOV

Matthew 5:48

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

We are again experiencing the thrill of those pilgrims of the Psalms who went up to their temple singing the words which have ever since expressed so beautifully the feelings of the hungry soul: "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go up into the house of the Lord."

That joy is ours today, as we find ourselves once again in our dear Jerusalem. And as we here dedicate ourselves anew to our Lord and to his coming kingdom, we hear, as it were, our Lord's own words, spoken on a similar occasion: "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?"

What could better set our goal before us? Our business of living, our purpose, our destiny, is set before us with the words, "Be ye therefore perfect," and by the life that was perfection itself, human life raised up to the divine and made the living, permanent abode of God himself. "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men!" God in a human life, transfiguring it, uplifting it, ennobling it, glorifying it, infilling it with deity—God and man becoming one in a human life, in Jesus Christ, the Master of Galilee, our Lord and our God!

That means that we know and worship God as our perfected and glorified Christ Jesus. That means that we see God—the Creator of the Universe—in the face of the Lord Jesus. God has spoken in the human language. He has touched men on earth with human hands. He has shown us love divine through lowly acts of service. He has healed, he has taught, he has saved, by coming among us and by becoming one with us. In that all-encompassing phrase which he has taught us, "the Divine Humanity," we approach and worship the one God of heaven and earth, seeing the divinity in the human and the humanity in the

divine, and in awe and adoration and thanksgiving cry out, "My Lord and my God!"

On the Isle of Patmos, John had the eyes of his spirit opened so that he might see into heaven and bear witness to the glorified Lord Jesus in all the splendor and majesty of his divinity. He saw light and mighty power ineffable. But the face he saw was that of the Lord Jesus; the voice he heard was that of his beloved master—the hand of this glorified and divine Lord is laid upon him in benediction and assurance that not only has death not conquered life, but God's life is still the "light of men!" The Lord Jesus, though glorified, though "having all power in heaven and in earth," is still our Lord Jesus, at once God and man, the Divine Humanity moving in the midst of us, as John saw him in the midst of the seven churches—approachable, intimately knowable, loving, near, still divinely concerned with the life and welfare of each one of us . . . and now with all power to lift up and to save: "And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me."

Still outstretched are his arms to us in divine invitation: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." And those arms are still human arms—divinely human arms!—and his words, spoken once on earth in our own human language, are still sent forth of his Spirit into our hearts and minds on their mission of redeeming, uplifting, saving, and freeing human life for the "life more abundant" that he yearns to give us.

"Be ye perfect." What a challenge to lay down to us! A challenge which only one who has tasted the perfection inherent in human life could utter—only one who was moving in the utmost depths of that life, yea, responding to it at its very source! One who felt supremely aware of its power and possibilities—and how could he but urge us to grasp it for ourselves in greater measure, to "have life, and have it more abundantly"? That was one of the ways in which the Lord explained the Incarnation:

"I am come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly."

***The Lord Jesus,
though glorified,
is still our Lord
Jesus, approachable,
loving, near.***

“Be ye therefore perfect.” The world’s consistent reaction to this saying has been that our Lord was setting up an impossible goal. Men have even tried to twist the words, retranslating and interpreting the Greek into a more “sensible” meaning. But still it stands. And it stands as coming out of, and backed up by, a perfect human life. It is the eternal challenge! It is as though he said, “I did it; you can do it too!”

There is no reason why any person has to live in the basement, sub-basement, first floor, or even the second floor of the building called Life. There is no reason, outside the individual himself. We can react to life on any level we wish. There is no limit to the heights we can climb. And knowing that our life here is but one phase in our continued existence as immortal, spiritual beings, we are not asked or expected to achieve perfection in our short span here. In fact, “perfection,” like so many of the divine verities, is a relative term. It is, by the mercy of the Lord, for us an ever-receding goal. In this regard, it is distinctly reassuring, rather than discouraging, to read that Swedenborg discovered that “there never can be a time when a person is so regenerated as to say, ‘I am perfect.’”

*Life is finite man
approaching the
infinite God.*

One of the characteristics of life is that it is growth, development, movement, striving, achieving; it is the continual discovering of new fields, fresh opportunities, further challenges to heart and mind. Life is finite man approaching the infinite God. Isn’t that just what our Lord bids us do? “Follow me,” he says—into the way of regeneration, into life, real life, using all the resources and powers inherent in the human nature he has given us! Though we can’t attain to the heights to which he attained, because he is a divinely human God and has forged through an earthly life an unbreakable bond of fellowship and kinship with man, he is with us every step of the way. His hand is outstretched to us, to lead us up onto the next rung of the upward-leading ladder of life, to the next step of being.

“Be ye therefore perfect.” It is as if the Lord were saying, “Follow me, make me your pattern and your guide, your inspiration. My life not only proves that it can be done—this ennobling and uplifting

***We are all that we
are plus what we
might be.***

of human life—but makes it possible for you; for I am with you.” Remember, our Lord met life even as we meet it. He knew the downward pull, of self, the call of the world, the drag of the physical senses, the attraction of petty ambition and unworthy motives. He felt all the inclinations to sin, to compromise with evil and circumstances. Remember, the Lord came as man, not as God. He encountered all the obstacles and difficulties with which life is strewn. He knew what it was to be misunderstood, mistreated, unappreciated, misrepresented. He saw cruelty, injustice, and perversion. He experienced discouragement, betrayal, frustration, and disappointment. And because He was responding to life deeply—close to its very source and not on the surface—how keenly did he know not only the best but also the worst that life has to offer! But he discovered—he found from actual experience, by living life—that human beings could make their way toward perfection. He consequently knew the riches, the lasting satisfaction, the inner peace, the joy, the glory, the thrill that life has to offer when it is lived deeply; when the human being achieves something of its destiny, when man becomes Man. Out of his life, out of his experience, come his words, “Be ye therefore perfect.” “Follow me.” He wants us to have life in its fullness, life more abundant, life in its perfection.

You say we are created finite, limited creatures? To be sure. But we are also created “in the image and likeness of God.” We are all that we are plus what we might be. And God has stepped into his creation as Man, and has demonstrated before our eyes what the human being is capable of, what might be made of life. We cannot become gods, but we can become perfect, and ever more perfect, images and likenesses of God.

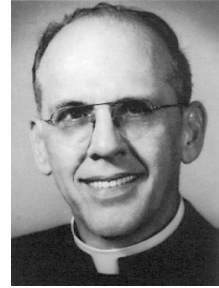
As we think of all God has done for us from the beginning of time, of all his love, wisdom, and care lavished upon us—a love that surrounds us, bathes us in itself, woos us, pursues us, draws us unto itself, a “love that wilt not let us go,”—we cry out with the Psalmist:

“What is man, that though art mindful of him?

And the son of man that thou visiteth him?
For thou has made him but a little lower than God,
thou hast crowned him with glory and honor,
thou has put all things under his feet."

What is it—lack of imagination?—that keeps us from achieving that fuller measure of our true life as human beings? It certainly is not lack of knowledge! We have before our eyes "the Way, the Truth, and the Life," not only in a Holy Word, but in a Holy Life. Why are we so slow of heart, weak, fearful, and afraid? Our Lord's living presence, his divinely human life, touches ours at every point. His hand is upon us to strengthen, to guide, to lead us, and "underneath are the everlasting arms." "Follow me." "Be ye therefore perfect!"

This classic sermon by the late
Reverend Richard H. Tafel, Sr.
was preached at the Church of the
New Jerusalem on Bowdoin Street
in Boston on April 1, 1951.



Prayer

O Lord, our heavenly Father and Savior, grant that we may more earnestly and more fully give ourselves to the business of learning to live. Inspire us anew, O Lord, with a fervent desire for a deeper, more abundant life with thee. Give us to know its joys and its possibilities. Grant that in the coming days we may ever hold thee before our eyes, and find thee ever more perfectly our Way, our Truth, and our Life. O Lord Jesus, our Lord and our God, as we make our way to thee, do thou come to us, and decide with us and in us. Amen.

Daily Meditations

Monday, November 16

Again they came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him.

Mark 11:27

Heavenly intelligence is a deeper intelligence arising from a love of what is true—not for the sake of any praise in the world or any praise in heaven, but simply for the sake of the truth itself, because it is profoundly moving and delightful.

Heaven and Hell 347

Tuesday, November 17

They said, “By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?” *Mark 11:28*

People who are moved and delighted by the truth itself are moved and delighted by heaven’s light; and if so, then they are also moved and delighted by divine truth and actually by the Lord himself, since the heaven’s light is divine truth. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, November 18

Jesus said to them, “I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things.”

Mark 11:29

This light enters the deeper levels of the mind only, since the deeper levels of the mind are formed to accept it; and to the extent that it enters, it moves and delights, because anything that flows in from heaven and is accepted has delight and pleasure within it. *Ibid.*

Thursday, November 19

“Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me.” *Mark 11:30*

All the people who have acquired intelligence and wisdom in the world are received in heaven and become angels, according to the quality and amount of their individual intelligence and wisdom. *Heaven and Hell 349*

Friday, November 20

They argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But shall we say, ‘Of human origin?’”—they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet. *Mark 11:31-32*

We take it with us after death, where it is increased and filled out, all within the level of our own affection and desire for what is true and good. *Ibid.*

Saturday, November 21

So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.” *Mark 11:33*

In heaven people are called wise if they are engaged in what is good, and people are engaged in what is good when they involve divine truths directly in their lives, since divine truth becomes good when it becomes a matter of life. Then it truly becomes a matter of intent and love; and anything that belongs to our intent and love is called good. *Heaven and Hell 348*

NOV 22 Where Heaven Begins

————— The Reverend Erwin Reddekopp

Isaiah 9:1-7

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Luke 13:11-24

And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?"

And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." And again he said, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem.

Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able."

Where Heaven Begins is the title of a book given to me many years ago when I was a student at our New Church Theological School in Cambridge, Mass. It was written by my dear friend and teacher, the late Rev. Everett K. Bray. In honor of our dear friendship, our second son, born in Boston, whom most people know as Wayne, was named after him: Everett Wayne. Mr. Bray also baptized him in the Cambridge chapel. Mr. Bray was totally blind, yet he taught his class on New Church Theology, using innumerable cross references, as though he could see. His memory was amazing. Many times I walked him from his home in Cambridge to the school and back home again. It was always a pleasure and a learning experience for me. He, for me, at least, was a symbol of patience and trust, and if I want to think of an example of "where heaven begins," I think of Mr. Bray. Yet he would say, I'm sure, that heaven can begin only at its source, in the infinite love and wisdom of the divine.

Speaking of his blindness, at the time I learned to know Mr. Bray, I also learned to know quite closely a fellow student by the name of John King. John also was totally blind, but refused to use a white cane. I could tell you so much about John, but this will suffice: that he tried

to live his life as though he had all five senses working adequately. It was amazing to hear him read in Braille—even in radio broadcasts. His notes in class were made in Braille, with a tool which most people have never seen.

Why do I mention all this? To try to show that heaven can be and is all around us, though too often we don't recognize this spiritual sphere. Oh yes: I regretfully note that John, though he was graduated and ordained, served only a few years in a church before he died prematurely.

Heaven is a spiritual state. It does not have any geographical location.

When the disciples and followers of Jesus wondered about the kingdom of heaven, he responded in this way: "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his garden; and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." (Luke 13:18-19)

This is, indeed, a strange explanation of what the kingdom of heaven is like. If your neighbor asked you "Where is heaven and what is it like?" what would you answer? Does heaven have a geographical location? If you were to say "He went to heaven," you could expect to be asked "Where is it?"

Heaven is a spiritual state. Heaven does not have any physical or geographical location. If we suggest that someone has gone to heaven—that is, if we do believe in heaven—we seem to imply or infer that it has some location. But that is not the case. So, if we want to consider the title of this lesson, "Where Heaven Begins," or the text taken from Luke's gospel, we need to change our way of thinking. For example, if we say that someone is happy or someone we know is very kind and generous, we are not speaking in terms of physical qualities. These are spiritual aspects of a person's character or personality. Heaven, as a divine quality flowing forth from the Lord, needs to be ultimated or terminated in this life here as people relate to one another. For example, again, you can't think in terms of love or hate, or any human quality or personality, without thinking of people.

So, in other words, we will need to recognize and accept the principle that from the time of our birth and to eternity, we live in two worlds, namely a physical and a spiritual world. As long as we are physically alive, we have difficulty separating the two. To make it simple: think of all the people you have known in your life who have died. Where are they? When you and I die (and we will) where will we be? What I'm trying to do now is to lead up to a useful and practical answer to the question of where heaven begins, and to the words of Jesus when he speaks about the grain of mustard seed and its growth.

I don't know about this mustard tree as a botanical entity. I have never seen one. Nor do I know about the actual size of the seed, nor do I know about the kind of birds that would build nests in that tree. What I do realize, however, is that our Lord Jesus was teaching his followers a lesson of spiritual worth, even as he is teaching us, for we are taught in the scriptures that he always talked in parables—a parable being (as defined by Webster) “a short, simple story from which a moral lesson may be drawn.” So what is this moral or spiritual lesson? What use can it be to you or me, or, for that matter, to those innumerable people who have never heard it?

That brings to mind the simple and practical process of people relating to each other. Unless you are a hermit living in a cave somewhere, you can't get through a day without relating to someone. Well, I suppose there could be some days. But, in general, you have to have some relationship. That is why God has created us—yes, to bring into being a “heaven of angels from the human race.” That's a simple statement from Swedenborg. I'd like to read this quotation from *Divine Providence* #27:

***From birth, we live
in two worlds, the
physical and the
spiritual.***

“As heaven is from mankind and is an abiding with the Lord to eternity, it must have been the Lord's purpose in creation; being the purpose in creation, it is the purpose of his providence. The Lord created the world not for his own sake but for the sake of those with whom he would be in heaven. Spiritual love by nature desires to give its own to another, and so far as it can do so it is, in its esse, peace and

***Right here and now
is where we make
our start, by trying
to be heavenly.***

blessedness. Spiritual love derives this from the Lord's divine love, which is such infinitely—it follows that the divine love and hence divine providence has for its object a heaven consisting of human beings who have become or are becoming angels, on whom the Lord can bestow all the blessings and felicities of love and wisdom and do so from himself in people. It must be in this way, for the Lord's image and likeness are in people from creation, the image in them wisdom and the likeness love."

Since the above passage refers to humans becoming angels, it seems necessary to comment briefly on the subject. It still appears to me that, even in this so-called "enlightened age," many good Christian (and non-Christian) people have the age-old concept of angels as being some sort of mythical creatures with wings somewhere up in the atmosphere. After all, they do have to get around, so it would seem obvious that their only means of propulsion would be wings. We'll be seeing a lot of this in the next few weeks before Christmas.

The truth is that there is no biblical confirmation of this age-old concept whatsoever. Angels in the Bible are referred to as human beings. Make a note of that. Now, in the matter of the statement above, you and I are, hopefully, in the process of becoming angels. That is where heaven begins. Put out of your minds that angels are those sexless, adorable creatures with wings. Goodness, they would be uncomfortable, and now, in the winter, it would be quite difficult putting on a parka. (I trust a bit of levity here is not irreverent.)

So, then, we look at our lives here in this world as a seminary of the human race, in preparation for angelhood in heaven where people will be people relating to one another, not so different from what they are doing here in this physical life—except, if it's in heaven, there will be a lot more love and concern expressed for one another than there is here, and there will be no fighting and disputes. Right here and now is where we make our start, by trying to be heavenly.

People relating to people is where heaven begins. The only way to experience a bit of heaven—or, regretfully, also hell—is in human relationships of one kind or another. I feel a bit of heaven when I see

little Thomas smile at me when I gently touch his cheek. That is an image of heaven, for sure. Little things like that are “where heaven begins.”

For the most part, we think of heaven as being in another dimension from this life in which we are engaged. But heaven can only begin here, in this life. If it does not, it’s certain that we’ll not experience heaven after we leave this plane of existence by the process of dying—that is, the death and decay of our physical bodies. It was necessary and part of the divine plan that we are born into this physical world, but as spiritual beings, so that, by the process of rebirth and regeneration we might be prepared for angelhood in heaven.

How does that process start? Our theme or text about the parable of the “mustard seed” is part of the answer. We start small. At the beginning there is much self involved in the process. The small grain of the mustard seed is a symbol of that. It’s something like encouraging ourselves to do good, so to speak. It’s not very spontaneous at the beginning. If we genuinely examine ourselves in the light of the golden rule, for example, we may find ourselves falling far short of the values that Jesus teaches or that we find embodied in the last five commandments. So we sort of force ourselves, thinking that we are doing the good thing, but the mustard seed is being planted. If we nurture it, there will be growth. How big will it get? Who knows? The Lord alone knows. You, however, are the only judge of your own feelings and actions, and you alone can use your personal insights in the way you feel and behave or act in relating to people—people of all sorts, races, and creeds.

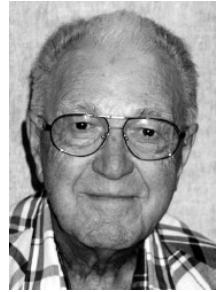
*Preparing for
angelhood is not
very spontaneous at
first.*

When that mustard seed has grown into a tree, you’ll find that birds can even build nests in it. Now that is a curious symbolism. We are taught that birds represent thoughts. In this case it has to be good thoughts—since, as the Lord himself is using this parable to describe the “kingdom of God,” we may see it as an attitude and philosophy of life. The birds correspond to an attitude that permeates our whole personality. What do we talk about when we get together with neighbors or friends? What are our values when it comes to business

practices? What ethics are important in making decisions? What kind of TV shows do you most enjoy watching? It can become very personal, but that's what the life of genuine religion is all about. Heaven can begin right here at this moment and continue on to eternity.

Heaven begins here—it begins with you and me. Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is the source of all that is heavenly, and he alone is the author of the values that, when put to use and practice, can help us all to experience a bit of heaven right here and now. This is where heaven begins! Amen.

The late Rev. Erwin Reddekopp
preached this sermon in
November 1995.



Prayer

God has created me to do him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission. I am a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good. I shall do his work. I shall be a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I but keep his commandments. Therefore will I trust him. Whatever I am, I can never be thrown away. He does nothing in vain. The Lord knows what he is about.

John Henry Newman

Daily Meditations

Monday, November 23

I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever;
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all
generations. *Psalms 89:1*

Everyone is capable of knowing that when we leave our outer
natural person we enter our inner or spiritual one; so we can also
know that heavenly pleasure is an inner and spiritual pleasure
and not an outer or natural one. *Heaven and Hell 395.3*

Tuesday, November 24

I declare that your steadfast love is established forever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens. *Psalms 89:2*

The quality of our pleasure follows from the quality of
the pleasure of our spirit, and the pleasures of our bodies,
called "the pleasures of the flesh," have nothing to do with
comparison. *Heaven and Hell 395.4*

Wednesday, November 25

You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to my servant David:
'I will establish your descendants forever,
and build your throne for all the generations.'"

Psalms 89:3-4

All pleasure flows from love, because what we love we feel
as pleasant. There is no other source of any pleasure.

Heaven and Hell 396

Thursday, November 26

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;
steadfast love and faithfulness go before you. *Psalms 92:4-5*

The quality of the love determines the quality of the pleasure.
Heaven and Hell 396

Friday, November 27

How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?
How long will your wrath burn like fire?
Remember how short my time is—
for what vanity you have created all mortals!
Who can live and never see death?
Who can escape the power of Sheol? *Psalms 89:46-8*

Pleasures of the body or of the flesh flow from love for
ourselves and from the love of the world, and these are
also the source of urges and their gratifications.
Heaven and Hell 396

Saturday, November 28

Happy are those people who know the festal shout,
who walk, O Lord, in the light of your countenance;
They will exult in your name all day long
and extol your righteousness.
For you are the glory of their strength;
by your favor our horn is exalted. *Psalms 89:15-17*

The pleasures of the soul or spirit, though, all flow from
love for the Lord and love for our neighbor, which are also
the source of affections for what is good and true and of
our deeper bliss. *Heaven and Hell 396*

The Kingdom of Heaven **29** NOV

The Reverend Sarah Buteux

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-45

He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. On finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

When did the word “like” creep into our vocabulary, not as a means to express similes, as in “her voice was like the singing of an angel” but as a verbal comma? “So, like, what are you doing?”

I think it occurred at a time when I was very young and that it had something to do with a curious species of teenager called a Valley Girl somewhere out in California. Their high-reaching crimped hair, along with their penchant for rainbows, shoulder pads, and slouchy socks, infected a nation. But it was their careless verbiage that laid the groundwork for a grammatical battle that would be waged quietly and persistently in our house throughout my youth.

My father would ask, “Sarah, where are you going this afternoon?”

And I would respond, “I don’t know, like, maybe Melissa’s house.”

“To a place *like* Melissa’s house, or to Melissa’s house?”

"To Melissa's, Dad; you know what I mean."

Or "Like, that is so cool!" I would exclaim.

"Is it cool, or is it just *like* something cool?" he would counter.

And I would say, "Dad!" in a very exasperated voice.

He was relentless, and for good reason. The word "like" occupies an important place in the English language, and if we were to think of

A true church is the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

it solely as a verbal comma, it would greatly change the meaning of much that has gone before. If we were to read today's parables from a Valley Girl standpoint, the kingdom of heaven would not just be like a mustard seed, it would be, like, you know, a mustard seed.

And what would we do with that?

Jesus loves to compare the kingdom of heaven to things, and there is much that we can learn from his comparisons involving seeds, yeast, pearls, and treasure. But I would like to begin today by asking not what the kingdom of heaven is like, but what the kingdom of heaven is, period. The kingdom of heaven is like many things, but what is it exactly?

Well, Swedenborg would say that the kingdom of heaven is first and foremost where the Lord dwells—you know, like, up there.

But the kingdom of heaven is also present where the Lord dwells here on earth. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is within you." God dwells in each and every person from the moment they are created. And he is present most palpably in our actions when they are informed by the good of love and the truth of faith. If you get enough people together who are acting lovingly toward one another out of love for the Lord, you have yourself a church. And Swedenborg would say that a true church is the kingdom of heaven here on earth, manifesting itself through the power of God that we allow to work in us and through us.

The kingdom of heaven is where the will of God is obeyed out of love. Think of the Lord's Prayer, which we say each Sunday: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth"—it can be done here—"on earth as it is

in heaven.” Where his will is done—and what is his will but that we love one another as he has loved us?—where his will is done, his kingdom has come. The kingdom of heaven is not just a place we can look forward to, but also a state of being that we can co-construct with God here and now through loving obedience to his truth.

So, in light of this understanding of the kingdom, what truths are held for us in the parables we read today? Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, the tiniest of all seeds, that once planted grows into a mighty and sheltering tree. The kingdom of God, he says, is also like a small amount of yeast that a woman mixed into a large amount of flour, which leavened it all the way through.

I think the lesson for us in these first two parables is that a little bit of heaven goes a long way. It just doesn’t take very much. The small mustard seed growing into a large tree, and the tiny portion of yeast working through all of the flour, illustrates how tremendous is the transformative power of the Lord’s kingdom. The kingdom is not just the power to grow; the littlest bit of heaven also has the power to change, to recreate, to make something wholly new and different of who we are and who we will be.

Think about this for a moment: you can put a seed deep in the ground, out of sight, but the nature of that seed is such that it will sprout back up again. And think about the yeast: once it is mixed into flour, it can never be separated out again. You won’t be able to see or retrieve the yeast anymore, but you will see its effects.

***The kingdom of
heaven cannot be
buried, hidden, or
diluted.***

I think what Jesus is trying to tell us is that the kingdom of heaven cannot be buried. It cannot be hidden. It cannot be diluted. It cannot be overwhelmed. And furthermore, you can’t control it. You can’t break it down so you only get what makes you feel comfortable, just as you can’t use part of a mustard seed to grow a smaller bush. You can’t hide a little yeast in the flour, for even a relatively small amount will work its magic all through a much larger portion of flour and cause it to rise up. The kingdom of heaven is a potent and living force that, when present, moves and grows and imbues all of life with the forces of love and wisdom.

But Jesus also said that the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure that a man found hidden in a field. He went and sold all he owned, and bought the field that housed the treasure. And the kingdom of heaven is like a pearl of great price, which a merchant, when he finally found it, gave up everything he had to own.

The lesson in these parables, I believe, is twofold. First: when we encounter the kingdom in our midst, it is worth everything we own,

To possess the kingdom of God, you must live out the truths of the kingdom in love.

everything we are. Second: it requires a total commitment from us. It is worth everything and it requires everything. The treasure, the pearl of great price, is divine truth. It is worth more than everything we have combined and needs to be valued accordingly.

But how do you give all that you have, all that you are, to gain this treasure? Am I suggesting that once you find the truth you need to go and sell all your possessions, join a monastery, and meditate on truth for the rest of your natural-born days? No. Everything you have, everything you are, is everything you love. You are what you love, so giving all you have is giving yourself over to God that you might love his truth first and foremost with all your body, mind, and soul. And this takes a total commitment.

You can't gain the treasure that is heaven by giving a little of yourself, a portion of what you have or who you are, a little bit of your love. You can know the truth and believe it, but you will not possess it like these people who gave all they had to own their treasure until you love the truth enough to act on it. The truth is not yours completely through understanding alone. You can know what is right, but until you love it enough to act on it with your whole being, it is still a treasure buried in someone else's field, or a pearl sitting pretty on the countertop at the jewelry store. To possess the kingdom of God you must live out the truths of the kingdom in love, with all your heart, all your mind, and all your soul. The kingdom of heaven is not a matter of your convenience, but your commitment.

So to recap, it doesn't take much from God's end to make a huge and wonderful impact (think of the mustard seed becoming a huge tree) or to work a huge change in us and others (think of the yeast working its way through all of that flour). But once found, it requires

everything from us—a total commitment not just to understand the truth, but to love it enough to act on it.

This is a message for all Christians. In fact, it is a message for people of all faiths. But what, more specifically, does it have to say to us as Swedenborgians? The Swedenborgian Church makes the claim in its original title that it is the Church of the New Jerusalem. This church was founded by men like Robert Hindmarsh, who read the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg and found within his theology the inspiration for a new church—a church that would let people know that the kingdom of heaven is as close as we want it to be, a church that would proclaim that Jesus is not coming back in the clouds someday soon to make everything all right for those he loves and a living hell for those he hates. We believe that Jesus is already here with us and that his Second Coming is an ongoing process facilitated through us, a process whereby people embrace the kingdom of heaven now and count all they have as nothing if it keeps them from living in the light of its truth and the warmth of its love.

I believe that we as Swedenborgians are not the only manifestation of The Lord's New Church, for it is found wherever people love one another as God loves them, but we are uniquely blessed with a theology that makes it all so clear. We are uniquely blessed with churches across this country whose beauty and form sing out to all that enter, calling them to live in hope and in love. That is what I feel when I walk through the doors of this chapel.

In this little church, as a member of this small congregation, I feel the enormous potential of the kingdom of heaven. In fact, I feel that potential more in this chapel than anywhere else on earth, which is probably why I feel so strongly about protecting it. When I stand here, I know for a fact that we are no smaller than a mustard seed, and we are as powerful as yeast if we choose to be.

*The kingdom of
heaven is as close as
we want it to be.*

And I can assure you that the world is hungry to hear what we have to say. Our job is not to convert people, but simply to share with them the hope that informs our faith. A few weeks ago *Time* magazine ran an article on the current American obsession with the Apocalypse. The article talked about how Christians around this country are rejoicing

in the disaster of our current Middle East peace process because they believe it will herald in a new age and the Second Coming of Jesus. But two weeks later, when the letters started pouring in, there were so many more people who recoiled when they heard this kind of talk. Many people out there feel, deep down, that we as human beings have a responsibility not to give up and let God fix it, but to work with God and one another for a better world.

For every Christian who has given up on the world, given up caring about issues like global warming, injustice, or world peace, because they believe God is going to come and wipe it all out anyway, there are people out there who believe the truths we have not yet spoken beyond the confines of our little Swedenborgian community. They are looking for another vision, an alternate view, something to hope for—and we have it right here. We don't need to convert people. We just need to share with people a truth they would like to believe in. They just need to hear the quiet whispers of the Spirit within them confirmed by others. That's how I felt when I first encountered Swedenborg. I remember thinking that here, finally, was everything I had always wanted to believe was true, laid out before me within the context of a Christian church. I thank God that I have access to our church's teachings, and I know so many others would and will, if we as a church can reach them.

As Swedenborgians, we need to (gulp) get out there and share our theology with those who want to hear it. We have found the treasure in the field, the pearl of great price, and we need to claim it by living it and sharing it. And we need to give up all those things that are getting in the way, like fear, embarrassment, and shame. We are so blessed. We have access to such a tremendous treasure. Let us embrace it and share it.

May God give us the grace, the courage, and the power to give up anything and everything that would keep us from the kingdom of heaven.

Amen.

The Reverend Sarah Buteux is currently the pastor of the First Congregational Church of Hadley.



Daily Meditations

Monday, November 30

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch. *Isaiah 62:1*

Heaven was formed of all those who, from the coming of the Lord to the present time, had lived the life of faith and charity, since these alone were forms of heaven.

The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrines 2

Tuesday, December 1

The nations shall see your vindication,
and all the kings your glory;
And you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the Lord will give. *Isaiah 62:2*

For he who lives the life of faith and charity, loves another as himself, and by love conjoins him to himself, and thus reciprocally and mutually; for in the spiritual world, love is conjunction. *The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrines 2*

Wednesday, December 2

You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate.

Isaiah 62:3-4

All things of heaven have relation to good and truth. So also have all things of the church, because the good and truth of heaven are also the good and truth of the church.

Monday, December 3

For as a young man marries a young woman,
so shall your builder marry you,
And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you. *Isaiah 62:5*

It is according to Divine order that good and truth should be conjoined, and not separated; thus, that they should be one, and not two; for they proceed in conjunction from the Divine, and are conjoined in heaven, and therefore they should be conjoined in the church.

The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine 13

Tuesday, December 4

Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels;
all day and all night they shall never be silent.
You who remain, said the Lord, take no rest. *Isaiah 62:5*

All the intelligence and wisdom which the angels have is from that marriage, and not any of it from good separate from truth, nor from truth separate from good. It is the same with the men of the church.

The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine 14

Wednesday, December 5

They shall be called "The Holy People,
the Redeemed of the Lord";
And you shall be called "Sought Out,
a City Not Forsaken." *Isaiah 62:2*

The life of charity consists in willing well and doing well to the neighbor, in acting in every work from justice and equity, from good and truth, and in like manner in every office; in a word, the life of charity consists in performing uses. *New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine 124*

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The Swedenborgian Church bases its teachings on the Bible as illuminated by the works of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a Swedish scientist and theologian. Swedenborg envisioned a new Christianity coming into being that was revitalized by the Spirit of the Lord.

We believe that there is one God, known by many names. We worship Jesus Christ as our Lord and our God, who made himself known to us through his life as the divine human Jesus of Nazareth, and whom we continue to know through his Holy Spirit, which operates through and around us.

We believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and that in its pages we find two parallel stories: the account of people, places, and events; and within that account a spiritual reflection of our individual and corporate journeys. The Bible, with its infinite depth of meaning, is truly a living Word, guiding us as we strive to make ourselves temples for the Lord by loving and serving others. We believe that, above all, "all religion relates to life, and the life of religion is to do good." The Swedenborgian Church exists to help people be open to the Lord's presence and leading, and to facilitate their spiritual well-being. We invite you to participate with others who are seeking to deepen their inner life and pursue their spiritual journey.

***Our Daily Bread* is a ministry of the Swedenborgian Church**

Our Beliefs in Brief:

- God is pure love, pure wisdom, and pure creative power.
- God became human in Jesus Christ and dwells with us.
- The Bible is God's Word, and has many levels of meaning.
- God loves and saves people of all religions.

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