

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2011

SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

OUR DAILY BREAD



*The Lord In
Ultimates*

Meditation

I do not venerate matter,
but the Creator of matter,
who became matter for my sake,
and accepted to dwell in matter,
and through matter worked my
salvation;
therefore I will not cease to reverence
matter,
through which my salvation was
worked.

~ John Damascene (c. 675-750)

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Dear Readers,

Autumn and winter bring Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the New Year, holidays celebrating the fruitfulness of harvest and the potential embodied in new life and new beginnings. Each in its own way, these special days reveal the presence of the beginning in the end, the first seeds in the ripe fruit, the divine and infinite in the human and finite. This is what it means for the divine to be "in ultimates."

In this physical world, time moves forward, despite our best efforts to keep it from passing. Now, not someday, is the time to embrace our love for the Lord and live it out. Heaven is around and within us, which means that eternal life is unfolding every day, whether we notice it or not! Waiting for some distant point in the future when we will be signaled to change or meet our maker for judgment misses the point.

The deep joy of a heavenly life (there are challenges, too, of course) awaits us now, not later. The Lord reaches out to us in this world, not abstractly but through the daily round.

In this issue, we explore just how our earthly lives and the presence of the Lord meet. We wish you a holiday season filled with awe, awareness, and beauty.

Many blessings,
Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

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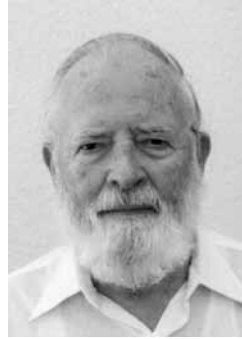
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NOV 6 HAPPINESS ON THE NATURAL PLANE

Rev. Dr. David J. Fekete

Genesis 25:19-26

These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

John 15:1-12

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Sermon

This Sunday I would like to follow up on my talk about bearing fruit. Last Sunday I talked about how love flows forth into good works. This Sunday I will emphasize why good works matter. I will discuss first why good works matter, then how good works flow into us from God, then the benefits that come from doing good works.

Jesus says in the Gospel of John that he is the vine and we are the branches. He says further, "If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). The fruit that Jesus is talking about are all the good things that we do from a heart of love. Last Sunday we saw that willing good is internal and doing good is external. Swedenborg tells us,

Charity and good works are distinct from each other like intention and action, and like the mind's affection and the body's operation; consequently, also, like the internal person and the external . . . therefore charity, because it is of the internal person, is to intend well; and the works, because they are of the external person, are to do well from intending well (TCR 374).

The external person that Swedenborg speaks of is also called the natural level of our personality. So we can also say that doing good is an activity of the natural level of our personality.

Let me take a moment to discuss the levels of our personality. There are three levels to our personality: the internal, the rational, and the natural. The internal is our spirit, and it lives in the spiritual world. Most of us are not conscious of this level. The rational level is the highest reaches of our mind. It can see what we are doing and make decisions about whether our emotions and actions are in keeping with God's precepts. In our rational mind are all the teachings that we have learned about God's kingdom. In it also are all the good feelings of love that God gives us. The natural level is the part of us that communicates with the world. In that level are all our worldly desires, attentions to the needs of the self, and the actions that we do in the world.

All of these levels need to receive life and love from God. The process by which we grow toward God is called regeneration. This is a lifelong process. Over the course of a lifetime, we let more and more of God's love into us and we learn more and more truths about God and what His will for us is. We are first regenerated in our higher levels. Our internal and rational levels are regenerated before our natural level is. That is because our rational level needs to

know what God wants for us before it can direct our natural level to do these things.

But regeneration needs to continue into all the levels of our personality. This means that our natural level needs to be regenerated too. The part of us that lives in the world needs to become oriented to heaven. All of our knowledge about God's ways and all of our feelings of love for our neighbor and love for God need to show themselves in our behavior. It is important for all of our higher feelings and thoughts to become rooted in our actions. Unless the higher levels of our personality shine forth in our natural level, we are like a house without a foundation. Swedenborg is very clear about this. He says,

The natural, which is external, must be regenerated; for unless it is regenerated, the internal has neither foundation nor receptacle; and if it has no foundation nor receptacle, it altogether perishes (AC 6299).

Swedenborg uses an analogy to explain this doctrine. Spiritual thoughts and feelings without spiritual actions are like a head detached from the body.

Good will and faith are only mental and perishable unless they are determined to works and coexist in them, when possible. Has not man a head and a body connected by the neck? Is there not in the head a mind which intends and thinks, and in the body power which performs and executes? If therefore man were only to intend well or were to think from good will, and were not to do well and perform deeds from it, would he not be as a head only, and thus a mind only, which cannot exist without a body? Who does not see from this that good will and faith are not good will and faith while they are only in the head and its mind and not in the body? (TCR 375)

So this is why good works matter: without a life of good works, our spiritual loves and thoughts have no foundation and will dissipate.

Swedenborg suggests that bringing our good will and faith into our natural level may be difficult. Our rational mind is an image of heaven, while our natural level is an image of the world. In our natural level are all the knowledge and emotions that are oriented toward success in the world. Thus in our natural level are desires for self-gratification, desires for worldly success, desires for income, and the knowledge to bring these things about. These things are not necessarily opposed to heavenly desires. We need to take care of ourselves or we will be a burden on society. But if our natural level is not rendered open to heaven, then we will become interested only in these worldly things. Then it will be difficult for

God and heaven to flow into our lives. These worldly desires must be rendered compliant with heavenly and God-centered beliefs and loves. So Swedenborg teaches,

In order for a person to become spiritual, his natural must become as nothing . . . for the natural has drunk from infancy nothing else than the things of selfish and worldly lusts, thus contrary to charity . . . These evils cause that good cannot flow in from the Lord, . . . But it should be known that it is the old natural that must become as nothing; . . . and when it has become as nothing, a person is then gifted with a new natural, which is called the spiritual natural—spiritual from this, that the spiritual is what acts through it, and manifests itself through it . . . and when this comes to pass, a person receives good from the Lord; and when he receives good, he is gifted with truths; and when he is gifted with truths, he is perfected in intelligence and wisdom; and when he is perfected in intelligence and wisdom, he is blessed with happiness to eternity (AC 5651).

Our natural level becomes compliant with our higher level by removing the things that block God's inflowing love. We need to let go of worldly attachments that concern only selfish ambition or worldly wealth. Then, when we have let go of these impurities that block God's love and wisdom, we can feel heavenly joy even in our natural life.

The impurities of the natural man are all those things which are of selfishness and love of the world; and when these impurities have been washed away, then goods and truths flow in, since the impurities are all that hinder the influx of good and truth from the Lord; for good is continually flowing in from the Lord (AC 3147).

Swedenborg tells us that washing away the impurities in the natural level can be a struggle at times. He notes that "before these two are conjoined, the person cannot be an entire person, nor be in the tranquility of peace, as the one contends with the other" (AC 2183). One level contends against the other when we try to hold onto the things we love too much from this world.

But when we have reduced our natural level to compliance with the rational level, all our spiritual loves will flow from God down into our natural degree. Our behavior then will conform to what we know to be God's will. Then our natural degree will become transparent and heavenly good will flow from our rational degree through our natural degree into our behavior. We will be living good lives. And then we will become truly happy and at peace.

I remember when I was learning jazz trumpet. I had a solid foundation in classical trumpet and I went to a jazz musician in Detroit to learn about jazz. My teacher of classical trumpet was very strict. If I started to play and my pitch was slightly off or my articulation wasn't solid enough he would shout, "No! Stop! Start over!" This gave me a fear of making mistakes that I took to Jimmie's when I went to learn jazz.

Jimmie taught me a song and invited me to try to improvise in it. Things didn't work out so well. I sounded stiff and regimented. I didn't have that free-flowing jazz sound. I was nervous about playing in front of him and my girlfriend, who had come with me. I felt inhibited. I still had that fear of making mistakes that my classical teacher had instilled in me. I was trying to apply those classical methods of perfect pitch and rhythm to the jazz I was trying to play.

Well, Jimmie talked with me for a while. He gave me some pointers about my breathing. He set me at ease and made me feel comfortable in his house and in this new musical format. Then he said, "Let's try it again."

It worked. I was improvising freely and coming up with some really inventive melodies. My heart flowed freely through my horn into a flow of sound. We stopped after a while and Jimmie said, "Yeah, you were blowing jazz. You can play jazz after the blocks get removed." Jimmie hadn't taught me anything new; he just relaxed me and got the blocks out of the way. He got rid of the inhibitions that were blocking my emotions and my creativity. He set me at ease and took away my fear of making a mistake. I blew jazz when the blocks were removed.

I use that as an example of regeneration on the natural level. We need to take action and remove the blocks that would interfere with God's inflowing joy and love. In theological language, this would be called "removing the evils that stand in the way of goods."

When we do this spiritual work, then God can flow into our lives and give us all the blessings of heaven. So Swedenborg writes, "There is nothing, therefore, that can make a person blessed and happy, but that his natural should be conformed to his rational and both joined together" (AC 2183). The heavenly life is not drudgery. It is enjoyable and fun. It feels good to be good. All the anxieties from worldly care are dissolved. All the frustrations that come from selfishness fall away. The heavenly life is meant to

be enjoyed. This enjoyment of life occurs when our natural level conforms to the heavenly loves and truths of our higher levels. Swedenborg tells us that

Truths of the good of doctrine are the doctrines of love to the Lord and of good will toward the neighbor, which are said to be conjoined with good in the natural man, when to know them for the sake of doing them is a pleasure and an enjoyment (AC 3709).

The fruits of spiritual growth are blessed happiness, pleasure, and enjoyment in the life we are living. When our natural degree is regenerated, we enjoy life much more fully than before. Heaven's joy and blessings make up the life we enjoy in our day-to-day living. These, finally, are the benefits of doing good works—a happy life.

Meditations and Prayers

You brought us out of non-existence into being, and when we had fallen you raised us up again, and left nothing undone until you had brought us up to heaven and had granted us your Kingdom that is to come. For all these things we give thanks to you, and to your only-begotten Son and your Holy Spirit; for all benefits that we have received, known and unknown, manifest and hidden.

- Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom

Holy Spirit of God,

Let us not seek you in the distant land, for you are here among us.

Let us welcome you in the heart which is your dwelling place

and let us rejoice in the glory of your presence,

the only fountain of goodness and love.

- Amy Carmichael

But the Lord calls the Spirit the "voice of a gentle breeze." For God is breath, and the breath of the wind is shared by all; nothing shuts it in, nothing holds it prisoner.

- Maximus the Confessor

Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has given us more than we ever thought to ask, more than we dare to receive, and more than we can ever understand.

- St. Catherine of Siena (c. 1347-1380)

Monday, November 7

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

Isaiah 43:1&2

Those who are received [into the new church] acknowledge the Lord's Divine Human, and live according to... the life of heaven; for the light there is Divine truth, from which come all intelligence and wisdom; and the heat there is Divine good, from which come all love and charity. *Apocalypse Explained 865*

Tuesday, November 8

For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. *Isaiah 43:3&4*

All who have lived a good life in the world and have acted from conscience, who are such as have acknowledged the Divine and have loved Divine truths, especially such as have applied those truths to life, seem to themselves, when let into the state of their interiors, like those aroused from sleep into full wakefulness, or like people passing from darkness into light. *Heaven and Hell 506*

Wednesday, November 9

Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." *Isaiah 43:5-7*

They then think from the light of heaven, thus from an interior wisdom, and they act from good, thus from an interior affection. Heaven even flows into their thoughts and affections with an interior blessedness and delight of which they had previously had no knowledge; for they have communication with the angels of heaven. *Ibid.*

Thursday, November 10

Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears! *Isaiah 43:8*

When our volition is doing what our discernment tells it to, then we have a life in accord with truths; but when our discernment is blind, our volition is blocked as well. All it can do freely in accord with its own reasoning is the evil that it has justified in its discernment, which is false. *Divine Providence 144*

Friday, November 11

Let all the nations gather together, and let the peoples assemble. Who among them declared this, and foretold to us the former things? Let them bring their witnesses to justify them, and let them hear and say, "It is true." *Isaiah 43:9*

The Lord alone combats for man in temptations, and man does not combat at all from himself. Man cannot by any means combat against evils and falsities from himself, because that would be to fight against all the hells, which the Lord alone can subdue and conquer.

New Jerusalem & Its Heavenly Doctrine 200

Saturday, November 12

You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior. I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses, says the Lord. I am God, and also henceforth I am He; there is no one who can deliver from my hand; I work and who can hinder it? *Isaiah 43:10-13*

The Lord does not tempt, but liberates, and leads to good. Temptations appear to be from the Divine, when yet they are not. In what sense the petition in the Lord's prayer, "Lead us not into temptations," is to be understood, from experience. The Lord does not concur in temptations by permitting them, according to the idea which man has of permission.

In every temptation there is freedom, although it does not appear so, but the freedom is interiorly with man from the Lord, and he therefore combats and is willing to conquer, and not to be conquered, which he would not do without freedom. *Ibid.*

NOV **13** ONLY THIS
LIFE COUNTS
Rev. Dr. William R. Woofenden

John 3:1-21

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Sermon

Swedenborg makes two statements about the things required of us that I should like to set before us at the outset: one from the large, unfinished work *Apocalypse Explained*, #934, and the other from the small work *Doctrine of Life*, #22.

The first says that in this life that we are all now living in this world, two things are necessary: first, an acknowledgment of the Lord's Divine (i.e., that everything good is from God); and secondly, that we are to live according to the laws of the Decalogue—the Ten Commandments.

The other states the two necessities in this way: first, that we are to shun evils because they are sins (because they are diabolical and therefore contrary to the Lord and his laws); and secondly, that we are to do this as if of ourselves, while at the same time knowing we do it not by our own power but by the Lord's power acting through us.

As we ponder these two statements, we find that they both say essentially the same thing. They tell us (1) that all goodness is the Lord's and never ours (except on loan), and (2) that God has told us what things are essentially good and what things are not good, and that he expects us not only to learn, know, and acknowledge this fact but also to try to live in accordance with what is good.

These two necessary things are the only things that count in this life. They are so simple as to be beguiling. Somehow, in our efforts to understand what some have called the "mysteries of life," we have managed to make it seem incredibly complex. Ernest Hemingway once wrote, "There are some things which cannot be learned quickly, and time—which is all we have—must be paid heavily for their acquiring. They are the very simplest things . . ." (*Death in the Afternoon*, chapter 16).

They are the very simplest things! Pennsylvania Dutch wisdom reminds us that "ve get too soon old and too late schmart."

What is it that prevents us from doing good habitually and at all times? We know that God is good and that he pours his love and truth continually on the mind and heart of every human being. Why, then, do not that love and truth always enter our minds and hearts, fill them, and then come forth in words of truth and works of love? It is a teaching of our church that we are all created for heaven. In the light of that idea, let us then ask, "If we really were

created for heaven, why in the world didn't God place us there right away?"

The "training ground" concept of earthly life is one possible answer; perhaps we need a reasonable period of life experience in order to become fit to inhabit heaven. There is also what the philosopher would call the "ontological reason" for our starting life on this earthly plane. Actually, the ontological reason and the training-ground reason are inseparable. Ontology has to do with what exists, what the basic nature or structure of reality is. Thus, the ontological reason as to why we start life on earth is that that's the way things are; that's the way God designed and planned it. It has been noted in our teachings that whatever proceeds from the divine does not stop midway in the process but continues on till it terminates in a fixed form, which is called its ultimate form—its last or lowest form. The natural world is such a form. From this lowest form, we are intended to use Earth as a training ground for the later, more real life God has in mind for us.

We have a colloquialism, "to start from scratch," meaning that whatever it is we are starting, we are starting without any particular advantages. That's the way God in his wisdom has decided we should all start life. And, in this context, it is unquestionably true that the life each one of us decides to live, starting from scratch, is the only life that counts.

Despite our absolute uniqueness as human beings, we nevertheless, for the most part, all start with the same basic possibilities, the same potential—namely, to become an angel. (There's that beguilingly simple language again!) Angels are not created. People are. People can become angels. But they have to want to. Really to want to is to be willing to undergo a sufficient period of basic training to become transformed.

That transformation—from starting out as a mere human being to becoming an angel—is so radical that when Jesus was trying to explain to Nicodemus (who was no fool) what life was all about, he startled him by insisting that he had to be born again! We mean exactly the same thing when we say we must go through a process of regeneration, or that we must be regenerated.

Let's get back to that question I posed earlier: What is it that prevents us from doing good habitually and at all times? It is because in the "state of nature" into which we are born, the low natural state filled with hereditary tendencies to self-centeredness, there is disorder, self-love—evil, if you will—in our hearts.

Before I go any further, let me stop and talk a little about the word "evil." I know that for many people it is a loaded word, a word to be feared, avoided, and certainly not used in a seemingly indiscriminate and condemnatory way. And this is not too surprising. It's hard to find a dictionary with a short entry for the word "evil."

I'm also aware that some new readers of Swedenborg, if they should decide to begin their reading with his first theological work, *Arcana Coelestia*, might not get beyond #39 and the sentence that begins: "Since man of himself is dead, and there is nothing in him but what is false and evil . . ." If only they could hang in there till they get to #4997, they might feel more at ease to read that "evil, viewed in itself, and also sin, is nothing but disjunction from good." Well, it does say more than that, but that "sets the stage," so to speak, for a more nearly universal definition of evil.

More often than not "evil" means simply some state or degree of disorder, especially something that is not in harmony with the order of God's creation. And ontologically, we are all born into greater or lesser states of disorder—that is, into states not in harmony with God's ways. That should not surprise or startle us at all. Compared to the way people who have worked to become angels live, we all lead decidedly disorderly (i.e., evil) lives. But there is no moral stigma attached to that fact unless we stubbornly refuse to make any attempt to improve our way of life.

Now, to get back to where we were: what is it that prevents us from doing good habitually and at all times? It is because there is disorder, self-love, evil in our hearts. This disorder tends to "harden" our hearts, make them stiff and unyielding. Some of the fixed and stubborn falsities in our minds shut out much of the light from heaven that constantly falls on us, preventing the Lord's love and truth from even entering our minds.

If you will now allow me similarly to generalize the definition of "good" to mean that which is in harmony with or an integral part of God's way or plan, then perhaps I may be permitted to say that we do not do good at all times because we are not good, except possibly from time to time.

Even an apparently good act, done by a person in an evil or disorderly state, is not, in truth, a good act. It may have all the outward appearance of a good and benevolent action, and may in fact actually benefit others, but—as far as the person acting is concerned—it is not a good act. It is in reality an evil or selfish act if it is done for some self-serving motive such as

the hope of praise or reward or some other sort of personal benefit.

Such motives are in the heart of every unregenerate person; self-love is at the bottom of almost every such person's acts. And self-love is the very essence of disorder, the great root of all evil. It truly is vain for anyone to try to save his or her soul simply by doing external acts of benevolence. For so long as a person's inner being continues in an evil and selfish state, that person can earn a whole chestful of merit badges, so to speak, and not be any closer to a state of salvation than he was at the start.

In order to qualify to become a citizen of heaven, we must first come into a heavenly state of mind and heart. Heaven has to be within us, not outside of us. No matter how well-behaved or moral or charitable we may be outwardly, if our actions spring from an unregenerate will, we shall remain inwardly selfish and evil. Thus—and mark this, for it is vital—for the greater part of our lives it is more important for us to look carefully at our inner motives and purposes than it is to be overly concerned with people-pleasing outward conduct.

This, in fact, is the principal reason why many of the rules of life found in the Bible, such as the Ten Commandments, are expressed in negative form. In the Word we are not nearly so often advised to do good as we are admonished to cease doing evil. The great prototype verse here is Isaiah 1:16: "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before my eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good."

We are told to act in this order—ceasing to do evil, then learning to do good—for a sound psychological reason: if we really, honestly stop doing evil things, there will be nothing left to do but good things! And the more evil (i.e., disorderly) things we cease doing and cherishing, the more good things we shall begin to do. Then, probably to our great astonishment, we shall find that they delight us much more than our old ways ever did. Further, the good that we then do will be genuine, for the doing of it will not be our idea but the Lord's, and therefore it will not be defiled with self-love or the craving for merit.

Is this beginning to sound too easy? You're right! It isn't that easy!

Two major obstacles loom in front of every one of us as we seriously tackle the business of making this life count:

1. It is very hard for any of us to see clearly, or to feel strongly enough about, and thus really become motivated by the idea that the process of rebirth, of regeneration, of purifying ourselves from disorder (i.e., ridding ourselves of evil), of putting our lives in order, is the most important thing we have to do in this world. That's obstacle number one.
2. The second obstacle should really be called the first, as it is the cause of the one we have just defined. And that is this: none of us is really willing to believe how deeply disorderly the unregenerate human heart is. Most of us are disposed to think of ourselves as being tolerably good, of imagining that on the whole we are—or ought to be—quite acceptable just as we are.

To become too complacently content with our present attitude and lifestyle is a dangerous error. If we don't ever wake up and discover it here, believe me, we will later in the other world! But then it will be too late.

The primary cause of this dangerous error is that most of us simply don't know ourselves very well. I can't resist quoting Robert Burns's famous stanza:

O wad some power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion.

There is probably no ignorance so prevalent as the ignorance of ourselves. Our good points—oh, we seem to be able to discover *them* easily enough. In fact, we are more apt than not to magnify them and even become somewhat vain about them, thus falling into the error of conceit. Our more external and trifling faults we also manage to see more often than not, and maybe we even publicly confess them now and then. Sometimes we may speak too freely about them, showing others (if not ourselves) that we are really more proud of our frankness than we are ashamed of the faults we are admitting to.

But the deep, radical disorders of our natures are, to most of us, hidden. Our eyes are blinded to them. We are for the most part not conscious of them. We might not be able to handle the shock if we were. It calls for close self-examination, guided by the light of divine truth, to see the human heart as it is. This sort of soul-searching is not something to be entered into either often or lightly. Swedenborg makes this recommendation: that we examine ourselves once or twice a year to see our own evils; that we then confess

them in the presence of God and pray earnestly for his help (*Apocalypse Revealed* #224.6).

It might be useful to observe that probably it is not so much from failure periodically to examine oneself that most people remain unconscious of their true inner state. It is more likely because of ignorance of the real nature of evil. As I noted earlier, most people, I suspect, when and if they think of evil, picture in their mind some great open vice; or at least some very gross fault, such as a violent temper, or ugly sullenness, or a revengeful attitude, or some other manifest defect of character.

But the real basis of evil is an *attitude*. In contemporary slang, the truly deadly attitude is: "I'm Number One, and my first priority is to look after number one." In traditional theological language, the deadly attitude is called "self-love."

Here's your chance again to say, "Hey! Wait a minute! Didn't Jesus say the second great commandment was to love your neighbor as you love yourself? So how can you say that self-love is the worst or most deadly attitude?"

Good question! It's so easy to oversimplify. Actually, we are told that there are four possible ruling loves: love of the Lord, love of the neighbor, love of the

world, and love of self. All of them are okay, if they are kept in the right order. Love of the Lord and the neighbor must always have higher priority than love of the world and self. If they're kept in that order, there is no law that prohibits us from loving ourselves and the things of the world. In fact, many people are in serious psychological trouble because they really hate themselves instead of loving themselves in the right proportion.

No, what I'm calling attention to is the kind of self-love that leads us to insist, "I'm Number One." For then love of self is set up in opposition to love of God and the neighbor. And whether we like it or not, we are all born with a very strong tendency to assign to self-love position No. 1.

This attitude will never just "go away" by itself. It's like a noxious weed that will grow and spread until it takes over the whole of our being. The only way to get it in hand is by the process of rebirth. Truly, the Lord says to us as he did to Nicodemus, "You must be born again."

Prayer

O Lord, never suffer us to think that we can stand by ourselves, and not need you.

- John Donne (1573-1631)

Swedenborgian Community.org

An Online Spiritual Community

www.swedenborgiancommunity.org

The mission of this ministry is to create a vibrant online spiritual community available 24/7 for Swedenborgians and seekers around North America and the globe to explore, share, and deepen their faith and connection to the Swedenborgian Church. We aim to create a community where our members are known to each other, where they feel free to share openly their personal journey of faith, and where they feel nurtured and supported in their walk with the Lord. We aim to create an open and welcoming community for new spiritual seekers, introducing the Swedenborgian faith in an accessible way through our own powerful testimony and life experience with it.

SwedenborgianCommunity.org was launched in June 2006 after being developed by a committed group of laypeople determined to create a new way for isolated Swedenborgians to connect with one another and be "church." This group called Rev. Sage

Currie to serve as their first cyber-minister. It called Rev. Wilma Wake in February of 2008, and she has served ever since. Please join us!



Daily Meditations

Monday, November 14

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. *Daniel 12: 2&3*

When someone is becoming a new person, that is, being reborn, it does not happen instantly, as some people believe, but over many years—in fact, through our whole life, right up to the last...

Arcana Coelestia 4063

Tuesday, November 15

Then I, Daniel, looked, and two others appeared, one standing on this bank of the stream and one on the other. One of them said to the man clothed in linen, who was upstream, 'How long shall it be until the end of these wonders?' *Daniel 12:5&6*

If human beings were in the design into which they were created—that is, in love toward the neighbor and in love to the Lord, since these loves are properly human—then, more than all animals, they would be born with not only information but also with all spiritual truths and heavenly goodness and, therefore, with all wisdom and intelligence... But since they are born not into the design but contrary to it, they are born into ignorance of everything; and because of this, things are so arranged that they can then be reborn and thereby come into as much intelligence and wisdom as they do goodness. *Arcana Coelestia 6323:2-3*

Wednesday, November 16

The man clothed in linen, who was upstream, raised his right hand and his left hand towards heaven. And I heard him swear by the one who lives for ever that it would be for a time, two times, and half a time, and that when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end, all these things would be accomplished. *Daniel 12:7*

The divine design is that we should arrange ourselves to accept God and prepare ourselves as vessels and dwellings into which God may enter and where he may live as in his temple.

We are to do this in apparent independence, still acknowledging that it all comes from God. We are to acknowledge this because we do not feel God's presence and working, even though God is most intimately accomplishing everything that is good in love and all that is true in faith. *True Christianity 105*

Thursday, November 17

I heard but could not understand; so I said, "My lord, what shall be the outcome of these things?" He said, "Go your way, Daniel, for the words are to remain secret and sealed until the time of the end.

Daniel 12:8&9

We have been so created that everything we intend and think and do seems to us to be in ourselves and, therefore, from ourselves. Without this appearance, we would not be human, since we could not accept, hold, or seem to possess anything of the good and true, of or love and wisdom, because, without this seemingly lifelike appearance, we could have no union with God and, therefore, no eternal life. *Marriage Love 444*

Friday, November 18

Many shall be purified, cleansed, and refined, but the wicked shall continue to act wickedly. None of the wicked shall understand, but those who are wise shall understand. From the time that the regular burnt-offering is taken away and the abomination that desolates is set up, there shall be one thousand two hundred and ninety days. *Daniel 12:10&11*

Only God is good, and there is nothing intrinsically good except from God. So, anyone who focuses on God and wants to be led by God is involved in the good; and anyone who turns away from God and wants to be led by self is not involved in the good. For the good that such an individual does is either for the sake of self or for worldly ends, so it is either for credit or simply imitative or hypocritical. *Ibid*

Saturday, November 19

Happy are those who persevere and attain the thousand three hundred and thirty-five days. But you, go your way, and rest; you shall rise for your reward at the end of the days." *Daniel 12:12&13*

In every person there are innumerable kinds of the things of understanding and of will, and all these are most distinct from one another, although people do not know it. But during a person's regeneration the Lord draws these things out, each and all in their order, and separates and disposes them so that they may be bent toward truths and goods and may be conjoined with them... A person does not even know this fact; still less can a person know in what manner he is regenerated.

Arcana Coelestia 675

WE REAP WHAT WE DO NOT SOW

Leah G. Goodwin

Matthew 25:14-30

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

Sermon

Well, my friends, we have here a challenging tale.

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; and to

one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, each according to his ability.”

Who is this man? Who are these servants supposed to be? And what does any of this rather upsetting parable have to do with us?

Let us start by assuming that Jesus is talking here about the kingdom of heaven, and that this “man going on a journey” is the Lord. Now, hold on. You may be thinking, as I was at this juncture, “How can the Lord go on a journey? A journey to where? He’s supposed to be everywhere and within everything, isn’t he? He can’t just take a vacation!” I would like to share with you just what I think this image means, and what I believe this parable has to say about our place in the kingdom of heaven and the way in which our own souls can join in building that heavenly kingdom.

Frankly, at first reading, I was not sure that I really DID want this story to have anything to do with me, or God, or my relationship with him and his kingdom. Several aspects of this parable really bothered me—overall, this parable seemed to end on a remarkably unjust note. But let us start at the beginning, with this traveling man and his money.

This man, about to leave for a journey, gives a great deal to his servants: he entrusts them each with a different amount of money, “each according to his ability,” and then, without further ado, he leaves. Jesus gives us no record of any instructions the man might have given his slaves about how to use that money, or what kind of profit he expects upon his return home, or even how long he will be gone.

Meanwhile, the first two servants make an impressive display of financial savvy: they head off to trade with their nest eggs and manage to double their investments. Quite an impressive accomplishment, especially by today’s stock-market standards! The third servant, however, takes the conservative approach. He buries his single talent in the ground, the equivalent of hiding it in the mattress. Presumably he does this for safekeeping. But we have to wonder why he chooses not to invest along with the others.

Then the story takes a challenging turn. When the master returns after a long absence, he wants to know how his financial venture has fared. He is pleased to discover that the first two servants have taken their respective five and two talents and doubled their value. As a reward for their faithfulness in this financial exercise, in “a few things,” the master gives them both authority over “many things.” He

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probably improves their status and living standards considerably.

When the third servant, the one given a single talent, comes forward, he has an excuse prepared. “Master,” he says, “I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow . . . So I was afraid, and hid your talent in the ground.” And, rather defensively it seems, he hands back to the master the single talent he had been given—no more, but certainly no less. *Look*, he seems to say, *I have not stolen or lost it, I have done what was required of me*—and indeed, he has safeguarded his treasure for his master’s return.

But this is apparently *not* what was required. It is certainly not enough for the master, who calls the last servant “wicked and lazy” and questions his excuse. “You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money, and on my return I would have received what was my own, with interest.” And with that, he takes the talent away from the servant and gives it to the servant who has the most money, who has made the greatest profit. And then he says something that really offends our sense of justice: “To all those who have, more will be given, but for those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” And he commands that the servant be thrown out of the household.

All in all, this finale seems like an unjust and unmerciful resolution to the parable. The story becomes all the more upsetting if we think of the master as God and the servants as ourselves.

Several immediate questions arise. First: What kind of a man simply leaves for a journey without giving even the most trustworthy servants specific instructions about the welfare of his money and property? Well, a man who isn’t particularly concerned about his finances, that’s for sure. In Jesus’ day, a talent was worth fifteen years’ worth of wages to a laborer. To that first servant, this man hands out five talents—seventy-five years’ worth of income, far more than a lifetime’s worth of money to a laborer. Even the servant who receives only one talent receives almost a working lifetime’s worth of pay. So we can assume that this traveling man is wealthy. And since he leaves no investment instructions for the slaves, it seems clear that he isn’t expecting any particular profit from his loans. In short, this man isn’t in it for the money. What does he want, then?

My second question: Why are the servants not given equal amounts of money? Jesus says that they were gifted “each according to his ability.” For many

of us, this unequal distribution will offend our sense of democracy. The servants do not begin on even economic ground. Notice, though, that the master judges them with this fact in mind. The first two do what they can with their endowments. They both double their investment, and the master is equally pleased with their profits. Clearly, it is not the actual amount of money that concerns the master.

And my third question: how can the master take what he has given from the third servant, and why does he banish him from the household? How is it right that the man with the least should have nothing and the man with the most have yet more? An urgent question, and one for which I have no simple response. But by considering the answer to this question, we begin to unpack the message held in this parable about our place in the kingdom of heaven.

Let us begin by considering what exactly the heavenly kingdom is. Swedenborg points out that heaven is not only a state that we choose or reject after this mortal life. “Every regenerated person,” he says, “is a kind of tiny heaven” (*Arcana Coelestia* 911). Heaven is here, now, both within us and around us. The kingdom of heaven is something we create or work against, depending on how we employ the abilities that lie within us.

It follows, then, that our free will plays an important part in creating or destroying the heavenly kingdom. If God is the master in this parable, what does it mean for the Lord to be “going on a journey?” If God is, as Swedenborg tells us, Divine Love and Wisdom, and if his essence is the basis for our very existence, how can he be understood to “leave”? Well, according to the way we understand the Lord, he doesn’t leave. He is, according to Psalm 139, present at even the farthest and darkest limits of existence. But, like the master who leaves his own property to the discretion of his servants, the Lord gives us free will—or at least the appearance of it—to use the gift of his property as we see fit. And what is the Lord’s “property”? What is the gift he gives us to invest and make profit with?

Existence. Life itself. And, by extension, the gifts and abilities we are born with.

The talents in this parable represent our innate gifts—our talents, as it were. The talents represent the “distinguishably one” qualities of charity and faith, goodness and truth, love and wisdom. One cannot operate without the other—goodness gives warmth to truth, love gives meaning to wisdom, and charity gives the spark of action to faith. In the same way, our lives are static, stagnant, totally self-absorbed and

meaningless, unless we apply our gifts to the good, happiness, and well-being of the world around us.

So the master—God—is not in this for his own profit. He is more concerned with the attitude of his servants. This becomes quite clear in his exchange with the third servant. “I was afraid,” the slave says. Afraid of what? Afraid that his master would reap where he did not sow—that the servant would be expected to produce a profit he had not been given the means to create. There is a fundamental problem with the third servant’s perspective here. He cannot free himself from the belief that the master is in it for the profit—that his master is interested in how much money the servant can make. Since he has been given a single talent, the least amount of money, it makes sense that, with this perspective, he feels unable to meet his master’s expectations. We can see why he buried the talent rather than bother to invest. Why risk losing everything when he could at least guarantee his ability to give what he was given?

But we know that the master has no interest in profit. Rather, he wants to see that the servant has bothered to invest—that he has tried to make something more out of the gift he has been given. After all, he is equally pleased with the first and second servants—and the first ends up with ten talents, while the second ends up with only four.

We can think of our own abilities in the same way. We are all born with varying degrees of ability in a broad variety of areas, and we are not better or worse, more or less worthy beings, for the kinds of gifts God gives us. We are given what we are able to use and develop for the greatest benefit of our own souls and others’. The third servant’s fear is unfounded. His one talent is worth a great deal, and his master did not ask for more profit than the servant could create from that single piece of silver. The “joy of the master”—heaven—is within the grasp of every person who recognizes and uses his or her gifts to good ends.

But what of the end of this parable? What meaning do we make of the servant’s loss of the single talent, of his banishment to outer darkness? And how do we reconcile these apparent cruelties with our understanding of a loving and light-filled God? This is strong stuff.

This part of the parable is a wake-up call. Jesus is telling us that if the possibility of heaven lies within and around us, so then does the potential for hell.

Our responsive reading for this morning was taken from Psalm 139. In another section of that passage, the psalmist asks the Lord, “Where can I flee from

your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in hell, you are there.”

If I make my bed in hell.

Not “if I am sent to hell,” or “if hell takes me,” but “if I make my bed,” my resting place, my safest sanctuary, in hell. Sometimes we “make our bed in hell” less by conscious choice than because we feel driven there by desperate circumstances, depression, or despair—and I am willing to bet that all of us have felt this way at some point in our lives. Jesus, in fact, in his journey from human to divine, could be said to have made his bed in hell during his darkest moments before the crucifixion. But hell is, according to Swedenborg, a choice.

There are a couple of ways that we can choose hell, or cast ourselves into the “outer darkness” of the parable. The first is to turn our gifts and abilities toward evil or self-serving ends. We can see this happen on a large scale. Consider Hitler, a charismatic man who turned his abilities toward acts of incredible darkness. We also see it occur on a smaller, more insidious scale. This happens when we use our own best qualities to manipulate others or to accomplish something at the expense of another.

The second way that we can “make our bed in hell,” and perhaps the more damaging way (because it can go completely unnoticed), is through what we do *not* do—we can fail to use the gifts God gives us, or see them as worthless. This is what happens when the third servant buries his talent in the earth instead of investing it in the more fertile ground of the bank. This happens to us when we let our gifts lie dormant inside us or think of them—and ourselves—as useless or inferior or unworthy. But although God never demands more than he gives us potential for, never gathers where he has not scattered seed, *we* reap what we do not sow. The loss to heaven is ours and everyone’s if we hide or reject our gifts as unworthy or impractical.

But Jesus, in this parable, never says that this “outer darkness” is forever. He never says that hell is inescapable. If the heavenly kingdom can be created here and now, during every moment of every day, then so can we escape our hells, here and now, during every moment of every day. George Dole points out that “we are all designed for heaven, and if we could see deeply enough, we would discover that heavenly design. True, it is covered over with much that is not heavenly, but that is just the covering. The simple fact that we are alive means that the Lord is flowing into us, and the Lord is perfect love and wisdom united”

(*Sorting Things Out*). We have only to recognize and reach toward the deeper, brighter possibility of heaven in order to be redeemed from the depths of hell.

God does not reap what he has not sown. We, however, *do* reap in spiritual hunger what we do not sow—the gifts we fail to acknowledge. I do not believe that the Lord asks any more of us than he gives us the ability to create. No person can singlehandedly save the environment, or end world hunger, or even repaint a house in a reasonable amount of time—no one can do it all, and in the same vein, no one can create heaven by him- or herself. The Lord does not demand that we contribute more to the world than he has made us capable of giving—but we *are* responsible for trying our very best to make this world a heavenly place with the blessings we do have, whatever those gifts may be. Likewise, we are responsible for putting our faith to work—the work of love. Listen again to Swedenborg’s words: “Every regenerated person is a kind of tiny heaven, or a likeness or image of the whole heaven; so, in the word, the inner person is called ‘heaven’ . . . When someone is governed by the design of the Lord, then he or she is likewise a tiny heaven, or [which is the same thing], a kingdom of

the Lord, because the kingdom of the Lord is within him or her” (*Arcana Coelestia* 911).

We have the precious gift of free will to invest our talents, however much they may amount to, and make profit on them. We also have freedom to be afraid, and bury those gifts in the earth. But, by uniting our faith in the Lord with acts of love, by combining what our heads know with what our hands and hearts can do—even if our contributions seem tiny—we can build the kingdom of heaven within ourselves, within our community, and throughout the world.

Prayer

Dear Lord, we thank you for the unique blessings and abilities you have given to each one of us. Help us to realize that every one of us truly is a unique light to the rest of the world, and help us to let that light so shine that we glorify you in creating a heavenly kingdom, both within ourselves and throughout this whole earth. Amen.

Save the Date

SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH CONVENTION
JULY, 5TH - 8TH 2012



What Does the
Lord Require of
You?

BRIDGEWATER STATE UNIVERSITY
BRIDGEWATER, MA

Daily Meditations

Monday, November 21

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you
discern my thoughts from far away. *Psalm 139:1&2*

For people on earth, heaven is to recognize the
Divine and to be led by the Divine. . . . A moral life may
be lived for the sake of the Divine or for the sake of
people in this world. These two look alike outwardly,
but they are inwardly quite different. For the person
who is living a moral life for the sake of the Divine is
being led by the Divine, but the one who is living a
moral life for the sake of people in this world is self-led.
Heaven and Hell 319

Tuesday, November 22

You search out my path and my lying down, and are
acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you
know it completely. *Psalm 139:3&4*

Most things which happen under Providence
appear to a man as if they took place by chance.
Providence acts invisibly for this reason, that a man be
not compelled to believe from things visible, and that
thus his freedom be not violated; for unless a man is
in a state of freedom he cannot be reformed, and thus
cannot be saved. *NJHD 276*

Wednesday, November 23

You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand
upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high
that I cannot attain it.
Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee
from your presence? *Psalm 139:5-7*

The Lord's Divine Providence is not, as is believed in
the world, universal only; and the particulars, that is,
the singulars, do not belong to a man's own prudence.
No universal is possible except from singulars, and
together with them: for the singulars taken together
are called a universal just as the particulars taken
together are called a general. *Ibid.*

Thursday, November 24

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit
me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
Psalm 139:13&14

The omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence
of God... proceed from the Divine love and Divine
wisdom in much the same way as the power and
presence of the sun are present in this world and in
each and all things thereof, by means of its heat and
light. *True Christian Religion 49*

Friday, November 25

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being
made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of
the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your
book were written all the days that were formed for
me, when none of them as yet existed.
Psalm 139:15&16

God is omniscient; that is, he is aware of, sees, and
knows everything down to the least detail that happens
in keeping with the divine design, and by contrast is
aware of, sees, and knows what goes against the divine
design. God is omniscient, that is, he is aware of, sees,
and knows all things, because he is wisdom itself and
light itself. Wisdom itself is aware of all things. Light
itself sees all things. *True Christianity 59*

Saturday, November 26

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How
vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I
come to the end—I am still with you.
Psalm 139:17&18

The more we follow the divine design in the
way we live, the more power we receive from God's
omnipotence to fight against forms of evil and falsity,
because no one can resist evils or the falsities that go
with them except God alone. *True Christianity 68*

NOV 27 THE LORD IS IN YOU; ARE YOU IN THE LORD? Rev. Kit Billings

John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

John 15:9-17

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Sermon

I begin my message with you today by inviting you to be open to your own beautiful center of wisdom, which lives deep within your soul. Do you believe that it's there, your personal connection to wisdom, which is the Lord who lives and moves and has his being within you? I believe it's there, and I invite you to be deeply in tune with it right now. See if what you're about to hear feels like the truth for you. If it does, then I rejoice in that. If my words do not connect

for you, then I hope you will trust yourself not to digest them.

In this church, we each are called to search out and find the truth that is sensible and meaningful, that is as tasty as grapes from a vine and therefore nourishing and digestible. I pray that my message will help you in some significant way.

God is inside of everyone. This is a given. God's gracious nature is to live inside of every person, no matter how good or evil. As Swedenborg noted, this is more than an act of love on God's part; it's a necessity to sustain our life. For we each are created beings. The Lord is Life Itself, self-sustaining Life. This is why Paul Tillich spoke of God as being the very "ground of being." One of the blessings of this, my friends, is that in order for anyone simply to live, she must have God within her, for the physical body is actually sustained and vivified by the presence and life-force of the human soul, and the soul receives its life from God.

But the spiritual reality of life doesn't end there. Since the Lord's Word declares that God is Love, we therefore can open ourselves to yet another life-altering truth, which is something so precious, so amazing, that it will take an eternity for each of us to understand what it means that a God like this dwells within us. It means that you are being loved by Love Itself, not only from the outside in but also from the "inside out!" God is cherishing you from within the inward parts of your being. And you don't have to work for this. It's a given. A gift.

Merry Christmas, my friends. Merry Christmas.

And that is exactly what we're faced with, my friends: God loves you! Intimately. Tenderly. Personally. With deep mercy and understanding. There is an intentional, conscious loving and caring for you happening down in the depths of your heart and your soul, such that the Lord is able to see and know you totally, even more than you know yourself, and is helping you intimately and ever so wisely with your inner struggles, your hurts, your fears, your misunderstandings, your doubts, everything that troubles you.

This is all part of the "good news" in God's Word, in the Bible. It's saying, in short, that the Lord lives within you and that He has a fundamental role in our lives as our constant, ever-present source of life's most important ingredients. His presence literally creates internal happiness, peace, faith, and a deepening desire to love others—just because!

In Genesis we read of the story of the Garden of Eden and about the Tree of Life living in the center of that paradisiacal garden. This morning we're blessed to reflect upon another angle of this image of the indwelling God, which is God as the Divine Vine of life.

In it we hear God incarnate, our Lord Jesus Christ, saying simply, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me."

So, the simple yet powerful question I want to ask you today is, are you in the Lord?

1. Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Divine Human, and do you hear His words as truth that give you life and set you free?
2. Will you seriously and hopefully ingraft yourself to the truth that you are cherished by Jesus, and will you try every day to love others as Jesus loves you?
3. Will you bear the fruits of love and just enjoy and be passionate about your own personal and unique ability to make use of this spiritual relationship you're blessed with as a Christian?

This is what the Lord meant, I believe, by saying that we must "remain in Him," as He also resides in you.

Donald Grey Barnhouse cites an amazing example of lasting fruitfulness. In Hampton Court, near London, there is a grapevine under glass; it is about a thousand years old and has but one root, which is at least two feet thick. Some of the branches are two hundred feet long. Because of skillful cutting and pruning, the vine produces several tons of grapes each year. Even though some of the smaller branches are two hundred feet from the main stem, they bear much fruit because they are joined to the vine and allow the life of the vine to flow through them.

God gives us many awesome graces or powers in life—to be sure, we're each inherently powerful creatures. One of the greatest of these is the power within you, which God gives to you, to learn about the Lord and to read His thoughts in the Bible and to believe that Jesus is the Son of God—or rather, God with us in glorified human form. This power of spiritual understanding, you might say, prospers as individual strands of faith and understanding combine into an ever-growing stalk of life perception. Each strand may consist of a person's coming to see

and know things that deal with spiritual life, such as the nature of God, the Incarnation, how the Lord accomplished redemption, what true charity is, the journey of spiritual regeneration throughout life, concepts and insights about life after death, and so on and so on.

Each of these individual strands of faith ultimately joins together into a growing stalk of faith within you, which joins into the Lord as the Divine Vine. But the Lord is simply reminding us today in John's gospel that such growing and living faith comes to us as a choice—and it's an enormously relevant choice indeed. If we open our ears to hear the truth of this lesson this morning, it reveals a fundamental relationship between us and the Lord God: that if we want to be open to real love and spiritual goodness, then Jesus Christ is the One we depend upon to nourish our spirits with love and empower us to bear fruit or works of love that will last. As the Lord said, "Apart from me you can do nothing. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. This is to My Father's glory that you bear much fruit. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Remain in my love."

Author and speaker Brennan Manning came up with a slogan: "I am the one Jesus loves." It sounds a little arrogant, doesn't it? But he is actually quoting Scripture. Jesus' closest friend on earth, the disciple named John, is identified in the gospels as "the one Jesus loved." Manning said, "If John were to be asked, 'What is your primary identity in life?' he would not reply, 'I am a disciple, an apostle, an evangelist, an author of one of the four Gospels,' but rather, 'I am the one Jesus loves.'"

What would it mean, I ask myself, if I too came to the place where I saw my primary identity in life as "the one Jesus loves"? How differently would I view myself at the end of a day? Sociologists have a theory of the looking-glass self: you become what the most important person in your life (wife, father, boss, et cetera) thinks you are. How would my life change if I truly believed the Bible's astounding words about God's love for me, if I looked in the mirror and saw what God sees?

Manning tells the story of an Irish priest who, on a walking tour of a rural parish, sees an old peasant kneeling by the side of the road, praying. Impressed, the priest says to the man, "You must be very close to God." The peasant looks up from his prayers, thinks a moment, and then smiles, "Yes, he's very fond of me."

This fundamental and transforming truth of the Lord's love for you is a core part of the Christian faith. Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love." But then God's love in us moves up and out and functions so as to bear fruit that contains this love within it, which is why life in Christ is called "heaven."

In a beautiful sermon entitled "The Power of Love," Paul Tillich, one of the great theological minds of the twentieth century, writes of a Swedish woman who aided prisoners and orphans during World War One. She ended up in a concentration camp herself because she gave aid and comfort. Tillich writes, "It is a rare gift to meet a human being in whom love—this means God—is so overwhelmingly manifest. It undercuts theological arrogance as well as pious isolation. It is more than justice and greater than faith or hope. It is the very presence of God in the form of a human being. For God is love. In every moment of genuine love we are dwelling in God and God in us."

There are other sorts of vines we can choose to graft ourselves onto—we know them as thistles and brambles. There are noxious ideas and belief systems that will give us the juice to bear sour fruit and that can make us rather "prickly" to others trying to get close to us. Are you sometimes too thorny to the approach of others? Only those Christians who personally choose to be spiritually ingrafted to Christ will be able to let go of the selfish inclinations that can ultimately strangle the life in our hearts and minds with noxious brambles, thorns, and choking weeds.

A story is told of a farmer who said that years ago a thunderstorm swept through southern Kentucky at the farm where his Claypool forebears had lived for six generations. The old farmer recounts this poignant tale: "In the orchard, the wind blew over an old pear tree that had been there as long as anybody could remember. My grandfather was grieved to lose the tree on which he had climbed as a boy and whose fruit he had eaten all his life."

"A neighbor boy came by and said, 'Doc, I'm really sorry to see your pear tree get blown down.'

"I'm sorry, too," said my grandfather. 'It was a real part of my past.'

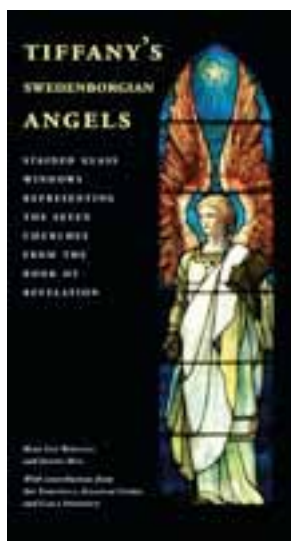
"What are you going to do?' the neighbor boy asked.

"The grandfather paused for a moment and then said, 'I'm going to pick the fruit and burn what is left.'"

That is the wise way to deal with certain things in our past. We need to learn their lessons, enjoy their pleasures, and go on with the present and the future. Christ is the Vine, and we are the branches. And when we need pruning, the goal is always more fruit.

The Lord Jesus Christ is in you. Are you in the Lord? The Lord gives us His powerful commandment: "Love one another." Amen.

Tiffany's Swedenborgian Angels: Stained Glass Windows Representing the Seven Churches from the Book of Revelation



Description:

In 1902, a Swedenborgian church in Glendale, Ohio commissioned the seven windows as a gift for their sister church in Cincinnati. Each window depicts an angel that represents one of the seven churches described in the book of Revelation. The windows were designed and created in the studios of Louis Comfort Tiffany, and they reflect not only the rich symbolism found in the Bible but Tiffany's hallmark color and brilliance. Tiffany's love of revealing angels in stained glass shines through in every panel.

Based on biblical passages in the form of letters addressed to the seven cities of Asia Minor that open the book of Revelation, the windows illustrate the deep inner meaning of these messages. The angels themselves represent each of the seven cities; they also can be seen to symbolize the stages of the development of the Christian church as well as the stages of the spiritual evolution of a person.

Tiffany's Swedenborgian Angels guides the reader not only through the history of the windows, but the spiritual meaning of each one, weaving Swedenborg's teachings with the luminous imagery of the angels themselves. If you have seen the exhibition, the book allows you to revisit the windows again any time; if you have not, it is a powerful introduction to a vivid piece of spiritual history.

Available at the Swedenborg Foundation: www.swedenborg.com

Monday, November 28

O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens. *Psalm 8:1*

Nothing whatever in the created universe is substance and form in itself, or life in itself, or love and wisdom in itself, indeed neither is the human being human in himself, but all is from God, who is human in Himself, wisdom and love in itself, and form and substance in itself. *Divine Love and Wisdom 52*

Tuesday, November 29

Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger. *Psalm 8:2*

[T]here is a connection of all things, through intermediate ones, with a First or source, and . . . anything that is not so connected will disintegrate . . . [N]othing can exist on its own, but requires something prior to itself, which means that everything goes back to that First . . . existence is a constant becoming so that all things are constantly coming into being—that is, existing—from that First from which they originated. *Heaven and Hell 303*

Wednesday, November 30

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them? *Psalm 8:3&4*

The union of eternal and temporal matters in us is the Lord's divine providence . . . The physical and time-bound things [of our bodies and understandings] are the outermost and final substances that we first enter when we are born, in order eventually to be brought into deeper and higher things. The outermost and final things are what hold us together, and they are found in this physical world . . . [A]ll the deeper and higher parts of us are present at once in these outermost or final elements. As a result, everything the Lord does he does from beginnings and endings at once, and therefore completely. *Divine Providence 220*

Thursday, December 1

Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them dominion over the works of
your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,

Psalm 8:5&6

The more closely we are united to the Lord, the more clearly we seem to have our own identity, and yet the more obvious it is to us that we belong to the Lord. *Divine Providence 158*

Friday, December 2

all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

Psalm 8:7&8

The grand purpose, or the purpose of all elements of creation, is an eternal union of the Creator with the created universe. This does not happen unless there are subjects in which the Creator's divinity can be as it is in itself, at home, so to speak—subjects in which it can dwell and abide. *Divine Love and Wisdom 170*

Saturday, December 3

O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth! *Psalm 8:9*

For these subjects to be his dwellings and homes they must be receptive of his love and wisdom apparently of their own accord, subjects who will with apparent autonomy raise themselves toward the Creator and unite themselves with him. In the absence of this reciprocity, there is no union. *Ibid.*

DEC 4 THERAPEUTIC PRAISE

Rev. Eric Hoffman

Zephaniah 3:1-5, 14-20

Ah, soiled, defiled, oppressing city! It has listened to no voice; it has accepted no correction. It has not trusted in the Lord; it has not drawn near to its God. The officials within it are roaring lions; its judges are evening wolves that leave nothing until the morning. Its prophets are reckless, faithless persons; its priests have profaned what is sacred, they have done violence to the law. The Lord within it is righteous; he does no wrong. Every morning he renders his judgment, each dawn without fail; but the unjust knows no shame.

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

Luke 2: 8-20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made

known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Sermon

As I look over the church calendar for December and January, it occurs to me that we will commemorate a number of birthdays. We will certainly honor the birthdays of those in our church community, but I'm thinking more of the birthdays of historical figures. In January, we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday on the 18th, and the week after, we celebrate Emanuel Swedenborg's birthday—not to mention, of course, the birthday that we celebrate on the 25th of December.

We celebrate a birthday today as well, and one that is very much in keeping with today's Advent theme of joy. On December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany, Ludwig von Beethoven was born. The reason why it is appropriate for us to remember this man today is connected to one of the few things that most of us know about him. During the time that he wrote most of his most memorable compositions, including his *Eroica* Symphony and his famous Fifth Symphony, Beethoven was almost completely deaf.

He began to go deaf when he was about thirty, which troubled him greatly, for obvious reasons. In addition to this unhappy turn of events, Beethoven did not have the happiest of childhoods. His father was an alcoholic and abusive, driving his children mercilessly to excel. Beethoven had to become the sole support for his family when he was only eighteen, which he accomplished by serving as a court musician. He was a bachelor his entire life only because he was attracted to women who were unattainable—either too aristocratic or already married or both. He ran away from the one woman who returned his affections because, as it turns out, he was terrified of marriage, never having witnessed a healthy one. Yet in spite of all of this, he produced some of the most emotionally charged and joyful music in the Western tradition. Modern psychologists would undoubtedly see that Beethoven created his music to compensate for the woundedness in his life. It was therapeutic for him to compose.

It calls to mind a strange thing that once happened to me. I was in, of all places, a Laundromat. As I was doing the washing, a song kept running through my head. You know how sometimes you get a tune stuck in your brain and you can't get rid of it? It was an old Roger Whittaker tune, and I was whistling it as I folded clothes from the dryer. A lady across from me

said, "Boy, I don't know how you can be in such a good mood. I think a Laundromat is one of the dreariest places there is."

As I stood there talking to her, I remember thinking that, you know, she had a point. I remember the Laundromats that my mother dragged me to as a child were probably the most boring places I had ever seen, exacerbated by the fact that with a large family it took us hours to finish the laundry. It was agony. The place where I was talking to the lady was nice enough, but it was still a Laundromat. People rarely become giddy at the thought of having to do the laundry. To top it all off, my car was at the mechanic's at the time, getting about a thousand dollars of transmission work done, and the rest of my schedule that day was looking pretty crowded. In the midst of all that, there I was in a Laundromat whistling a happy little tune. Could it be, as the lady suggested, that I was actually in a good mood?

Without realizing it, I think I, like Beethoven and countless other happy people with dirty laundry, was on to something that really works. I'm going to call it "therapeutic praise."

We hear in the Word many encouragements to praise God and to "make a joyful noise unto the Lord." But the reality is that sometimes we just don't feel like it. Sometimes there is so much stress and hardship and anxiety that we lose sight of the beauty and purpose in our lives. I don't believe that all those prophets and psalms were saying, "Praise God, but only if you're having a really good day." I think they understood that praising God reestablishes and strengthens our awareness of the divine presence. It has been said that the night before Jesus was born was the darkest night in history, spiritually speaking, and yet in the Christmas story an entire heaven's worth of angels are singing praises at the top of their celestial lungs. What a remarkable response! To put it simply, singing praises helps us to feel better. It reinvigorates our sense of hope.

This should come as no surprise to anyone who's had a really bad day, full of unwelcome surprises and unappreciated challenges, and who turns on the car radio on the way home and hears a really good song. Involuntarily, we start to sing along. Lo and behold, the next song is pretty good too, and so we sing that one. A few songs later, we notice that we are feeling better—the music has, on some level, helped us to reestablish our priorities in life. You don't have to be Pavarotti or Beverly Sills. How well you sing isn't the important thing. It's the singing—the act of letting go—that does the trick.

I think Swedenborg understood therapeutic praise. He wrote that in any person's spiritual development a stage occurs at which we do certain things because we understand that they are good, with the hope that soon we will be able to *feel* the good in them. This is the stage in our process he called "reformation." Some more contemporary theorists call it "fake it 'til you make it." If we persist in doing good, exercising charity and living love even when we don't feel like it, God can demonstrate to us on a deeper level why it's so wonderful to do these things, and pretty soon we do them because we *feel* them.

So it is with praise. When we express our acknowledgement of God in the form of praise, especially during the times when we don't perceive God all that clearly, then we can open ourselves up to the divine presence, and God can be made known within us. In other words, sing as if you were happy and it may very well lead you actually to feel happy. And, you know, happy isn't a bad thing to be: not only is life more enjoyable, but we actually get more done when we're happy.

We can apply the concept of therapeutic praise right here and now, especially if we're getting just a little tired of all the Christmas confusion and chaos going on out there. I know Christmas is a joyful time for most of us, but for some Christmas can be depressing, especially if everyone around you has family to share Christmas with and you don't. Many people in this world have "blue Christmases," and it's important for all of us to be sensitive to that. I confess that there are times when Christmas gets me down. But I would offer that one possible answer to the Christmas blues is to *sing praises anyway*. Go out and intentionally find Christmas and enjoy the season for all it has to offer, as if you've always known it. Sing those carols with life in your voice, no matter how old and familiar they seem to you. Instead of pretending you're not home, open the door when you hear carolers outside and have fun with them. Wrap those presents with joy, knowing that someone will receive that gift and love it and be grateful for it. Most of us, when wrapping gifts, tend to focus on it as a chore, one more something that has to get done. Try visualizing someone unwrapping it as you wrap it and see if that changes anything for you. And for those of us who share Christmas with children, don't be afraid to show a little excitement on Christmas morning. Santa Claus visits grown-ups too, you know.

Let's all endeavor this year to let go of whatever cynicism we may feel and open ourselves up to Christmas so that God can show us just how wonderful it can be.

Daily Meditations

Monday, December 5

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!
Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!
Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining
stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters
above the heavens! *Psalms 148:1-4*

A person has two sights: one from cogitative faith, the other from love. When a person has only the former sight, that sight is devoid of amazement at God's divine majesty; but when a person has sight from love, it is attended with amazement. *Apocalypse Explained 76.3*

Tuesday, December 6

Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he
commanded and they were created.
He established them forever and ever; he fixed their
bounds, which cannot be passed. *Psalms 148:5&6*

The six days or times, which are six successive states of human rebirth, are in general terms like this.

The first state is the one that precedes—both the state from infancy and the state just before rebirth. It is called void, emptiness, and darkness. And the first motion, which is the Lord's mercy, is the spirit of God hovering over the face of the water. *Arcana Coelestia 6-7*

Wednesday, December 7

Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and
all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling
his command! *Psalms 148: 7&8*

The third state is one of repentance, in which the individual, from the inner person, does talk reverently and devoutly and does bring forth good [actions] that resemble deeds of compassion. Still, they are not really alive because they are thought to be done independently. They are called the tender plant, the seed-bearing plant, and, finally, the fruit tree.

Arcana Coelestia 9

Thursday, December 8

Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!
Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and
flying birds! *Psalms 148: 9&10*

The fourth state occurs when the individual is moved by love and enlightened by faith. Before this, the person did indeed talk reverently and bring forth good [actions]—but out of a state of trial and constraint, not out of faith and compassion. So now faith and compassion are kindled in the inner person and are called the two great lights. *Arcana Coelestia 10*

Friday, December 9

Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all
rulers of the earth!
Young men and women alike, old and young together!
Psalms 148:11&12

The fifth state is the one in which the individual talks from faith and, consequently, strengthens his or her devotion to what is true and good. The things now brought forth are alive and are called the fish of the sea and the birds of the air. *Arcana Coelestia 11*

Saturday, December 10

Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name
alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and
heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all
his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to
him. Praise the Lord! *Psalms 148:13&14*

The sixth state occurs when the person says what is true and does what is good from faith and, therefore, from love. The things now brought forth are called the living soul and the animals. And since the individual is then beginning to act from both faith and love, he or she becomes a spiritual person, who is called an image [of God]. The spiritual life of such a person is delighted and nourished by things related to insights of faith and to deeds of compassion, which are called "food"; and the natural life is delighted and nourished by things related to the body and the senses. This results in conflicts until love gains control, and the person becomes heavenly. *Arcana Coelestia 12*

THE REVELATION OF OUR INNER THOUGHTS

Rev. Sarah Buteux

Luke 2:22-38

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too." There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Sermon

When Jesus was brought to the temple, his presence was a cause for much celebration. Not only did his proud parents have a healthy baby to thank God for, they were also greeted by two prophets, Simeon and Anna, both of whom confirmed all that the angels had said about this special child. By their words they declared that this baby was indeed the Messiah, the "salvation . . . of all people," "the light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of Israel." He was truly a blessing.

But, as is the case with many blessings, he was a mixed one. For Simeon, after singing his praise to God, continued his prophecy: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel," he said. "[He] will be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed." He then turned to Mary and said that a sword would pierce her own soul as well. You can almost feel the cloud passing briefly before the sun, and the chill his words would have caused for all who stood in the temple courts that day.

Jesus' presence would indeed bring healing, hope, and consolation to those willing to receive him, but he would also bring sorrow to and arouse anger in others. I am most struck by Simeon's words about Jesus revealing people's inner thoughts. His ability to do this would cause Jesus to be loved and revered by some and despised by others. You see, the revelation of our inner thoughts is rarely a comfortable process. Jesus made a great many people uncomfortable and angry because by his very presence he drew people into the light and revealed to them who they truly were and what they truly loved. He did not judge others, but something about the way he spoke and acted brought people's true motives to the surface. He gave them the opportunity to see themselves clearly, and people are rarely thankful for that kind of honesty. Some took their interactions with him as an opportunity for spiritual growth and did indeed rise up: Nicodemus, many of the disciples, Zaccheus, and Mary Magdalene, just to name a few. But there were also those who turned away, clinging to their illusions rather than yielding to the truth. The revelation of our inmost thoughts is a profoundly life-altering experience, and rarely an experience that we welcome with open arms.

I saw something of this in action a few weeks ago. Doug, our sexton here at the chapel, invited the Thursday night reading group to the Cambridge Zen Center to hear the teachings of an American Zen master. I really had no idea what to expect, but it sounded like an interesting variation on our usual routine, so I encouraged the group to go. We arrived in good time, shed our shoes at the door, and proceeded through the renovated brownstone buildings that have been joined together to house the Zen Center until we reached the outer hallway of the main meeting space. There we were given robes, which Doug taught us all how to tie on properly, and then we were escorted into the room where we sat zazen on cushions and meditated for a time. After a short

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instructional talk by a member of the community, the evening was turned over to the Zen master.

I had expected him to give a lecture or sermon or talk of some sort, but instead, he just sat there. And then, after a short time, people began to ask questions . . . all sorts of questions. Questions about life, government, civil responsibility, meditation, love, death, war, and enlightenment. The Zen master answered each individual in turn with a calm assurance. I was impressed with his wisdom. He was unflappable and honest in a way that was both disarming and welcoming.

As I listened I had the sense that Jesus must have been a teacher like this—as, I imagine, was Socrates. A genuine affection for everyone present suffused this man. He was not judgmental, but he was unflinchingly honest. I became aware that he was not one to send people away with easy answers. He was not there to make us feel comfortable with ourselves. In fact, his answers seemed to make people distinctly uncomfortable. And, perhaps because of this dynamic, one thing I noticed rather quickly was how reluctant those who asked a question were to hear his answer. They had thought long and hard about their questions, mulled them over, and often come up with answers of their own, so when the Zen master responded, some of them genuinely had trouble accepting his words. Rather than mull over the master's response, they would often simply rephrase the question and toss it back at him for another go.

The master was unflappable, patient, and uncomfortably frank. Afterwards I mentioned to Doug that the master seemed like a rock: unshakable, absolutely certain, impossible to offend, and opaque. He revealed nothing about his own inner struggles or desires as he spoke and seemed completely detached. But the people who questioned him . . . I have to say it was almost too much for me, because as they struggled to hear what the Zen master was saying, rephrasing their questions and trying again and again to understand, they revealed so much about themselves: their fears, their desires, their temptations. Some even became visibly angry. It was as if their innermost thoughts were laid bare before the master and the rest of us. I felt as though they were running up physically against this man with their questions, and as though their egos—or, as Swedenborg would phrase it, their proprium, that which was proper to them—splintered in the face of this man's calm repose and compassionate wisdom. He reflected their doubts and their fears as a mirror, and that mirror was often shattered by his answer.

People would either see the pieces and leave them there on the ground, thankful that the illusion had been broken, or gather them up again and glue their mirrors together and have another go at him. Many of them chose the latter option.

As I said before, that Zen master reminded me of Jesus. So many times during his ministry, Jesus was approached by people who questioned him but were unhappy with his answers. The rich young man, the Pharisees, Peter: so many people would rush up to Jesus seeking answers, or attempting to trap him, or simply trying to understand him better, and they would be overwhelmed by his quiet wisdom. Many were unable to hear and accept his truth in their hearts. His truth was often so hard to hear because it would reveal parts of themselves that people were uncomfortable with, parts they would rather have kept hidden. The rich young man went away saddened because Jesus' answer to him revealed that the young man loved the security of money more than anything else. The Pharisees would continually betray their own hunger for power at the expense of truth when they would spar with Jesus. They would attack him, hoping to prove that he was too proud, that he had overstepped his authority, or that he was out of line. But in each of these conversations he would reveal in his own quiet way that the evil they sought to find in him was an evil they had yet to confront in themselves.

And then there were the others. People like the disciple Peter—Peter, who was constantly stumbling, boasting, failing to live up to his best intentions, and loving Jesus in spite of it all. Peter was a rare soul, a person who could stare his mistakes full in the face, once he saw them, and love God enough to seek forgiveness and try again. With his words, Jesus often held up a mirror to Peter, and that mirror was repeatedly broken. But Peter left the pieces of his many mirrors on the ground and kept walking after Jesus.

I keep playing with this metaphor of the mirror and the idea of its being shattered because it truly was my first impression of the Zen master. I was surprised to see the verb used in Swedenborg's writings as well. But he does talk about good people whose false principles must be shattered before they can ascend into heaven. And this makes sense to me. Because it is not just a matter of shedding falsities, but breaking their hold on us. "Shattering" is a drastic, violent verb, but God allows these falsities to be shattered for our own good. This destruction allows what is good in us to rise freely to the surface. It is an act of love.

And much like the Zen master, I believe that Jesus loved each one of these people who came before him, even if they found it hard to love him back. I believe that Jesus loved them and forgave them and longed for their spiritual healing. It was all a matter of whether they could hear him and allow his truth to shape their lives. I guess the more I study his words, the more I realize that there was never a question of Jesus' love and forgiveness, nor will there ever be. The question lies in each individual's desire to accept love and forgiveness.

I am fully indebted to Doug for this sermon, because my next quote comes from a book he gave to me for Christmas. The book, by Stephen Mitchell, is entitled *The Gospel According to Jesus*. In the introduction Mitchell writes:

[With]in Jesus' sayings, it may seem as if God's forgiveness is dependent on ours. "Forgive us our [debts] as we forgive [our debtors]" . . . "If you don't judge you will not be judged; if you do not condemn, you will not be condemned; if you forgive you will be forgiven." But these ifs have only one side . . . Jesus does not mean that if you do condemn, God will condemn you; or that if you don't forgive, God will not forgive you. He is pointing to a spiritual fact: when we condemn, we create a world of condemnation for ourselves, and we attract the condemnation of others; when we cling to an offense, we are clinging to precisely what separates us from our own fulfillment. Letting go means not only releasing the person who has wronged us, but releasing ourselves . . . In these sayings of Jesus, God is a mirror reflecting back to us our own state of being. We receive exactly what we give. The more openhearted we are, the more we experience the whole universe as God's grace. Forgiveness is essentially openness of heart. It is an attitude, not an action. (p. 55)

But forgiveness, whether it is the forgiveness of God or the compassionate guidance of the Zen master or our own attempts to reconcile with each other, is, as David Steindl-Rast says, "forgiveness freely offered, not imposed" (*The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 71). And this is why Jesus made people so uncomfortable: because often we don't want to be forgiven, we want to go on just as we are. God will not love us the less for it, for God's love is unconditional, but we will experience less of that love because those parts of ourselves we would rather deny will cause us to turn away from it. Our true natures, for good or ill, are revealed in the face of heavenly love. Our propria are shattered in the presence of truth. In the end we cannot hide what we are because we are what we love. We see, reflected in Jesus, our inmost thoughts, fears, loves, angers, and hopes. Like that little town of

Bethlehem, "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in" us when we come into his presence. Jesus is a blessing, but a blessing that comes at some cost to that part of us we would rather hide.

Swedenborg, in *Divine Providence* 227, writes: "There is good and evil in everyone. The good is from God, but the evil is the person's own. Evil alone would squeeze all the life out of them: likewise good, if it were alone, would smother the person in a Divine stranglehold. So there is good and evil in everyone (that we might experience the freedom to choose what kind of people we will be)."

Everything hinges on which prevails—on whether the person is really hooked on evil and only outwardly concerned with the good, or vice versa. Either way, God sees to it that the distinction doesn't become too blurred, and after death good and evil are finally sorted. All that remains is what the person has actually taken to heart, despite worldly appearances.

Jesus, Zen masters, and even honest assessments of ourselves can help to reveal our inmost thoughts. If there is one message I would leave us all with today, it is this: Jesus made many people uncomfortable because he revealed their inmost thoughts, but we don't have to fear anything within ourselves. We don't need to be afraid. There is no question of God's love for us. We are loved, we are forgiven, we are welcomed in the eyes of God. We have only to love ourselves enough to be open and willing to look at ourselves honestly. There will be times when our inmost thoughts are revealed to be heavenly, and there will be times when they will be revealed to be hellish. This is what it is to be human. Rather than fear this truth or feel judged by it, let us accept it for what it is and realize that even the hells within us serve a use when they can be identified and turned away from. I think what made people so uncomfortable in the presence of Jesus was the very fact that he did not judge their inmost thoughts but allowed them to choose for themselves who they wanted to be. This freedom has caused, and will continue to cause, the falling and the rising of many, in Israel and beyond. But it is not a freedom we need fear. It is a freedom we can lay hold of and use as God intended, for our spiritual growth.

I would like to leave you with one last quote. It is from a book called *A Winter's Tale* by Mark Halpern. Within the book a wealthy old man is about to die, and he is settling his will between his two sons. He loves both of his sons, but he makes a curious decision. To the son who shows no sign of becoming a responsible individual, he leaves all of his wealth. To the son he

is most proud of, he leaves only a golden platter on which are inscribed four virtues, "honesty, courage, sacrifice, and patience." Allow me to read:

The light on Hardesty's face went from violet and blue to gold and silver. He felt its warmth, and saw again the inscriptions—four virtues (honesty, courage, sacrifice, and patience). Many times, his father had taken him to read them, insisting that they were the most important things he could have, and implying with a sharp, dismissive gesture of hand and arm that wealth, fame, and worldly possessions were worthless and demeaning. "Little men," he once said, "spend their days in pursuit of such things. I know from experience that at the moment of their deaths they see their lives shattered before them like glass. I've seen them die. They fall away as if they had been pushed, and the expressions on their faces are those of the most unbelieving surprise. Not so for the man who knows the virtues and lives by them. The world goes this way and that. Ideas are in fashion, or not, and those who should prevail are often defeated. But it doesn't matter. The virtues remain uncorrupted and uncorruptible

[sic]. They are rewards in themselves, the bulwarks with which we can protect our vision of beauty, and the strengths by which we may stand, unperturbed, in the storm that comes when seeking God."

Prayer

Dearest God, you have searched us and you have known us, and you love us. There is nothing within us we need hide from your light and your love. Help us to love ourselves as you love us. Help us to pare away all that would separate us from you. Help us not to be afraid to look at ourselves openly and honestly, but to love ourselves enough to seek after you in all things. Amen.

ODB Online Signup

The vast majority of *Our Daily Bread's* funding comes from the Swedenborgian Church. In these troubled economic times, we are all forced to make budget cuts and live within our means. We would love to send a paper version of ODB to everyone who would like it, but we are not able to do that. If you wish to receive the magazine in print, it is essential that you subscribe!

But please do not forget that you can download ODB on your computer and print it on your printer. The electronic delivery is more reliable than the post office, which delivers it when it fits into their schedule (the magazine is not sent First Class).

Sign Up Online!

Step One: Go to www.swedenborg.org

Step Two: Click on the signup icon for "Messenger and ODB" (you can sign up for just ODB if you prefer).

Step Three: Enter your email address.

Step Four: Select *Our Daily Bread* & fill in the required information.

The image is a composite of three screenshots from the Swedenborgian Church website, illustrating the online signup process. The top screenshot shows the church's homepage with a navigation menu and a callout box that says "Sign up to have our newsletters The Messenger and Our Daily Bread delivered to your email inbox." The middle screenshot shows the "Registration" form where the user enters their email address in a field labeled "Your email address:" and clicks a "Continue" button. The bottom screenshot shows the "Please Choose Mailing List(s)" section, which asks the user to select the types of emails they want to receive. Two options are listed: "The Messenger" and "Our Daily Bread", both of which have their checkboxes selected.

Thursday, December 15

Young men are compelled to grind, and boys stagger under loads of wood. The old men have left the city gate, the young men their music. The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning. The crown has fallen from our head; woe to us, for we have sinned! *Lamentations 5:13-16*

Evil can be taken away only gradually, and . . . the forgiveness of evil is not the same as its removal. . . . No evil that we are born with or that we ourselves adopt by our behavior is taken completely away from us. Evils are set aside so that they are no longer visible. . . . They are all still there, and when they are forgiven after we have repented, they are moved from the center to the sides. Since our evils are not taken completely away . . . it can happen that we once again get involved in evils we thought we had left behind.

Divine Providence 273

Friday, December 16

Because of this our hearts are sick, because of these things our eyes have grown dim: because of Mount Zion, which lies desolate; jackals prowl over it. But you, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations. *Lamentations 5: 17-19*

We are all immersed in many kinds of evil from birth. They are in our volition, and we love whatever is in our volition. . . . This love flows into our discernment and makes itself felt there as pleasure. It moves from there into our thoughts and into our conscious intentions. So if we were not allowed to think the way the love of our volition wants us to . . . that love would stay closed in and never come out where we could see it. . . . [But] if kept hidden, [such evils] hasten us to our end. On the other hand, when we are allowed to think about the evils of our life's love even to the point of wanting to act them out, they are healed by spiritual means the way a life-threatening illness is cured by physical means. *Divine Providence 281*

Saturday, December 17

Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days? Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old—unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure.

Lamentations 5:20-22

We therefore have freedom to think as we wish, in order that our life's love may come out of hiding into the light of our discernment; otherwise we would have no knowledge of our evil and could not abstain from it. . . . The Lord makes sure, however, that this does not happen. *Divine Providence 281*

Monday, December 12

Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us; look, and see our disgrace! Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to aliens. We have become orphans, fatherless; our mothers are like widows.

Lamentations 5:1-3

[T]he Lord ascribes goodness to everyone and evil to no one, and therefore . . . judges no one to hell but instead lifts us all toward heaven to the degree that we will follow along. *True Christianity 652*

Tuesday, December 13

We must pay for the water we drink; the wood we get must be bought. With a yoke on our necks we are hard driven; we are weary, we are given no rest. We have made a pact with Egypt and Assyria, to get enough bread. *Lamentations 5:4-6*

Evils cannot be set aside unless they come to light . . . [W]e need to look carefully not only at our actions but also at our thoughts, at what we would do if it were not for our fear of the laws and of ill repute. We need to look especially at which evils we see as permissible in our spirit and do not regard as sins, for eventually we do them. *Divine Providence 278a*

Wednesday, December 14

Our ancestors sinned; they are no more, and we bear their iniquities. Slaves rule over us; there is no one to deliver us from their hand. We get our bread at the peril of our lives, because of the sword in the wilderness. *Lamentations 5:7-9*

In order that we may be capable of this self-examination, we have been given discernment, a discernment separate from our volition, so that we can know, discern, and recognize what is good and what is evil. It is also so that we can see what the real nature of our volition is—that is, what we love and what we desire. . . . We see this the way we see our face in a mirror; and when we see and recognize what a sin is, then if we want to and ask the Lord for help, we can stop intending it, abstain from it, and later act against it. *Divine Providence 278a*

DEC 18 REFINER OF SILVER

Rev. Kevin K. Baxter

Malachi 3:1-6

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts. For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished.

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down

and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Sermon

He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.

The season of Advent is a time of intriguing contrasts. During Advent, we look forward to something very happy: the birth of our Lord! And yet something about the season is also a bit dark. You see, transformation is a double-edged sword, and that is what we are really talking about when it comes to Christmas. Christmas is a time of new birth and rededication, but to really focus on those things we must also realize what our old life is and what it is we are doing. We must think of both the meaning behind the Lord's birth and the conditions that existed when it occurred.

Malachi tells us that the one whom the Lord will send will be "as a refiner and purifier of silver," meaning one who seeks to rid us of impurity. Moreover, the text tells us that this refiner is going to go after a certain group of people, the Levites. The descendants of Levi are an interesting group: they are one of the twelve tribes of Israel, but unlike the others, they did not receive territory. Instead, they were given the care of the people of Israel. Their livelihood was based not in agriculture or mining, but in overseeing religious practice and caring for the sick.

But in both the prophets and the gospels, we hear that these people had become more devoted to worldly wealth and status than to God and their community. Prophets like Malachi were thus calling for change—not a great redistribution of wealth per se, but a purification of the priesthood. Our reading from Matthew goes one step farther by calling all those who believe to be purified and rededicated.

What John the Baptist was doing was not new, but it was different. The laws of Moses detail purification rituals involving baths, and bathing has, across the cultural board, long been used ritually as a sign for cleansing the soul. But John the Baptist added something: the idea that what the person was doing in the river at that moment was not the end of the process, for, he said, "one more powerful than I is

coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” John the Baptist altered the way in which God’s presence with the people was mediated. Normally a priest, who understood the law, checked to ensure that you had properly followed it so that you would be restored to participation in the covenant. In other words, purity meant following the covenant’s rules and laws.

John did not do what the other prophets had done, which was to say that the Levites would be reformed. After all, he was himself a Levite, and I think he knew what the track record was of that happening—not good, as of his day. Instead, he shifted the notion of purity from ritual purity to volitional purity through the descent of the Holy Spirit. He changed the source of a person’s purity from ritual practice to desire.

Neither Malachi nor John is talking about nonbelievers. They are talking about people who know about and are dedicated to their faith; for Malachi it is the Levites, and for John it is all those people who have gone out of their way to come to him. Both of them are talking about going deeper than the ritual purity of the covenant.

On this Sunday of Advent, which is generally understood as the Sunday of Peace, we do not celebrate the arrival of peace, but rather the promise of peace that comes through the birth and advent of our Lord. But, in reality, what do these readings for today mean to us? Many people use them as stories about how they are right and others are wrong. Some use them as stories proving that God can only come to those who are baptized. Others, meanwhile, look at them as historical proof that the Lord is the Christ, citing John the Baptist as the person that Malachi and Isaiah are referring to as preceding God’s new Messiah.

If we take the Bible to be the key to our life of faith, the story must deal more directly with us. We must ask the question, “Who are the ‘Levites’ about whom Malachi is talking?” In us, the priests represent the place where we meet God, the place in our hearts where we hold our affection for good and truth, which are the essentials of faith. We must then ask ourselves, “What does it mean to refine goodness and truth?”

I find it ironic that our tradition contains an extensive and elaborate corpus of theological writings based in Enlightenment philosophy, and yet Swedenborg’s final statement about good and truth is that they are simple. We can sit around discussing this and that theologically for hours and hours, but in the end, if you need to spend time reasoning on it

or explaining it, it is impure—not necessarily wrong, mind you, but impure.

Our lives get this way sometimes, don’t they? Our priorities and responsibilities cross. Our energies move in a different direction than what we feel is right. But our love for goodness and truth, our love for the Lord, has the power to clarify all of this and bring peace to our lives. The truth is that we cannot create anything out of nothing, for this would make us God. What we can do is build and construct things out of what the Lord has given us.

The Bible is full of journey stories. Adam and Eve, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and even Jesus have lives full of journeys, from birth to death, and none of them are easy.

Each of us has a journey to make, and this journey takes commitment. We have been called to bring love into this world in our own special ways. You may be pointing in the right direction on your journey, but what bit of complexity is holding you back? What are the impurities stopping you from bringing your love into this world?

Christmas is a time for new birth. It is a time when we focus on showing love and joy. It is also the harbinger of the new year, a time to rededicate ourselves to what really matters. With a little discipline and work, we can bring about a new spirit and renew our lives, thanks to the love of the Lord and the peace that comes with it.

Meditation

For they say that God and the human person are paradigms of one another, that as much as God is humanized through love for humankind, so much is the human person able to be deified through love.

For humanity clearly has the power of naturally uniting the divisions of the cosmos; through that capacity it can come to be the way of fulfillment of what is divided and be openly instituted in itself as the great mystery of the divine purpose . . .

For this reason the human person was introduced last among beings, as a kind of natural bond mediating between the extremities, and leading into union in itself those things that are naturally set apart from one another by a great interval.

- Maximus the Confessor

Daily Meditations

Monday, December 19

Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.
I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord; I have no good
apart from you." *Psalms 16:1&2*

The Lord is constantly leading us away from the evils that we assimilate and attract by associating with these spirits, leading us if not by the inner restraints of conscience (which we do not accept if we deny the Divine), then by the outer restraints already listed, the fears of the laws and their penalties, of the loss of money and the forfeiture of rank and reputation.
Heaven and Hell (Dole) n. 577.4

Tuesday, December 20

As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight.
Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips.
Psalms 16:3&4

We are born with evils of every kind from our parents. These evils reside in our earthly self, which left to itself is directly opposed to our spiritual self. Nevertheless, we are born for heaven.

We cannot come into heaven, then, unless we become spiritual, and that happens through regeneration alone. It follows inevitably from this that our earthly self and its desires have to be tamed, brought under control, and turned upside down. Otherwise we cannot take a single step in the direction of heaven; we slip instead farther and farther down into hell.

True Christian Religion 574

Wednesday, December 21

The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage. *Psalms 16:5&6*

For the Lord draws after Him the man who from freedom wills to follow; but He can draw no one who does not will to follow Him. For the Lord so operates with man that man may follow Him as if of himself; thus does the Lord flow into man's freedom; and this He does for the sake of the reception and implantation of truth and good with man and consequent reformation and regeneration. *Apocalypse Explained 864*

Thursday, December 22

I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.
I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. *Psalms 16:7&8*

Everyone receives enlightenment and instruction from the Word according to his affection for truth and degree of desire for it, and according to his ability to receive it. The internal man of those who receive enlightenment dwells in the light of heaven, for the light of heaven is what enlightens a person in the truths and forms of the good of faith. *Arcana Coelestia 9382.2*

Friday, December 23

Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure.
For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. *Psalms 16:9&10*

The first essential, God's loving others outside himself, is recognizable in God's love for the entire human race. And as those who love the purpose also love the means, God also loves all the other things he created, because they are the means.

All people and all things in the universe are outside God, in that they are finite and God is infinite. God's love goes out and extends not only to good people and good things but also to evil people and evil things. It goes not only to the people and things that are in heaven but also to those that are in hell, not only to Michael and Gabriel but also to the Devil and Satan, for God is the same everywhere from eternity to eternity.

True Christian Religion 43.2

Saturday, December 24

You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore. *Psalms 16:11*

This joy is contained in that love and in that faith; and the man who has heaven in himself, comes into that joy after death; meanwhile it lies hidden in his Internal. In the heavens there is a sharing of all goods; the peace, the intelligence, the wisdom, and the happiness of all are communicated there to each; yet to every one according to his reception of love and faith from the Lord. *True Christian Religion 236*

THE REALITY OF CHRISTMAS

Rev. Edwin G. Capon

difficult for scientifically oriented people to believe? Who among us has seen an angel? Whom do we know that has followed a moving star?

25

 DEC

John 1:1-25

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Sermon

What a wonderful time the Christmas season can be! The beautiful Christmas carols. The glory of Handel's *Messiah*. Moving pictures with tender scenes. Colorful displays of Christmas lights. For most of us it is one of the best times of the year, though we should not forget that for some—the lonely, the bereaved—it can be one of the most difficult. But I do have to wonder sometimes how deeply and how meaningfully we experience Christmas, the holy day we have set aside to remember and celebrate the birth of the one we call Emanuel, God-with-us. Do the central truths of the most astounding event in all history get proper attention? Do we really take the Christmas story seriously? Is it accurate and factual in every detail? Or do we have merely a collection of charming tales

Time was when no Christian questioned any statement in Scripture. Its teachings may not have controlled their lives in any significant way, but few would have doubted the inerrancy of the Word of God. But those were the days when most men believed the world was flat, burned and hanged witches, and attributed everything that happened to the direct, intentional will of God. With the rise of rationalism and the growth of modern science, this situation changed. So much so was this true that Copernicus' teaching that the earth and the other planets revolve around the sun produced what the German historian of religion Ernst Benz called "the Copernican shock." Then in the last century came what we may well call "the Darwinian shock." Faith in the complete accuracy of the Bible suffered considerably both at the hands of human reason and from some of the results of the scientific endeavor. But must our basic faith suffer?

I'm sure we have all heard or read something of the efforts of some Christians and some Christian groups to obtain legislation requiring the teaching of creationism in our public schools as a plausible alternative to what most modern science teaches about the age and manner of development of our present world. Clearly it is an effort on their part to protect the reliability of the Word of God, the revelation upon which they feel their salvation depends. Even though the Biblical creation stories were written in primitive times, these individuals believe that they must be true because God was the author. I wonder if it has ever occurred to them that our modern understanding of creation would have made no sense to whoever wrote down the Genesis creation stories. Can they not see that God must speak to his children in terms they can understand at a particular time in human development?

Emanuel Swedenborg, who lived and wrote after Copernicus but earlier than Darwin, was as firmly convinced as a man could be that in Scripture we have the very word of God. Yet he did not feel that the validity of the Word depended upon either scientific or historic accuracy. Without making a big deal out of it, he mentions in his writings that the first eleven chapters of Genesis containing the creation and flood stories are made-up history, which—as his own books show—in no way prevents them from being vehicles and vessels of revelation. He might have called them "myths," but he didn't. However, if he had, I think

he would have appreciated my favorite description of myth: "A myth is a lie that tells the truth." Recall the power with which Jesus' parables project their message, though we have no way of knowing whether each represents an actual happening. To coin a phrase (and a word)—it does not take factuality to communicate actuality.

In the next few weeks the songs we sing and the stories we read will be about messages from angels, a virgin mother, gentle shepherds, a guiding star, wise men from the East, and a stable. There will be colorful pictures, too. And at the center will be a tiny baby, all innocent and new. But what is the message? What was so important to create such a fuss?

For the Christian Church, for Christian people everywhere, the Advent and the Christmas stories are the wrappings enclosing the greatest Christmas gift any human being could ask for: the gift of God Himself to a troubled world. They tell of divine intervention in a world where men were destroying themselves for want of the inspiration and power to do otherwise. Does it really matter whether the Gospel writers remembered all the details exactly a generation or more after the actual events? It was their continuing experience of Jesus that assured them that a marvelous power for good had been let loose in the world by him of whom they wrote. The greatest testimony to Christ is not the stories of his birth or even the accounts of the miracles he worked; it is the tally of changed lives, of men and women made new by his presence. It is Albert Schweitzer and St. Francis of Assisi and Martin Luther King, Jr. It is the faithfulness unto death of those who suffered martyrdom rather than deny him who made them new creatures. It is the dedicated lives of millions who have been honest and hardworking and considerate of others because of what Christ has done for them.

It has often been remarked that it would be nice if the Christmas spirit could be maintained all year round. Why should we be closer to other people at one time of year than we are the rest? Why should we show a consideration for others for a few short weeks that we deny to them the rest? Is it perhaps because we do not look often enough beyond the charming stories of Christmas to the gift it brings to all who are ready and willing to receive? As Dr. Joy Brown pointed out on her talk show one night, enjoying Christmas does not require a religious outlook or commitment. But it does, I think, require a religious perspective and genuine dedication in order for the spirit of Christmas to last. The setting for Christmas—a stable, an unimportant country

town, a remote province of the Roman Empire—may not remind us of the cosmic consequences of this life through which God has come and spoken to us—not if we dwell only on the outward details. We might as well say with Jesus' fellow townsmen, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joses, and of Judah, and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" The true dimensions of the Christmas story are best expressed in a passage that says nothing about angels or shepherds or a manger: one might call it the deeper story of Christmas. It is the opening verses of John's Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. . . . The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God. (John 1:1-5, 9-12)

Meditations and Prayers

We must dare to add this as being no less true: that the Source of all things Himself, in His wonderful and good love for all this, through the excess of His loving goodness, is carried outside Himself, in His providential care for all that is, so enchanted is He in goodness and love and longing. Removed from His position above all and beyond all, He descends to be in all according to an ecstatic and transcendent power which is yet inseparable from Himself.

- *Dionysius the Areopagite (early sixth century)*

Fill our hearts, O God, with such love towards you that nothing may seem too hard for us to do or to endure in obedience to your will. Grant that, loving you, we may become daily more like you and finally obtain the crown of everlasting life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

- *Bishop Brooke Foss Westcott (1825-1901)*

Lord Jesus, I give you my hands to do your work; I give you my feet to walk in your way; I give you my tongue to speak your word; and I give you my heart, that through me you may love every human soul, today and always.

- *Bishop Lancelot Andrewes (1555-1626)*

Monday, December 26

I will command, and shake the house of Israel among all the nations as one shakes with a sieve, but no pebble shall fall to the ground. All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword, who say, "Evil shall not overtake or meet us." *Amos 9:9-10*

God in his essence is divine love, and divine love is like the purest fire; and as love viewed in itself seeks no other end than to become one with him whom it loves, so the divine love seeks no other end than to unite itself to man and man to itself, even until it is in him and he in it. *True Christianity 838*

Tuesday, December 27

On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; *Amos 9:11*

And since the divine love is like the purest fire, it is evident that God, being such a fire, could not in the least degree be in man and cause man to be in him, for he would thus reduce the entire man to a most subtle vapor. But inasmuch as God from his very essence burned with a love to unite himself with man, to do this he must needs veil himself with a body adapted to reception and conjunction. For this reason he came down and took on a human in accordance with the order established by him from the creation of the world. *True Christianity 838*

Wednesday, December 28

in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name, says the Lord who does this. *Amos 9:12*

There are three things that follow in order—accommodation, application, and union. Accommodation must happen before there can be application and application together with accommodation before there can be union; and the accommodation on God's part was that he became human. *True Christianity 370.3*

Thursday, December 29

The time is surely coming, says the Lord, when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. *Amos 9:13*

The last level (i.e., the lowest and outermost level) embraces, contains, and is the foundation for the earlier levels...the vertical levels are in their fullness and power in the last level.

Divine Love & Wisdom 209 & 217

Friday, December 30

I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. *Amos 9:14*

Anyone who is acquainted with the more internal truths of the Word...conceives of [the Lord] interceding [with God the Father] not as a son does on earth with his king and father, but as the Lord of all things with Himself, and as God by Himself; for the Father and He are not two but one, as He Himself teaches.

Arcana Coelestia 8705

Saturday, December 31

I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land that I have given them, says the Lord your God. *Amos 9:15*

People cannot think about the Divine in itself except by setting up some concept of a divine person. It is even less possible to be united to the Divine in itself by love without some such concept... People who think about God from themselves or from a purely physical perspective all think about him without boundaries—that is, without any defined concept; while people who do not think about God from themselves or from the flesh but from the spirit think about him with boundaries... Intellectuals in heaven have a concept of the Divine in a human; so the Lord [Jesus Christ] serves as their mediator and is, therefore, a light for their minds. *Arcana Coelestia 8705:3-5*

Our Daily Bread is a ministry of the General Convention of the Church of the New Jerusalem

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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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.

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