

MARCH/APRIL, 2012

SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

OUR DAILY BREAD



Living from Love

Uniting Our Will and Understanding for a Better Life

Prayer

Let me walk in the way you love,
O God.
Let me love you for yourself.
Let me love you in all things.
Let me taste
the sweetness of your love
and let it work its beauty in me,
until I love with that divine love
with which you love me;
through Christ our Lord.

- Gertrude More
(1606-1633)

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Dear Readers,

It's hip to be connected with the divine; we hear frequently these days about "living a spiritual life" or "adopting spiritual practices." But how much time do we spend asking a question that probes the heart of this cultural trend: "What does it actually mean to be 'spiritual'?"

The ready answer usually invokes the concept of being one with the infinite, an idea that is very real in its deepest sense. But the truth is, our desires can lead us astray, creating a feeling of unity with God that may be more wishful thinking than actual communion. Ultimately, "living spiritually" means uniting love and wisdom in both our will and our understanding and then acting on the power of their marriage. In other words, it means living from God's love. That's no small task!

This is not to say that striving for a robust, vibrant spirituality is silly or pointless or unattainable. It is, however, really hard work, since God's dreams for us rarely involve the easiest or most direct routes.

Jesus knew just how hard that work was; he was God become man, and so his journey to unite divinely wise love with the desires of human existence was correspondingly arduous. The old spiritual says, "Jesus walked that lonesome valley,/He had to walk it by himself." But because the Lord loved us enough to become human, to make the journey with and for us, we do not have to walk that valley alone. This is the promise of Easter.

Many blessings,
Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

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Genesis 4:1-16

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have produced a man with the help of the Lord." Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground.

In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.

The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."

Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me." Then the Lord said to him, "Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him.

Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them."

Sermon

In the past two weeks, I have received three visits from those in the larger community wishing to address social concerns. There was a very nice woman that wanted to establish a coalition of people to address domestic-violence issues in our community. That same day I had a meeting with a man from the cathedral down the street who wanted local congregations to band together to educate the public about issues related to ethnic and religious diversity. There is also an effort to form an organization, involving volunteers from the churches, to help people acquire the skills necessary to find jobs and become less dependent on welfare programs. These are all good and worthy programs. They address

social issues that need to be addressed. Even so, part of me has been wondering, do we really need these programs?

I know this sounds a bit callous, so let me explain. I have been exposed to a great many social programs. We all have. Anyone who receives mail knows that there are a lot of programs in our community hoping for our participation or our generous donation. From my vantage point as a minister, I have seen many programs doing their best to get off the ground. Someone perceives a social need and designs a new program to address it, then goes on the road, sometimes even door to door, looking for those willing to support this new initiative. I have seen quite a few programs fail, even after they have their charters and bylaws written and filed in the appropriate municipal office and even after they have funding, because there's no one to do the work that needs to be done. The program looks great on paper, but too few actually take over from there and run with it. So I wonder if we need yet another program, when what we really need to get the job done are those who will do the work and see it through as long as the need exists.

Establishing a new program is often the first response to community need, and it's not difficult to understand the reason why. In general, we are a head-centered species. Our brain actually thinks that it's in charge. Swedenborg maintained that the story of Cain slaying Abel was really the story of how our minds—our intellectual faculties—are considered more important than our hearts—our affections—in our lifelong quest for truth. Cain is a tiller of the ground, corresponding to the realm of the mind in which ideas are planted and nurtured. Abel is a shepherd, a caregiver to the beasts of the field, which correspond to our feelings and emotions. Cain is the knowledge of what is good, and Abel is the desire to live according to it. In the story, Cain is confused and disturbed that Abel's offering is accepted by the Lord while his is not. We all need to know what is good, but that doesn't do us any good if we aren't also willing to live by it. So Cain responds in the only way he knows how. He rationalizes that with Abel out of the way, God will begin to favor his sacrifices of the fruits of the earth. He is cursed for killing his brother, since thinking without compassion doesn't lead to spiritual growth.

When we perceive a social need, our mind jumps right in there and responds in the only way it knows how. Our minds want to make certain that needs

get addressed in a rational manner and constructs a system with a solid infrastructure that not only establishes clearly defined goals and objectives but also meets the parameters of the written mission in a timely fashion. The heart, in contrast, grabs a can of soup and a blanket and lays it before the altar of God. Programs are good, but they are nothing if our hearts—our desire to be of service—are not involved in the process.

The desire to be of service is essential to meeting any social need, whether it's preventing domestic violence; promoting diversity awareness; reducing unemployment; ending poverty, illiteracy, or hunger; teaching effective parenting; reducing environmental pollution; or anything else we can name. These needs will continue *ad infinitum* as long as we do not act from a desire to serve.

This is really the foundation of Swedenborg's doctrine of uses. God has given each and every one of us, including and especially *you*, gifts and talents. There are some things that you do especially well, and they are related to the things that you love most. We are each called upon to contribute to our communities by invoking our loves, expressing our gifts, and doing useful things. If we do not practice our usefulness, our thoughts and feelings never get expressed in meaningful ways. They remain unproductive, and in fact can become stagnant and destructive if we do not allow them to flow as they should. When we act from our usefulness, we not only benefit our communities but also receive benefits. We feel our wisdom enhanced and our desire to be of service growing even stronger.

I believe that this was one of the central messages Jesus sought to teach his disciples when he washed their feet before the Passover. He knew that his students regarded him as supremely important to the world and that they therefore probably regarded themselves rather highly. They were part of the elite, and perhaps because of this fact not one of them was willing to do the servant's task of washing the dust from the other guests' feet as they entered the household. Jesus saw that there was work to be done and was not too proud to do it himself. "Whoever would be a leader among you," says the Lord, "must be willing to be a servant to all." Jesus invoked his love for his students, expressed a gift for sensing the needs of others, and became useful within that room.

*When we
act from our
usefulness, we
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There is a term that is growing more popular in use: "servant leadership." It is a model for leadership that actively incorporates humility. It is extremely easy for humans in positions of leadership to act like kings and queens, believing they have the power to make or break things. But if we are to assume a position of leadership we must begin, if we want to be effective, with an attitude of humility. We must be willing to put aside our personal agendas in favor of fulfilling the real needs of those we lead. Servant leadership not only insists that we put the needs of others ahead of our own but also discourages us from assuming that we know what their needs are without actually having to ask. That was Jesus' gift because he was in community with the divine. How many leaders do you know of who have attained that state in which they no longer have to ask what our needs are?

There are a lot of needs out there and a lot of opportunities for each of us to be of service. There are a lot of programs around us, each of them beginning with a sincere desire to fulfill a need. If you encounter a program that touches one of your loves, don't let it just sit there on paper. Support it. Be of service. Make your contribution. Being useful is how we grow.

SWEDENBORG COLLOQUIUM II SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

March 31, 2012

Philmont Country Club, Huntingdon Valley, PA

TO REGISTER, or for more information, e-mail swedenborgcoll@gmail.com * or call 215-364-3460

REV. SUSANNAH CURRIE - Introduction and Moderator

DRS. ROBIN AND STEPHEN LARSEN -- Partnership as Spiritual Practice

SANDRA AMRITA MCLANAHAN, MD -- Health and Spirituality Through Yoga

REV. DAVID MILLAR -- Logopraxis: Engaging with Sacred Texts as the Basis for a Spiritual Practice

PETER RHODES - God Doesn't Practice

REV. FRANK ROSE -- The Evolution of My Spiritual Practices

REV. DR. JONATHAN S. ROSE -- Outer and Inner Spiritual Practice

REV. JANE SIEBERT -- Why Practice? "Seven Sacred Pauses - Living Mindfully Through the Hours of the Day" (Moderator)

REV. DR. RAY SILVERMAN -- Joyous, and Free from Ego Concerns: The Art Of Being Adequate

DEAN SLUYTER - Just Being: The Way of Natural Meditation

General Information:

REGISTRATION IS REQUIRED but ADMISSION IS FREE. Coffee, tea, and water will be available all day without charge.

SCHEDULE: Check-in and coffee at 8:00 a.m. (valet parking available). Program begins promptly at 8:30. One-hour buffet lunch begins about 12:30 p.m. Meet the Speakers begins at 5:15 p.m. and ends 6:30 p.m.

TO RESERVE LUNCH: \$17.64; includes tax and gratuities. Please arrange pre-payment by contacting us. Those who prefer to bring their own lunch are welcome to do so.

The program will conclude with a MEET-THE-SPEAKERS and BOOK-SIGNING SESSION. Selected publications authored by these speakers will be available for purchase.

* (Some problems with our Gmail account have been reported - please phone if you do not receive confirmation within a few days.)

Daily Meditations

Monday, March 5

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

The term "tent" is employed in the Word to represent the celestial and holy things of love, [as] in ancient times they performed the holy rites of worship in their tents. But when they began to profane the tents by profane kinds of worship, the tabernacle was built, and afterwards the temple, and therefore tents represented all that was subsequently denoted first by the tabernacle, and afterwards by the temple.

Arcana Coelestia n. 414.3

Tuesday, March 6

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

They are called "saints" who live according to the truths of the Word; not that they are holy, but the truths in them are holy, and they are holy when they are in them from the Lord; and the Lord is in them when the truths of His Word are in them.

Apocalypse Revealed n. 586.3

Wednesday, March 7

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

Man possesses a natural mind and a spiritual mind. The natural mind is below, and the spiritual mind above. The natural mind is the mind of man's world, and the spiritual mind is the mind of his heaven. The natural mind may be called the animal mind, and the spiritual mind the human mind. Man is discriminated from the animal by possessing a spiritual mind. By means of this mind he can be in heaven while still in the world; and it is by means of this mind also that man lives after death. *Doctrine of Life n. 86*

Thursday, March 8

In whose eyes the wicked are despised,
but who honor those who fear the Lord;
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;
Psalm 15:4

So long as a man does not shun evils as sins, the concupiscences of evils block up the interiors of the natural mind on the part of the will, being like a thick veil there, and like a black cloud beneath the spiritual mind, and they prevent its being opened. But in very deed the moment a man shuns evils as sins, the Lord inflows from heaven, takes away the veil, dispels the cloud, opens the spiritual mind, and so introduces the man into heaven. *Doctrine of Life n. 86.4*

Friday, March 9

who do not lend money at interest,
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.
Those who do these things shall never be moved.
Psalm 15:5

As it is with good, so also it is with truth. Those who do truth for the sake of truth, do it also for the sake of the Lord, because they do it from the Lord. To do truth for the sake of truth, is to do good; for truth becomes good when it passes from the understanding into the will, and from the will goes forth into act.

Arcana Coelestia (Potts) n. 9210

Saturday, March 10

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Matthew 22:36-40

That the doctrine of love towards the neighbor, or charity, is of wide extent may appear from the fact, that it reaches to all the things which man thinks and wills, consequently to all which he speaks and does, even to the most minute particulars; and also from the fact that charity does not exist alike with two different persons, and that no two persons are alike the neighbor.

Heavenly Doctrine n. 107

MAR 11 THE LIFE CALLED CHARITY

Rev. Dr. George F. Dole

Mark 10:17-22

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Sermon

The third essential of the church is "the life called charity." It is worth noting at the outset that nothing is said of "acknowledgment" as in the first two essentials—the acknowledgement of the Divine of the Lord and the acknowledgement of the holiness of the Word. For the third requirement is not the conviction that the life of charity is worthwhile; it is that life itself. It is not enough to convince ourselves that we ought to refrain from doing this and do that instead; we must actually refrain and actually do.

The connection between this third essential and the first two is very simple. The life called charity is the embodiment, actualization, and even the proof of our inner religious convictions. Without it, all our supposed faith in the Lord and all our knowledge of and reverence for His Word are illusions. They are ideas without substance, for we have never encountered the "stuff" they are made of, the raw material of daily consecration.

As we have on previous Sundays, let us now look at the terms of the essential before us. We have noted the absence of the term "acknowledgment," which gives added stress to the word "life." In this context, "life" means all our conscious acts. Sometimes we distinguish between thoughts, words, and deeds. These distinctions are basically valid, but we must not conclude from them that "life" refers primarily to deeds, that words alone are scarcely anything and that thoughts are even less.

We grant that both thoughts and words ought to issue in deeds as occasion arises. But the fact remains that both thoughts and words are often acts in and of themselves. There are times when we ought to stop and think, to face facts about ourselves, and when we avoid this confrontation by becoming suddenly busy "doing things." There are times when our deeds are apparently good but are done with words that leave wounds. There are many people who drive themselves overtime with "I've got to get this done" because as long as this feeling of compulsion, of no alternative, is there, they can avoid the question, "Is it all worthwhile?"

Neither thought nor word nor deed can be omitted from "life." Each has its place, and each may be called for at just that time when we are most unwilling to respond. Each may be difficult, and each rewarding.

A second aspect of life we may overlook is that communication is a primary value of deeds as well as of words. This may sound strange at first, but we can see it illustrated time after time. What we have actually done often has less effect than what people believe we have done. The coherence of the fabric of society, the hope for a better world, rests in the growth of understanding and love. We may perform our daily tasks to the letter; if this conveys to our neighbors that we think ourselves better than they, then every outward good we do will widen the gulf between us and them.

We are not finally responsible for what others choose to think of us. But we are obliged to try to convey the truth to them, to be alert to misunderstandings, and to be more desirous of correcting them than of blaming others for misunderstanding. What we say and what we do not say, what we do and what we do not do—these are the tools with which we tell others what is of value to us. These are the tools with which we tell others whether they are of value to us, whether we value them. There is no virtue in doing good "for spite."

If, then, we take life in this broad sense, including our activity and our inactivity, our speech and our silence, and our thoughts, what is meant by "the life of charity"? Swedenborg defines charity at one point as "acting with prudence to the end that good may result."

Now, the Lord alone is good, and He alone can give good. Moreover, He can give good only as an individual is both willing and prepared to receive it. We cannot take love, the essence of good, from our

own hearts and place it in the hearts of others where it has not been before.

But the form of love, and its receptacle in us, is truth. Through truth we can at times awaken love, and through obedience to truth we prepare ourselves for the Lord's gift of love. Our acts are most likely to result in good if they are efforts to awaken in others an understanding of truth that in turn awakens love.

"Truth," of course, is a word with many meanings. In order to bring the matter down to earth, let us take a commonplace example. Here we have two members of one church. One believes that the church should start a Young Couples Club, primarily social, while the other is opposed to the idea. This is brought up at a meeting, each has his say, and no decision is reached. After the meeting, circumstances are such that the two are together, with no alternative but to talk to each other.

What are some of the truths that might be conveyed? We can list a few only, for there would be thousands. To begin with, both want this to be the Lord's church and to be alive. This may need to be expressed. Neither has changed his mind. Each wants to persuade the other. Neither has the right to condemn the other. Neither totally understands the other. The Lord's will probably does not coincide precisely with the will of either. Facts and figures exist about the success and failure of similar groups in other churches. This topic is only a fragment of the interests of each, and each is interested in the other's family, job, and general welfare. Each is anxious not to be misunderstood. One is wearing a nice tie. The weather has been pleasant lately. The pennant race has been quite something. Both would like to avoid the whole issue of a Young Couples' Club and get home.

Actually, all of these things may be true, and virtually anything said or avoided will convey more than one such truth. To bring up baseball may say "Let's forget it" or "It's no use arguing with you" or "Let's be friends." To say "This is the Lord's church" may convey "I'm right and you're wrong" or "Let's try to understand the good each of us intends" or even "This is the Lord's church."

Charity here must rest in the widest possible awareness of such truths, kept in proportion to each other. It requires expression of such truths as will be conducive to genuine mutual understanding on as deep a level as possible, and the awakening of genuine affection. It requires the implicit denial of such falsities as "My opinion is intrinsically worth

more than yours" and "Let's keep the Lord out of this."

For with all our words and deeds, we make implicit statements concerning the first two essentials. Our acknowledgement or disbelief, our ignorance of them, our belief that they are practical or irrelevant, all come out in our lives. And the life of charity is that life which, by means of all the lesser truths it tells, affirms with growing clarity the Divine of the Lord and the holiness of the Word. Amen.

Meditations and Prayers

O God of grace and freedom,
increase our desire for truth,
that we may live honestly with brother and sister.
Increase our desire for what is right,
that we may live justly with our neighbors.
Increase your compassion in us,
that we may love even our enemies for your sake.

- Julie M. Hulme

Almighty God, in your mercy forgive us our divisions. Forgive us the pride, prejudice, and self-centeredness that lie at the root of all separation and bitterness. Show us the things we have in common, help us to understand each other and find reconciliation in and through, and for the love of, Jesus Christ our Lord.

- Frank Topping

The most important thing in my life
is that I chose to follow Jesus.
No one makes me.
I chose to.
I have chosen to follow him
because he loves me
and love makes all the difference.

- Ann Kiemel

Daily Meditations

Monday, March 12

Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in their hearts; there is no fear of God before their eyes. For they flatter themselves in their own eyes that their iniquity cannot be found out and hated.

Psalm 36:1&2

Hypocritical faith is no faith at all. We become hypocrites when we think about ourselves a great deal and give precedence to ourselves rather than others. By doing this we focus the thoughts and feelings of our mind on our body and invest them there; we unite our thoughts and feelings to our physical senses. This turns us into earthly, sense-oriented, and physical people. *True Christian Religion n. 381*

Tuesday, March 13

The words of their mouths are mischief and deceit; they have ceased to act wisely and do good. They plot mischief while on their beds; they are set on a way that is not good; they do not reject evil.

Psalm 36:3&4

Of all earthly people, hypocrites are the lowest and most earthly. They are sense-oriented; their mind is tightly bound to their physical senses. They have no love for seeing anything except what their senses take in; and because the senses are in the material world, the senses force the mind to think about everything, including all aspects of faith, from the point of view of the material world. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, March 14

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O Lord. *Psalm 36:5&6*

The Lord effects these things with those who do good and believe the truth, that is, those who have the faith of charity. *True Christian Religion n. 143*

Thursday, March 15

How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

Psalm 36:7&8

In the Word those that have an abundance of knowledges of good and truth, thus who are within the church where the Word is, are meant in the spiritual sense by the "rich;" while those who lack these knowledges, and yet desire them, thus who are outside of the church and where there is no Word, are meant by the "poor." *Heaven and Hell n. 365*

Friday, March 16

For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.

O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your salvation to the upright of heart!

Psalm 36:9-10

Eternal life and salvation are not attainable without conjunction with the Lord, because He is eternal life and salvation. There are many, indeed, who confess the Lord, and who do good to the neighbor; but unless they act from love towards the neighbor and from faith in the Lord, they are not regenerate.

True Christian Religion n. 726

Saturday, March 17

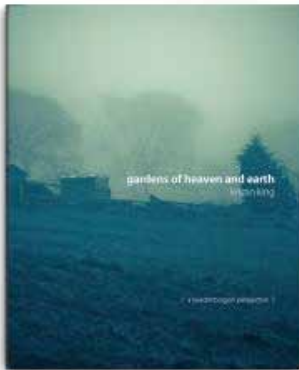
Do not let the foot of the arrogant tread on me, or the hand of the wicked drive me away.

There the evildoers lie prostrate; they are thrust down, unable to rise. *Psalm 36:11&12*

For they do good to the neighbor only for reasons that regard the world and themselves, and not the neighbor as the neighbor. Their works are merely natural and inwardly destitute of anything spiritual, because they confess the Lord with the mouth and lips only, while their heart is far away.

True Christian Religion n. 726

New Release from the Swedenborg Society (London) (<http://www.swedenborg.org.uk/>)



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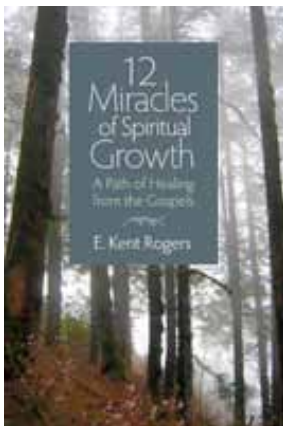
Gardens of Heaven and Earth
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Synopsis

Bringing a fresh perspective to the roles gardens have played in delighting and sustaining the human condition through the ages, Kristin King's lyrical study of gardens in the life and writings of Swedenborg is an examination of the nature of experience, the limitations of language, and the meanings behind our desires and efforts to maintain, manipulate and ornament our surrounding outdoors environments.

This book-length essay explores the various meanings gardens had for Swedenborg and what meanings they might hold in turn for readers of Swedenborg.

New Release From the Swedenborg Foundation (www.swedenborg.com)



12 Miracles of Spiritual Growth
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Author: E. Kent Rogers
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Description:

In this practical guide to healing our inner selves, Rogers takes the reader on a journey through twelve of Jesus's miracles from the Gospels, examining the lessons that each can teach us. From the story of the Canaanite's daughter (healing from feelings of unworthiness) through the miracle of the resurrection of Lazarus (finding spiritual rebirth), Jesus's miracles trace a path of spiritual growth that is as powerful today as it was during his lifetime.

Written as a guide for group sharing, this book can also be used for personal study. Each chapter concludes with a guided meditation, a summary of the lessons taught by the miracle being discussed, suggested exercises, and questions for discussion or reflection. While the book grew from the author's experience as a Swedenborgian, it can easily be used by seekers from any faith tradition.

- ˘Nondenominational exploration of Bible teachings
- ˘Provides practical tools for spiritual growth
- ˘Personal narrative gives a model for using the exercises

MAR **18** LIVING FROM LOVE
Rev. Dr. David J. Fekete

Isaiah 61:1-4, 6-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. but you shall be called priests of the Lord, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory. Because their shame was double, and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs. For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Psalm 126

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."
The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Sermon

Today we consider the third of Swedenborg's "three R's." The three "R's" are repentance, reformation, and regeneration. This Sunday we look at regeneration. Swedenborg's terms can be a little confusing because he uses the same word for two ideas. Regeneration in a general sense means the whole process of rebirth, which takes a lifetime and even continues into the next life. But regeneration in a specific sense means the third of the three "R's." In its specific sense, as the third of the three "R's," regeneration means a final state that we achieve in our spiritual growth. It is when our struggles are over. It is when we act from love freely. It is a time when temptation ends and we are at peace. We live eternally in heaven's joys, no longer burdened with vexations from the world and our lower selves. When we reach the stage called regeneration, then God is fully born in our hearts. The coming of the Lord is complete.

Our Psalm reading captures the happiness we know when we are fully regenerated. It is a time when, as the Psalm says, "Our mouths [a]re filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy." We fully acknowledge that God has worked salvation in us, and we say, "The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy."

The stage of regeneration is also captured in our reading from Isaiah. The prophet speaks for us all when he says,

I delight greatly in the Lord,
my soul rejoices in my God.
For He has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels
(Isaiah 61:10).

When we have reached the stage of regeneration, we have been saved. So we are clothed in garments of salvation. We are filled with love for God, so we rejoice greatly in the Lord. Filled with holiness and heavenly love, Isaiah captures our regenerated condition, "You will be called priests of the Lord, you will be named ministers of our God." "Priests" and "ministers" mean those who are filled with heavenly

love and those whose minds are filled with heavenly wisdom.

The processes of repentance, reformation, and regeneration go like this: First, we see sin in ourselves. We fully recognize our shadow and accept that it is in us. This is the process of *repentance*. Second, we learn the path that God would have us walk. We gather truths from many different sources. We learn teachings that instruct us about who God is and what the heavenly life is. Then we work on our thoughts, our emotions, and our behaviors and bring them in line with the way we have been taught. This is the stage called *reformation*. Finally, a great shift takes place in our personality. Instead of acting from what we know, we act from what we love. In this stage, our heart takes the first place, not our thinking. We have trained ourselves to feel heavenly loves, and these are all we desire. Now thought becomes subordinate to love. From what we love, we know what is true. Our hearts can feel truth when we hear it. We no longer have to figure things out with our minds. We have so learned what heavenly love is like that we instinctively do it and follow our hearts. We no longer need our minds to tell us what to do. As Swedenborg says, "The first is a state of thought from the understanding, and the second a state of love from the will" (*True Christianity* 571). This is the stage called *regeneration*.

I found this process well-illustrated in a passage from Confucius. In his *Analects*, he writes,

The Master said, At fifteen I set my heart upon learning. At thirty, I had planted my feet firmly upon the ground. At forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities. At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of Heaven. At sixty, I heard them with docile ear. At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right. (Confucius, *Analects*, Book II, no. 4)

The Master begins his faith journey with a desire to learn. Learning the Way and how to walk in it is the beginning. This is at the age of fifteen. Then, learning all the while, it isn't until he reaches the age of fifty that the Master can say, "I knew what were the biddings of heaven." He has spent his life learning what the ways of heavenly life are. His faith journey implies struggle in applying what he knows about heavenly life to his own life. It isn't until the Master gets to sixty that he hears the biddings with a "docile ear." I take this to mean that he hears heavenly truth without resistance from his lower self and the ego and

selfishness that can sometimes dominate our lower self. Then, at the age of seventy, the Master enters the stage that Swedenborg would call regeneration. Confucius can follow his heart freely. He can do this because he has learned the biddings of heaven first. Then he has implemented them in his life and formed his life around what he has learned. Then, after training himself to love what he has learned about heaven, he can follow his heart. He says, "At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart, for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right."

So the stage of regeneration is a stage of love. We act from love, not from teachings about love. The stage called regeneration is also a stage of freedom, for we act freely from our hearts with no constraint or compulsion. We are no longer restraining our dark side, because we have overcome it. We are no longer compelling our feet to walk in God's commands because we do them willingly. Our minds no longer tell us what to do. Rather, our hearts tell us what to think. We love doing what is good. And from our good feelings, we see what is true. Swedenborg writes of this process as follows:

Regeneration is a stage of love. We act from love, not from teachings about love.

"When this latter state begins and is progressing, a change takes place in the mind; the mind undergoes a reversal, the love of the will then flowing into the understanding, acting upon it and leading it to think in accord and agreement with its love; and in consequence so far as the good of love

comes to act the first part and the truths of faith the second, man is spiritual and is a new creature; and he then acts from charity and speaks from faith; he feels the good of charity and perceives the truth of faith; and he is then in the Lord, and in peace, and thus regenerate" (*True Christianity* 571).

Love, after all, is the primary thing of religion. We do indeed seek out teachings and religious truths. But for Swedenborg, the point of spiritual truth is only to lead us into love and into a good life. He even says that truths fall away from us and dissolve like fall leaves if we haven't incorporated them into our lives. For Swedenborg, truth serves one function only: to lead us into love.

Ralph Waldo Emerson took issue with this aspect of Swedenborg's theology. Emerson admired Swedenborg's mind and intellect. He was impressed with Swedenborg's philosophical and scientific accomplishments. And he was also impressed with how rational Swedenborg's theology is. He felt that

Swedenborg cheated his own mind by subordinating intellect to feeling—mind to heart. And as a philosopher in his own right, Emerson wanted mind to be preferred over heart.

I see so much humility in Swedenborg when he makes this statement about love. Here was a man credited as one of the greatest geniuses in the history of the Western world—and yet this ponderous genius claims that intellect can only go so far. He lays aside his intelligence in favor of a loving heart. He lays aside all his knowledge to valorize a good life as the goal of knowing.

I think that our society, sadly, agrees for the most part with Emerson. I think that we value intelligence too much. We flatter a mother when we say that her child is smart or intelligent. We look up to smart people. But how often do we praise others for being loving? Do we give kindness and gentleness the same praise we do intelligence? Would a mother be as flattered should someone say of her child, “He or she is so loving and kind!”?

But love is where it’s at. Jesus tells us this plainly and simply: “My command is this: Love each other” (John 15:12).

I am reminded of a story that one of the ancient Church Fathers told. It was about the Apostle John. John was very advanced in years. He was so old that he had to be carried wherever he went. On one occasion he was asked to speak at a dinner attended by early Christians. All he said was, “Little children, love one another.”

Someone spoke up. “Is that all you have to say? I have heard you before, and that is all you ever say.”

John replied, “That is all I remember, resting my head on Christ’s breast; and if you do that, it is enough.”

Love is where it’s at. Little children, love one another.

Prayers

Forgive us, O Lord, when we listen but do not hear; when we look but do not see; and when we feel but do not act; and by your mercy and grace draw us into the righteous deeds of your Kingdom of justice and peace; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

- Maria Hare (1798-1870)

Safeguard your faithful people in the sanctuary of your love, O God.

Shelter them this night in the shelter of the saints.

God to enfold them

God to surround them

God in their watching

God in their hoping

God in their sleeping

God in their ever-living souls.

- *Prayers from Iona*

Peace between neighbors,

Peace between kindred,

Peace between lovers,

In the love of the King of Life.

Peace between person and person,

Peace between wife and husband,

Peace between woman and children,

The peace of Christ above all peace.

Bless, O Christ, my face,

Let my face bless everything;

Bless, O Christ, mine eye,

Let mine eye bless all it sees.

- *Carmina Gaedelica (20th century)*

O God, who by your son Jesus Christ has set up on earth a Kingdom of holiness, to measure its strength above all others: make faith to prevail over fear, and righteousness over force, and truth over the lie, and love and concord over all things; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

- *War Prayers, King’s College, Cambridge*

Lord, help us to see that every act of kindness,

Every word of forgiveness, every gesture of love,

Seen or unseen, however small,

Changes the world, and us, forever.

- *Frank Topping*

Monday, March 19

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.

Matthew 22:2&3

Marrying means being conjoined with the Lord, and that entering into marriage means being received into heaven by the Lord. *Conjugal Love n. 41*

Tuesday, March 20

"Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.'

Matthew 22:4

Who does not know that the invitation or call is universal, and also the grace of reception? Man obtains life by going to the Lord because the Lord is Life itself, not only the life of faith but also the life of charity.

True Christian Religion n. 358

Wednesday, March 21

"But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.

Matthew 22:5&6

So far as man does not prepare himself he removes the Lord from him and does everything from his own self; and what man himself does from himself has no real life in it. *True Christian Religion n. 359*

Thursday, March 22

"The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' *Matthew 22:7-9*

As man prepares himself naturally to receive the Lord, so the Lord enters and makes all that is within man inwardly spiritual, and thus alive. But on the other hand, so far as man does not prepare himself he removes the Lord from him and does everything from his own self; and what man himself does from himself has no real life in it. *True Christian Religion n. 359*

Friday, March 23

"Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' *Matthew 22:10-12*

In heaven no one can conceal his interiors by his expression, or feign, or really deceive and mislead by craft or hypocrisy. There are hypocrites who are experts in disguising their interiors and fashioning their exteriors into the form of that good in which those are who belong to a society, and who thus make themselves appear angels of light; and these sometimes insinuate themselves into a society; but they cannot stay there long, for they begin to suffer inward pain and torture, to grow livid in the face, and to become as it were lifeless. *Heaven and Hell n. 48*

Saturday, March 24

"And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen." *Matthew 22:13&14*

Gnashing of teeth is the continual contention and combat of falsities with each other, consequently of those who are in falsities, joined with contempt of others, with enmity, mockery, ridicule, blaspheming; and these evils burst forth into lacerations of various kinds; since everyone fights for his own falsity and calls it truth. *Heaven and Hell n. 575*

MAR 25 GIVING FROM THE HEART

Rev. Sarah Buteux

Exodus 35: 4-9, 20-29

Moses said to all the congregation of the Israelites: This is the thing that the Lord has commanded: Take from among you an offering to the Lord; let whoever is of a generous heart bring the Lord's offering: gold, silver, and bronze; blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine linen; goats' hair, tanned rams' skins, and fine leather; acacia wood, oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, and onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and the breastpiece.

Then all the congregation of the Israelites withdrew from the presence of Moses. And they came, everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and brought the Lord's offering to be used for the tent of meeting, and for all its service, and for the sacred vestments. So they came, both men and women; all who were of a willing heart brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and pendants, all sorts of gold objects, everyone bringing an offering of gold to the Lord. And everyone who possessed blue or purple or crimson yarn or fine linen or goats' hair or tanned rams' skins or fine leather, brought them. Everyone who could make an offering of silver or bronze brought it as the Lord's offering; and everyone who possessed acacia wood of any use in the work, brought it. All the skillful women spun with their hands, and brought what they had spun in blue and purple and crimson yarns and fine linen; all the women whose hearts moved them to use their skill spun the goats' hair. And the leaders brought onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and the breastpiece, and spices and oil for the light, and for the anointing oil, and for the fragrant incense. All the Israelite men and women whose hearts made them willing to bring anything for the work that the Lord had commanded by Moses to be done, brought it as a freewill offering to the Lord.

Deuteronomy 14:22-29

Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field. In the presence of the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always. But if, when the Lord your God has blessed you, the distance is so great that you are unable to transport it, because the place where the

Lord your God will choose to set his name is too far away from you, then you may turn it into money. With the money secure in hand, go to the place that the Lord your God will choose; spend the money for whatever you wish—oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your household rejoicing together. As for the Levites resident in your towns, do not neglect them, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you. Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.

Matthew 6:1-4

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Sermon

Once upon a time, in a galaxy much like this one, at a church meeting not unlike many I attended in my youth, a very wealthy man rose up to share his testimony. "I'm a millionaire," he said, "and I attribute it all to the rich blessings of God in my life. Friends, let me tell you about the turning point in my faith. I was young man and I had just earned my first, crisp one dollar bill. I took it with me to church that evening and listened as the missionary who was visiting told us about his good work for the Lord. I knew, at that very moment, that even though I only had the one dollar, God was calling me to either give it all to his work or give nothing at all. So at that moment I decided to give my whole dollar to God. I believe God blessed that decision, and that is why I am a rich man today."

There was an awed silence as the man returned to his seat. As he sat down, the little old lady who was sharing his pew leaned over and said to him, "Son, I dare you to do it again."

Today we have the opportunity to talk about stewardship and begin the process of intentionally

setting aside time to consider how we can best respond to God's many blessings in our lives.

And it is customary to begin this discussion with some words about money. But nobody likes to talk about money, at least not in public. And pastors are especially reluctant to talk about money. I have read a number of articles, studies, and surveys over the years, all of which conclude that the majority of pastors practice the Biblical discipline of tithing ten percent of their income back to the church, and that the majority of pastors would rather talk about anything else in a sermon. And I am with the majority on this one.

Because money is a funny thing. Yes, we need it, we want it, we chase after it, and we do our best to earn it. It can be stolen, saved, won, stashed, given, worshipped, despised, considered the root of all evil and the fount of great good. It seems that money, no matter how much or how little you have, can be seen as either a blessing or a curse. Perhaps that is why, as the Reverend Eric Allison has pointed out, Jesus talked more about money than he did about prayer.

And for good reason. We are right, at least on the most literal of levels, to equate money with power, influence, and security. It is a force to be reckoned with, but if viewed correctly, that is really all it is: a force. Stephen Mitchell has said that "when we see money clearly, we can recognize it as neither good nor bad, but as pure energy, and understand that it can be used, just like electricity, either for good or harm" (*The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 240).

So money is a blessing that ought to be held loosely, because it is a blessing that can all too easily overwhelm us if we become too attached. I guess you could say that there is a strange alchemy surrounding the accumulation of wealth. I have seen it in my own life. As I alluded to before, I have done my best to tithe—that is, give ten percent of my income—since I was little. And I'll admit right away that I haven't always been successful. But I will tell you something curious that I have learned. You see, I remember tithing out of the check the church paid me back when I was working here as an intern during my divinity school days.

I remember all too clearly how hard it was to make ends meet, and I used to dream about how much easier life would be when I had more money. I was sorely tempted back then not to tithe because I had

so little to begin with, but I also really wanted to be true to that ideal. And so I would have the treasurer write out two checks for me each month. One was for the amount I had earned minus ten percent, and the other was the ten percent. He would leave the second check blank for me, and I would fill in the name of the church and hand it back to him. I didn't trust myself to put the full amount in the bank and then bring the ten percent back at a later time, so I never let the ten percent leave the premises.

But here is the funny thing. For some reason, I thought that when I earned more money it would be easier to give ten percent of it back. But I have found the opposite to be true. The more money I make, the harder it seems sometimes to give that ten percent back to God, because as that sum gets larger and larger, I become more and more attached to the other things I can do or buy with that money. I find myself tempted not to tithe.

And I use the word "temptation" for a reason. Just like Swedenborg, I believe that in a spiritual sense we are always kept in balance, and that as our potential for good grows, so does the nature and strength of our temptation. Because I have always thought of tithing as a powerful spiritual practice, it makes perfect sense that I would feel tempted not to do it. And when I say "powerful," I don't mean to sound like the rich man I just told you about. I don't want to encourage you to tithe with the expectation that God will reward you.

Tithing is its own reward and carries within itself an inherent sense of satisfaction.

As Swedenborgians we talk a lot about believing what is true simply because it is true and doing what is good simply because it is good. And we believe that right belief and right action are compromised if they are embraced out of a sense of fear or greed, or for the sake of reputation. I don't tithe because of what I get out of it, or because I am afraid that God will withhold himself from me if I do not. I tithe because God has asked it of me, it makes me conscious of my blessings, it is a way for me to support the church, and by extension it is a way for me to support the needs of others.

I also use the word "temptation" because in a very real sense I was tempted not to speak about tithing as plainly as I just did. I think it goes back to all those weird attitudes we cultivate about money. In our society we claim that money is a private matter, though how we live could easily leave people of other cultures

Tithing is its own reward and carries within itself an inherent sense of satisfaction.

thinking otherwise. But I think this awkwardness pastors feel stems more from temptation than from a sense of modesty or unwillingness to offend. As pastors we know how powerful this practice can be, and I think we are tempted to keep quiet about it because if we were all to tithe we could accomplish such powerful things and grow in such meaningful ways that the spirits whose job it is to tempt us away from what is good have a lot invested in keeping this knowledge under wraps.

But I already feel as though I have gotten ahead of myself, so let me tell you a little bit more about what tithing entails from a biblical perspective. Often you hear phrases in church like “Now it is time to give of our tithes and offerings,” and you may wonder, “What’s the difference?” Well, tithing is the biblical concept of giving ten percent of your income or yield. Back in the day, if you had ten new sheep born to your herd in a given year, you would take one sheep to the temple and offer it as a sacrifice to the Lord. If you harvested a hundred bushels of wheat, you would take ten bushels to the temple. If your fig trees yielded thirty pounds of fresh figs, you’d bring three pounds with you to the altar.

And, as our reading from Deuteronomy makes clear, you wouldn’t just leave your tithe there. You would offer it to the priest, he would consecrate your gift, then take a portion for himself and the work of the temple—which included caring for and feeding the poor—and then everyone would share the meat, or the fruit, or whatever it was that you brought. Tithing was a celebration.

It wasn’t just about sacrificing or giving away a portion of what you had been blessed with, it was about taking that portion, holding it up in the presence of God, and saying, “This bounty I lay here on the altar is just the beginning of what I have to be thankful for.” God did not require tithes because he was hungry, or thirsty, or in need. He called on his people to be very intentional about bringing their tithes and offerings to the temple because it made them conscious of how much they had been blessed. And it was a practical, evenly distributed, and organized way of providing for the priests, maintaining the temple, and caring for the poor, the fatherless, the widows, and those who sojourned as strangers in their land.

It was a beautiful system, really—a tangible way in which people could come together, give thanks for all they had earned through the grace of God in

a given year, support the good work of the temple, and care for the poor. And tithing remains to this day a concrete way in which we can acknowledge that everything good we have comes from God. It is interesting to note that tithes correspond, according to Swedenborg, to everything in our souls that is of God. Swedenborg refers to these aspects of goodness and love as “remains,” generous and heavenly impulses that lie within us at the ready, just waiting for some moment to surface and lead us to act in love. When we tithe, we openly demonstrate our understanding that everything we are, and everything we have that is good, is of God. It instills in us a sense of gratefulness and humility; it makes us conscious of our many blessings, reminds us of our dependence in all things upon the Lord, and enables us to provide for our churches and those in need.

God wants you to know how much he loves you and cares for you and provides for you.

And tithing does not need to be limited to money, just as the blessings God bestows upon us are not limited to money. I think most of you already know this because I see you live it out each week. We are a diversely talented and generous group of people. I am so thankful for each and every one of you because you so freely share your computer skills, your artistic ability, your knowledge of home improvement, your ideas for how we can strengthen our efforts, and your compassion for one another. Even taking the time to come to church on Sunday is an act of giving as well as receiving. I hope you feel this time is worthwhile, but I also hope you know how valuable your presence here this morning is to our community and our future. In some ways I feel as though I am preaching to the choir, because I have seen how each one of you has found ways to share a part of yourself with the larger community.

And so I trust that you can see not just why tithing is important, but also why it is such a joy-filled practice—why it makes sense to give back a portion of what we have been given. But I did promise to tell you about the difference between tithes and offerings, and it is this: tithing involves giving ten percent of your income; offerings are what you freely give over and above that amount. This is why I picked out the reading from Exodus for today as well. I love the image of Moses standing before the Israelites and calling upon them to give the very best of themselves, whether it was gold or silver, or their skilled labor, to create a tabernacle for the Lord.

Listen again:

“Moses said to all the congregation of the Israelites: This is the thing that the Lord has commanded: Take from among you an offering to the Lord; let whoever is of a generous heart bring the Lord’s offering; gold, silver, and bronze; blue, purple, and crimson yarn,... All who are skillful among you shall come and make all that the Lord has commanded:

“Then all the congregation of the Israelites withdrew from the presence of Moses. And they came, everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and brought the Lord’s offering to be used for the tent of meeting, and for all its service, and for the sacred vestments. ...They came, both men and women; all who were of a willing heart brought broaches and earrings and signet rings and pendants, all sorts of gold objects, everyone bringing an offering to the Lord. And everyone who possessed blue or purple or crimson yarn or fine linen or goats’ hair or tanned rams’ skin or fine leather, brought them. Everyone who could make an offering of silver or bronze brought it as the Lord’s offering; and everyone who possessed acacia wood of any use in the work, brought it.

“All the skillful women spun with their hands and brought what they had spun in blue and purple and crimson yarns and fine linen; all the women whose hearts moved them to use their skill spun goats’ hair. And the leaders brought the onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and the breastpiece, and spices and oil for light, and for anointing oil, and for the fragrant incense. All the Israelite men and women whose hearts made them willing to bring anything for the work that the Lord had commanded by Moses to be done, brought it as a freewill offering to the Lord” (Exodus 35:4-29).

I love this image of all the Israelites working together, because everyone in that assembly had unique gifts to bring to the project. For some it made sense to offer their gold and silver; for others their gift was weaving or carving. But what I really love about this passage is the repeated mention of the word “heart.” Five times in this little vignette people are described as giving from their heart. And this is so important. Giving our tithes and offerings to the work of the Lord is not about giving out of a sense of obligation or even expectation. It is not meant to be a burden, or a chore, or some sort of karmic roulette game where you give your whole dollar and God gives you a million in return. We don’t give hoping that God will bless us more; we give because we have already been blessed.

And even though tithing involves the number ten, I want to make it clear to everyone that God is not as invested in the amount we give as he is in the attitude

with which we give. If God can multiply five loaves and two fishes to feed five thousand, he can take even the smallest offering and work wonders. That is why Jesus commended the widow who dropped in her last two mites and scorned the wealthy men who made such a show of offering lavish gifts in the temple. God does not want your money; he wants your heart.

He wants you to know how much he loves you and cares for you and provides for you, and when you give a portion of that back, whether it’s money or time or talent, you are letting God know, and you are letting yourself know, just how blessed you really are. When I worked in the homeless shelter across Harvard Square at University Lutheran Church, we did whatever we could to allow the guests at the shelter to give of themselves. These men and women who had so little in terms of material goods had the opportunity to offer to dry the dishes or mop the floor, to listen to one another and offer prayers and advice. We are all created to be useful and capable of making a contribution, and because of this, I think we feel a real need to be useful. As long as we are able to draw breath, we are able to give to one another, and there is no price tag attached that determines the worth of such actions. No gift we can give is too big and no gift is too small, if it is given with a willing heart.

So I don’t know about you, but I’m excited. I’m excited to give to the work of the church, and I’m excited to see how God will work in your hearts and lead you, over the next few weeks, to consider what you will offer to the church.

There is a stewardship card in each of your programs. We will take these cards at the end of the month and add them together to draft up our annual budget. But this is not just about money. This is about something bigger. This is about taking stock of all we have and all we are and prayerfully considering how best to give thanks for the good of everyone.

So I encourage you, take your card home. Sit down with it. Take some time to think over the many ways in which you have been blessed by the Lord, and with a willing heart ask him how he would have you respond. Amen.

Prayer

I am bending my knee in the eye of the God who created me, in the eye of the Son who died for me, in the eye of the Spirit who moves me in love and in desire. For the many gifts you have bestowed on me, each day and night, each sea and land, each weather fair, each calm, each wild, thanks be to you, O God.

Daily Meditations

Monday, March 26

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. *Matthew 5:3&4*

Those who know anything of the spiritual sense of the Word know that heaven is for all who live a life of faith and love, whether rich or poor.

Heaven and Hell n. 357

Tuesday, March 27

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Matthew 5:5&6

To “inherit,” in the internal sense, when predicated of the Lord, is to have the Father’s life, thus to have life in Himself; and when predicated of men, it is to have the Lord’s life, that is, to receive life from the Lord, is evident from many passages in the Word.

Arcana Coelestia n. 2658

Wednesday, March 28

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Matthew 5:7&8

Such as the affection is, such is the multiplication. With the regenerate man the affection is that of good and truth from the charity that is given by the Lord. Whatever therefore favors that affection of charity he learns, retains, and cherishes, and thus confirms himself in goods and truths. *Arcana Coelestia n. 1016*

Thursday, March 29

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. *Matthew 5: 9&10*

Righteousness is acquired only so far as man practices righteousness; and this he does so far as he acts towards the neighbor from a love of what is righteous and true; and righteousness has its abode in the good itself or use itself which he performs.

True Christian Religion n. 96

Friday, March 30

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. *Matthew 5:11&12*

To think about getting into heaven, and that good ought to be done for that reason, is not to regard reward as an end and to ascribe merit to works; for thus do those also think who love the neighbor as themselves and God above all things; so thinking from faith in the Lord’s words, “That their reward should be great in the heavens...” Such do not trust to reward on the ground of their merit, but have faith in the promise from grace.

True Christian Religion n. 440

Saturday, March 31

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:14-16

From these passages it is evident that works are what save man, and what condemn man; that is to say, that good works save, and evil works condemn; for in his works is man’s will. He who wills good, does good; but he who does not do good, however he may say that he wills good, still does not will it when he does not do it. *Arcana Coelestia n. 3934.7*

BE WHAT...? BE PERFECT!

Rev. Julian Duckworth

Matthew 5:1-12, 43-48

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Sermon

Therefore you shall be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Just by being created we can be more and more closely linked with the Lord. And the more closely we are linked with the Lord, the wiser we will become. And the more closely we are linked with the Lord, the happier we will become. And the more closely we are linked with the Lord, the more distinctly will we seem to ourselves to be master of ourselves, and yet

the more obviously and fully will we recognize that we are the Lord's.

1 APR

In a way this is very much a sermon for the New Year, and yet it's absolutely relevant to every single day of our life—this amazing idea of "perfection" and the Lord's statement "...therefore you shall be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect."

I have a couple of questions for you about this issue. You are probably already expecting the first one: Are *you* perfect?

Your knee-jerk immediate answer will surely be, "Of course not. Don't be absurd! Nobody's perfect!"

Here's the sub-question to the first one: Do you think you could one day become perfect?

"Hmm," you think. "Could I? I'd like to think I could, but that first answer still stands . . . Nobody's perfect . . . nobody's perfect, ever!"

OK. Here is my second question. Look carefully at the words of the text and decide whether you think they are a command or perhaps only a statement. Is this verse actually saying to us "Be perfect!" as we might say to a naughty four-year-old "Be good...or else!" or "Be quiet, for goodness' sake!" Or is Jesus simply saying, at the end of a set of words that ask us to love unconditionally, that if we can love like that without expecting something back from it we shall thereby be perfect, even as our Father in heaven is perfect?

I think it's the second one, the statement that we shall then be perfect as a consequence if we love in that unconditional kind of way. I just can't see the Lord ever asking us or commanding us to do something that is impossible for us to carry out. It reminds me of another "extreme" statement in the Bible at the other end of the human spectrum, in one of the Psalms where it says very clearly and so helpfully, "O Lord, if you should mark iniquities"—which means our errors or faults—"if you should mark iniquities, who could stand?" Point taken!

So, our perfection comes about when we try to love other people in that complete kind of way without expecting something back, but just loving them for their own sake, even so far as loving our enemies, blessing those who curse us, doing good to those who hate us, and praying for those who spitefully use us and even persecute us. Then we are living perfectly, and then and only then are we matching this idea of becoming perfect.

Let's face it: even loving without expecting anything back is hard enough for us to carry out, so we shouldn't breathe a sigh of relief that we're not being asked to be perfect! We're being asked to love without expecting anything back! Can we even do that?

Yes, we can. It's within our means to do so, even though it seems such a hard task.

We might almost prefer the command "Be perfect" because then we could sit back and say, "Don't be ridiculous!" and then just carry on the same as always. We quite like that kind of situation. But loving others, whoever and however they are, and loving without expecting anything in return, is something we can adopt and do. It will make us squirm at times, trying to be loving like that when someone is driving us crazy, and we will start thinking, "Why on earth should I love you when you curse me, hate me, use me, stand against me?" This, of course, is setting conditions to our loving, which immediately makes us imperfect.

And we start thinking along those lines because loving without expecting something back just doesn't come naturally to us. We've a whole lifetime's experience, perhaps, of being part of the mutual appreciation society—love me and I'll love you...if I love you, you've got to love me back...scratch my back and I'll scratch yours...or however it goes between us.

If that's what comes naturally to us and if it's how the world runs it and if it's how it's been for over fifty years, we aren't going to find unconditional loving all that easy! We are going to have a lot to unlearn. The world around us is full of conditional suggestions. It's called "advertising," and it's so devious. "Here's our wonderful product. Your home will be sparkling and spotless if you used it. You need it." What they actually mean is "We want your money so that our revenues increase," but of course they never say that. They seem to think the world of us, we are their "special valued customer," but it's all baloney. They are actually quite desperate and ready to lie through their back teeth.

And you see, we can even be like that too, perhaps not even realizing it. We can advertise ourselves very well. Being "nice" is a great example of it—being nice works a treat and gets you liked back and many friends. Two people being nice to each other looks

fantastic, and there is nothing wrong with being nice. But it's really only a conditional love. It isn't what Jesus is saying or what he's after, which is this unconditional love—loving in spite of things. That's the hard one, of course, because it's based on being consistent and constant. I am going to love you, come what may!

Now, we need to do something important. We need to know what we're talking about when we say something like "I am going to love you, come what may." We do not have such love when we say it through gritted teeth! It's fallen back into conditional love again, and this time we're setting our own conditions on ourselves: I - will - love - you - come - what - may! We might as well say, "I will peel your potatoes come what may!"

This is the point at which we need to bring the Lord in. If you go back to the passage where these words about being perfect are found, you'll see that the Lord is mentioned twice. First of all, after the "love your enemies" part, it says, "That you may be sons of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust." That is telling us that the Lord is consistent and even indiscriminating—evil and good alike get his sunshine, just and unjust get his rainfall. A great weather analogy we can understand!

The other mention of the Lord is in our reading. "Therefore you shall be perfect...just as your Father in heaven is perfect." That's very helpful, because it is pointing a number of things out. God is perfect, and so, if we follow God in a real sense, we can gain access to a perfect way of loving. It's not our love or our ability to love; it is tapping into God's love coming into us and through us. In fact, I will stick my neck out here and say that you've really got to have some sense of the divine or the higher source of all life if you are ever going to succeed at perfect loving—unconditional loving rather than conditional. The real thing starts from God and involves God by drawing on him.

On our own, we might say, "I know there's a God and He loves us completely, so I will be like that too." But we'll come unstuck, because we're not actually tapping into God, only copying him.

Jesus, when he was in the world, was endlessly talking about his Father. It was a total relationship,

You've really got to have some sense of the divine or the higher source of all life if you are ever going to succeed at perfect loving—unconditional loving.

even though we know they are basically one and the same. Jesus went beyond the normal status quo of the time, when the focus was on acknowledging God but putting all one's efforts into keeping the whole law. Jesus kept breaking the law and going beyond it, loving beyond the limits. And really, this is the heart of Christianity. Christianity is about forming a working relationship with God and being the kind of person God wants you to be so that he can work in you and through you. That's what it is all about, and that is why this verse adds up—"Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." There's the relationship spelled out.

Try and take that to heart and get the mechanics of it as right as you can. On your own or by your own efforts, you simply can't keep the loving up, no matter how determined you are to do so. It's a cul-de-sac. Develop a working relationship with God—not just a nod to God sometimes—and own the fact that without God you can do nothing but with God all things become possible. Put the jigsaw of your life in the right order and ask God to work with you and through you, particularly in this business of loving, being constant, knowing that in the end it is God but also discovering that the more you are linked with God, the more you will feel free and relaxed to be who you are and empowered to love in that complete, divine kind of way.

Love and loving is the most important commodity of all, so let's take it out and advertise it with everything we've got. And if you can market it to your target audience, make sure that means everybody. Amen.

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Daily Meditations

Monday, April 2

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. *Matthew 5:17&18*

Our nature from creation enables us to be more and more closely united to the Lord. Support for this may be found in the material about levels in part 3 of *Divine Love and Wisdom*, particularly on the following points.

Divine Providence n. 32

Tuesday, April 3

“Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. *Matthew 5:19*

There are three distinct or vertical levels in us from creation. The Lord opens these levels within us depending on the way we live. This is really happening in this world, but not so that we can sense or feel it until after we leave this world. As the levels are then opened and perfected, we are more and more closely united to the Lord. *Divine Providence n. 32.3*

Wednesday, April 4

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. *Matthew 5:21&22*

Murder means enmity, hatred, and revenge, which breathe slaughter; for in them murder lies concealed as fire in wood under ashes. Infernal fire is nothing else; hence the expressions, to be inflamed with hatred, to burn with revenge. These passions are murder in intention, not in act; but if fear of the law or of retaliation and revenge were removed from them, they would break forth into act, especially if there is treachery or ferocity in the intention.

True Christian Religion n. 309

Thursday, April 5

“So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. *Matthew 5: 23&24*

To worship God means worship both internal and external, namely, from love and from faith, and thus from the life... Divine worship consists primarily in charity towards the neighbor, and not in piety without that. *Apocalypse Explained n. 391*

Friday, April 6

“Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. *Matthew 5:25&26*

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. It seems as though the more closely we are united to the Lord the less sense of identity we have. This is indeed how it seems to all evil people and to people who believe on religious grounds that they are not subject to the yoke of the law and that none of us can do anything good on our own. *Divine Providence n. 42*

Saturday, April 7

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” *Matthew 5:27&28*

Since people who are united to the Lord are neither willing nor able to think and intend what is evil, the outward appearance leads others to believe that this amounts to a loss of identity; yet it is the exact opposite.

Divine Providence n. 42

THEY JUST WENT TO ANOINT HIM

Rev. Kathy Speas

older I get, the more I'm convinced that of all the virtues to cultivate, hope is the most important one." It felt good. It brought me back down to earth after the roller coaster of the election year.

8 APR

Mark 16:1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Sermon

Here we are. It's Easter, the big mother of all Christian holidays. He is risen! Resurrected from the dead! Christ has triumphed over death and sin and evil and darkness, once and for all! Easter is glorious, alive, the pink-and-purple holiday. All over the world, churches are filled to overflowing with people in new clothes and hats, singing "Alleluia."

My journey to Easter started the day after Election Day. I expended a lot of energy hoping my candidate would win, addicted to CNN, feeling so hopeful for a country I truly love, for ideals I had almost written off. The day after Obama won, I had to ground myself. I planted bulbs. And I thought a lot about the people on Palm Sunday, relieved that their guy had ridden into Jerusalem: now people with *our* values are going to be in power, now we've kicked those Romans out, and *our* guy is going to rule, and we'll get our nation back. Oh, we know how that story ends, a week later.

And so I dug and planted, thinking about the dreams of those poor Palm Sunday crowds whose Great Hope got crucified, and thinking maybe there's hope for America and for our little planet yet, as I stuck these ugly little onion-y things into cold mud on a gray day. My friend the Catholic priest says, "The

So here we are at Easter, the holiday where we celebrate the fulfillment of hope, the emergence of light from darkness. Someone said, "Give us a message about renewal." You've got bulbs, trees leafing out, people in T-shirts; the earth greens up once again. Some of you are preparing gardens. The days are longer. If you haven't gotten the renewal message by now, no theological message from me is going to do it for you. Besides, renewal is experience—something that you know in your bones, not something I can tell you about. First the experience, then the song/dance/art, then the explanations.

If you look at the story of Easter in all the gospels, it isn't really about glorious triumph and the day when all hope is fulfilled. The gospels do not reflect this ultimate theological pinnacle that Easter has become. Swedenborgians explain Easter as a celebration of the cosmic fusion of divine and human energies, something that transformed what it means to life a life in this world. We don't agree with other Christians who explain that God sent Jesus to die so that our sins would be wiped clean. We've woven explanations to make sense of a baffling, grievous, amazing experience of people who had just lost an inspirational teacher and friend whose very presence transformed them.

All the gospel stories are different, and none really has all the details that have come to be attached to the Easter story over the years. Mark is the earliest gospel, which leaves about thirty years between Jesus' death and the first account of it. I don't think it's just the CNN addict in me that would expect stories to emerge more quickly from such a momentous experience.

The whole story leading up to the Resurrection—who is there, what they find, what is in the tomb—is sketchy and inconsistent across the gospels. Did they find two angels (John), or a boy dressed in white (Mark)? Who was even there? Was it Mary Magdalene (John), or all the women who were with Jesus (Luke), or Mary Magdalene and the other Mary and Salome (Mark), or just two Marys? No self-respecting myth starts out, "Once upon a time, there were these two women, or maybe it was a group of women, or it could have been three women, or maybe it was just this one lady who ran to find these other guys..."

The gospel writers have completely different takes on what happened that we now celebrate as Easter:

John (90 AD): Jesus is standing in the tomb, looking like the gardener, then appears to the disciples who were hiding behind closed doors, lets Doubting Thomas touch him, does some miracles, breathes on everybody, and instructs them, "Feed my sheep."

Luke (70 AD): Jesus appears on the road to Emmaus, walks with the disciples, goes unrecognized until he has a fish sandwich, then blesses everybody.

Matthew (50 AD): Jesus meets the women as they are en route from the tomb to tell everybody, and then commissions them to spread the word.

Mark (30 AD): The earliest gospel, the original one, has no resurrection story. Mark has no Easter. The women go to anoint Jesus, find the tomb empty, and run away in fear. The end.

As I read through all of the Easter stories, trying to remember why we make such a big deal out of Easter, there was an image that stuck out for me: women going to the tomb of their friend to anoint him for burial, according to Jewish tradition. Even today, groups of Jewish women (*chevra kadisha*) do an extensive ritual funeral preparation (*taharah*). This prayerful ritual of washing and preparation for burial is as old as Moses and was probably what the women had in mind when they went to the tomb. They loved Jesus. He had been their friend. He had recognized them in a way that society did not, affirming their humanity, their wholeness—not just their value as procreators or strategic marriage targets. And they stood there and watched him get executed. They just wanted to give him the dignity and decency of the traditional ritual of their faith. This is a powerful ritual.

My friend Henry is a Holocaust survivor. He's so old you can't even read the number tattooed on his arm anymore. We're losing those people, that witness. Henry lost his wife, his beloved Rose. He was so unable to face her death (which was not sudden, believe me) that he hadn't talked to anyone about final arrangements. His daughter figured they'd just have her cremated; isn't that what people do? We found a rabbi who offered his *chevra kadisha* to do the *taharah*. At the graveside, the rabbi spoke of how Rose was anointed the way her Bubbie and Tzadie had been anointed, and their grandparents before them, and so on, back to Moses. The Holocaust

had disrupted that tradition in Henry's family, and burying Rose in a traditional Orthodox ceremony, with the ritual preparation, had restored something: it kept an order—in Henry's life, in history.

This idea is at the heart of the Easter story. Women who loved Jesus, even when their hopes in what he might accomplish had been killed, even when it was dangerous to be associated with him. Love that is greater than expectations. Faith that is bigger than grief. These women came to anoint him because they loved him, not because they thought there would be a resurrection in clouds and glory. Easter is about the love and faith that see us through when hopes crumble and grief seems insurmountable.

I want to close with some words from author Molly Fumia:

"Resurrection. The reversal of what was thought to be absolute. The turning of midnight into dawn, hatred into love, dying into living anew. If we look more closely into life, we will find that resurrection is more than hope; it is our experience. The return to life from death is something we understand at our innermost depths, something we feel on the surface of our tender skin. We have come back to life not only when we start to shake off a shroud of sorrow that has bound us, but when we begin to believe in all that is still endlessly possible. We give thanks for all those times we have arisen from the depths or simply taken a tiny step toward something new. May we be empowered by extraordinary second chances. And as we enter the world anew, let us turn the tides of despair into endless waves of hope."

Hava nashira, shir alleluia—Let us sing, let us sing alleluia.

Prayer

Christ is risen from the dead: trampling down death by death; and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.

Though thou didst go down into the grave, O Immortal One, yet thou didst put down the power of Hades and didst rise a conqueror, O Christ our God: thou spakest clearly to the myrrh-bearing women, "Rejoice!"; thou didst bestow peace upon thine apostles, and to the fallen hast thou brought resurrection.

- *Orthodox Rite*

Monday, April 9

“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

Matthew 5:33-35

Truths divine are to be confirmed from the Lord, and not from man, which is effected when men are internal, and not external; for external men confirm truths by oaths, but internal men by reasons. They who are still more internal do not confirm them; but only say that it is so, or that it is not so.

Arcana Coelestia n. 9166.3

Tuesday, April 10

“And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one. *Matthew 5:36-37*

The more nearly anyone is conjoined to the Lord the more distinctly does he appear to himself to be master of himself, and yet the more evidently does he recognise that he is the Lord’s. *Divine Providence n. 158*

Wednesday, April 11

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. *Matthew 5:38-42*

He who does evil to another from the heart, receives the like evil. For good that is from the heart is conjoined with its reward, and evil that is from the heart is conjoined with its punishment. *Arcana Coelestia n. 9049*

Thursday, April 12

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;

Matthew 5:43-45a

In general, when the principle is false, nothing but falsities can follow from it; for all things conform themselves to the first principle. *Arcana Coelestia n. 1017*

Friday, April 13

“For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? *Matthew 5: 45b&46*

[The Gentiles] have not confirmed themselves against the truths of faith, as have very many Christians; and therefore their internal man is not closed, but, as with little children, is readily opened and receptive of truth.

Arcana Coelestia n. 9256.2

Saturday, April 14

And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. *Matthew 5:47&48*

Sincerity is to be understood as including integrity, justice, fidelity, and rectitude. In these no man can be from himself so as to love them from and for themselves. But he is in them who shuns them as sins, fraud, cunning, and deceit, and is therefore in them not from himself but from the Lord. *Doctrine of Life #83*

1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said,

"Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Sermon

I would like to start out today by welcoming you all again and thanking you for coming to church today. Many do not know this, but this day in the Christian year is called "Low Sunday." While the reason for this name is still a mystery, I believe it has to do with the drop in energy or the relaxation felt after the great Christian feast of Easter. But there is something more to it than simply the sigh of relief uttered after all the work of preparing for Easter. There is also a hint of let-down behind it.

Even in the gospels we see this same pattern. Jesus has risen, but where is he? The disciples question the reality of the resurrection, but they receive the gift of seeing the Lord again. Well, all the disciples except for one get see the Lord again; Thomas was absent when the Lord stopped by the first time. He doubted the other disciples' claims, so he has been permanently dubbed "doubting Thomas," which I find unfair—after all, the other disciples were having similar issues before they saw Jesus, too!

But I digress. Jesus had risen and people doubted—that's a low point if I ever heard of one. But the irony is that Low Sunday is historically the poorest-attended church day of the year.

I could speculate on the myriad of reasons why that might be, but I would much rather focus on what Jesus said to Thomas after their tactile exchange: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Some have interpreted this statement as an admonishment directed toward Thomas, in which case we would have to indict the rest of the disciples as well, for they also had to see Jesus in person to believe.

When Jesus refers to those who have not seen, he is speaking of faith. Recently, I was sitting in a room without much to do. Like a bored kid at breakfast, I started reading the proverbial cereal box, but in

this case the cereal box was the room. I noticed that written across the wall were the words “faith,” “hope,” and “charity.” (I was surprised to find out how many people who viewed the mural did not observe the reference to Scripture). The mural on which the words were written depicted a ladder; each rung of the ladder was labeled with one of the three qualities—the first rung was faith, then came hope, and finally charity. The ladder depicted alluded to Jacob’s ladder ascending into heaven.

Though I always knew that the “greatest of these [was] charity”—or “love,” as our reading this morning translates it—I had never really looked at faith, hope, and charity as stepping stones before. But they are. After all, without hope, it would be very difficult to love someone who was constantly abusing you. I mean, I hope that my loving actions would affect that person. And what is having hope unless you have faith in something larger than yourself, something you believe will conduct this elementary-school orchestra we call life? In the end, faith becomes the foundation for all three qualities. Faith seems to be, in the end, the most pivotal point of the ladder. Or is it? Those of you who looked at the sermon title might guess that it is not.

Plato and other early Greeks knew something critical about divine order that we can sometimes forget—something that, like Thomas and the disciples, we contemporary Christians forget all the time. Every future event, planned and unplanned, is made up of the present. And on top of that, our present is made up of both our experiences and the thoughts and priorities we have in our heads right now.

If we have a plan to build a church, that’s good! A plan is great! We can put up walls; finish the outside, for the most part, before we finish the inside; put up an altar and worship the Lord. But don’t we really need to be worshiping the Lord before the altar is installed?

For some odd reason, I have a predilection for joining groups in transition. For instance, I joined a fire department as a volunteer right after they decided that their training manual was no longer sufficient, which really was a good decision. But, rather than stick with the bad manual, they gave me...nothing. I had to find my way through word of mouth and people’s ideas of what proper training policy was. Two years later, by the time I was long past my

“rookie” period, I received the new training book. Since I had never completed the previous book, they expected me to work my way through the new one. As when people are building a church, my training, like worship, needed to be practiced throughout the creation of my volunteer-fireman career.

As our tradition teaches, the end result must be present in the very first moment, throughout a process, and at the end of a process in order for the proper order to exist. But what does this mean for us in the context of faith? We may have faith in a great number of things, because we define faith as expectation. Most people who have cars have faith that those vehicles will start in the morning. Or we might have faith that we will be able to make an appointment we schedule for the following week.

The faith we are talking about today has to have one specific element present in order for it to be faith in the divine. That ladder of faith, hope, and charity is missing part of the process: the ladder itself needs to offer a reason to climb it in the first place. If we merely desire one day to have charity and a heaven-bound life, as when we wait to worship until the building is complete or wait to give out (or read) training materials, we are doing nothing but looking at the destination the ladder leads to.

We must actually love and practice charity even to step onto the first rung of our spiritual ladder, because our desire at the moment we start a journey predicts the end of the journey. What is faith in the Lord without acting on loving the neighbor and loving the Lord? We would transform the first rung of the ladder into a lack of faith or into a rung consisting of self-love. Without charity, what would hope be? We would transform hope or reliance on love and the Lord into a rung of love of self and reliance on the self. What would charity be without love of the neighbor? It would not exist; it would be, in the end, absolute self-absorption.

Our first step, then, is to acknowledge and love the truth of the Lord. We must realize that “faith without charity is not faith, and charity without faith is not charity, and neither has life except from the Lord. The Lord is charity and faith within us. We are charity and faith within the Lord” (TCR 336). There is no faith or charity without actions based on faith and charity. When we hit a point at which our actions are dictated by our desire to love others, we can begin to have faith.

That ladder of faith, hope, and charity is missing part of the process: the ladder itself needs to offer a reason to climb it in the first place.

Once we have that, we are given, by the Lord, hope. And this hope, while it does help us have personal hope, is not defined by our personal hope. Rather, heavenly hope is a hope for others. It is the power for us to say, "I can make a difference in this other person's life. I can make a difference in the community around me. Together, my neighbor and I can work to bring about a more loving community." It means ceasing to draw labels and lines around us to define who is in or out or who is worth working with. It means trusting your neighbor.

In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, Tim Robbin's character has just been released from an extended stay in solitary confinement. When questioned how he got through it, he says he's had composers with him. Those around him look shocked, and one fellow inmate asks, "Did they let you bring a record player?" Robbins replies, "No. They can take every possession away from you, but they can't take the music in your head." When the crowd disperses, Morgan Freeman's character asks Robbins's character what he's talking about. Robbins replies, "Hope—they can't take that from you." Freeman replies, "Hope is a dangerous thing."

Hope's combination of faith and charity gives you the ability to move mountains, but if your faith and trust in the Lord collapse, it leaves you in what seems like a pile of rubble. If we can fight through those temptations to doubt, we are given the true gift of charity—charity consisting of charity, faith, and hope bound together. When we have that, we are in the Lord, the Lord is us, and we are in the Father.

The disciples were waiting in a room. They were hiding out. They were not spreading the word of the Lord. Their faith had been challenged, and they turned from loving others to protecting the self. Just like Thomas, all of them also doubted. (And honestly, rightfully so; they did not have the complete story, as we do.) Where are we on our spiritual journeys? Are we in a room protecting ourselves, or are we living lives of faith and charity? Are we spreading faith, hope, and charity in the world around us?

One who has climbed Jacob's ladder sees a world full of wonder and proclaims that wonder, for it is impossible to keep the beauty of the divine quiet or confined.

"Faith, hope, and charity abide, these three, but the greatest of these is charity."

Prayers

O Christ, you are a bright flame before me;
You are a guiding star above me;
You are the light and love I see in others' eyes.
Keep me, O Christ,
in a love that is tender;
Keep me, O Christ,
in a love that is true;
Keep me, O Christ,
in a love that is strong;
This day, tomorrow, and always.
- *Prayers from Iona*

Lord Jesus Christ, who has taught us that the greatest of all is the servant of all; take from us every false ambition and make us joyful in the service of our sisters and brothers; for your name's sake. Amen.

Monday, April 16

Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and charged him, "You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women. Go at once to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father; and take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother. *Genesis 28:1-2*

When man is being regenerated, he is at first led by the Lord as an infant, then as a child, afterwards as a youth, and at last as an adult. The truths he learns as an infant child are altogether external and corporeal, for as yet he is unable to apprehend interior truths. These truths are no other than knowledges of such things as contain, in their inmost, things Divine; for there are knowledges of things that do not contain anything Divine in their inmost; and there are knowledges that do contain it. *Arcana Coelestia n. 3665.5*

Tuesday, April 17

"May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and numerous, that you may become a company of peoples. May he give to you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your offspring with you, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien—land that God gave to Abraham." Thus Isaac sent Jacob away; and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, Jacob's and Esau's mother. *Genesis 28:3-5*

The good which is from truth is inverse to the good from which is truth. Those who are being regenerated, before their regeneration is completed, are in the good which is from truth; whereas the same when regenerated are in the good from which is truth.

Arcana Coelestia n. 3669

Wednesday, April 18

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

Genesis 28:10-12

All the histories of the Word are truths more remote from essential Divine doctrinal things, but still are of service to little children and older children, in order that thereby they may be by degrees introduced into the interior doctrinal matters of truth and good. *Arcana Coelestia n. 3690*

Thursday, April 19

And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." *Genesis 28:13-15*

The knowledges by means of which the human understanding rises, God holding it in His hand and leading it, may be likened to the steps of the ladder seen by Jacob, which was set upon the earth with the top of it reaching to heaven. *True Christian Religion n. 24.2*

Friday, April 20

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. *Genesis 28:16-19*

The fear of love is a fear of injuring the Lord in any way, or of injuring the neighbor in any way, thus of injuring what is good and true in any way, and consequently of injuring the sacred things of love and faith and the consequent worship. *Arcana Coelestia n. 3718*

Saturday, April 21

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you."

Genesis 28:20-22

The case is the same with those who call themselves Christians and say they worship Christ, but do not live according to His precepts; such worship Him with idolatry, because they worship His name alone, since it is a false Christ whom they worship

Arcana Coelestia (Potts) n. 3732.2

APR 22 THE WORK OF LOVE AND WISDOM

Rev. Kimberly M. Hinrichs

Micah 6:6-8

“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Luke 11:33-36

“No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar, but on the lampstand so that those who enter may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness. Therefore consider whether the light in you is not darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, with no part of it in darkness, it will be as full of light as when a lamp gives you light with its rays.”

Sermon

It is a sign of the times that among the most popular syndicated comic strips today is one in which the everyday life of corporate America is ridiculed to the point of hilarity. *Dilbert*, the brainchild of Scott Adams, a Bay Area local, is a scathing critique of inept managers, faulty products, Machiavellian business schemes, and endless permutations of the bizarre personality traits of co-workers. Adams’s point of view has struck a chord with millions of people who can identify with the bittersweet struggle to earn a living in a system that does not inherently uphold their own well-being as its ultimate end. And yet it is in this capitalist system that we Americans carve out our destinies, form lifelong relationships, and usher our souls along on the never-ending process of regeneration. Although *Dilbert* might never admit it, work is clearly a spiritual undertaking.

The workers of this country, from the railroad builders to the garment workers, from the teachers to the architects of the telecommunications infrastructure, from the farm workers to the retail salespeople—the labor of these workers has formed this country into the most powerful nation on earth.

It is right indeed to give thanks to the generations of hard workers who have made it possible for us to live the way we do today.

A few decades ago, it was believed that advances in technology would lead us to work less—that the array of new machines handling menial tasks for us would result in an ever-increasing amount of leisure time for all classes of people. Far from that vision, today’s workers are putting in longer hours than ever before, and for many people, work has become a primary arena in which to look for meaning in one’s life.

One of the things I love the most about the theology of our church is that it is supremely practical—its sublime spiritual truths are applicable to everyday life. Emanuel Swedenborg himself exemplified a practical, spiritually grounded life in his own work. He had a career as a brilliant scientist and distinguished statesman before turning his primary attention to his spiritual and theological undertakings after a life-changing visionary experience at the age of 54. Even after his change of vocation, he continued to make contributions to government affairs, which many people understand as a testament to his conviction that we all must be of service in the real world.

One of the central concepts of Swedenborg’s theology is the notion of use. Use—or “usefulness,” as we might say in contemporary parlance—is joined with love and wisdom as the essential tripartite formulation of existence. Swedenborg believed that the divine itself consists of love and wisdom. Divine love and divine wisdom are in constant, co-creative interplay with each other, but the way in which they come into being in the world is through uses. Uses are essentially actions that are good, and Swedenborg believed that the entire created universe is made of and for uses. In other words, love and wisdom are actualized in this world through the actions of human beings. The way we bring God into existence is through our words, our speech, our actions—and indeed, through our occupations.

I would like to convey two main points about usefulness. Usefulness, first of all, means that we are meant to live out our spiritual values in the real world. It means that true piety and devotion are to be undertaken not only in church but all over the place, right in the middle of our ordinary lives. Secondly, usefulness means that part of the essential responsibility we inherit as God’s creatures is to offer ourselves in service to creation. We use our lives to give back a little bit of the awesome beauty and wonder that we have each been given ourselves.

It might seem natural that as people of faith we would live out our spiritual values in the real world. Why does it get so complicated, then, in the daily living of our lives? One reason is that the spiritual pitfalls of work can be tricky. For many, work has taken over the majority of our lives, and yet its goals can be incongruous with our own. Work can also be deceptive. It can drive us to attach importance to wealth, success, and authority. If we work in business, work can seduce us into believing that the laws of supply and demand are in fact eternal spiritual truths, and that the activity of *buying things* is the ultimate reason for being. In addition, work can make us perpetually future-oriented—focused on projects that need to be completed and goals that need to be reached—and by doing so it can diminish our ability to live in the present. Work can fool us into believing that an organization’s goals are actually more important than the humanity of our colleagues. Any of these distortions, taken to heart, can destroy the soul.

To avoid these pitfalls, we must be guided by a spiritual roadmap. Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures reflects this guidance. In the passage from Micah, the questioner wonders what kinds of elaborate sacrifices he should bring to express his devotion to God. In ancient Near Eastern religions, it was a common practice to sacrifice valuable goods to show the extent of one’s faith. Alas, the answer in this case is that none of them are needed: all that the Lord requires is that we act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

To embrace the concept of uses means that we do not let the negative potentials of work overtake us. It means that we bring our spiritual values right into the conference calls, the classrooms, the email messages, and the budget decisions. We practice an awareness and conscientiousness of how our speech and actions affect those around us. We can strive toward being present to the gifts of the moment, and we can embrace our whole, complicated, expansive selves that spill over the distinct categories of our daily occupations. We can help make decisions that will steer our organization’s efforts to benefit humankind. Perhaps most importantly, we can honor the people with whom we share our lives, understanding them as both flawed and gifted, wounded and productive. In all of these “good actions” we practice, we are

We can strive toward being present to the gifts of the moment, and we can embrace our whole, complicated, expansive selves that spill over the distinct categories of our daily occupations.

bringing divine love and divine wisdom into reality in our world.

The second aspect of uses that I noted can be more elusive, and more challenging. It is the idea that with our very lives we can be useful to God’s creation. For some, this idea can translate into finding one’s mission in life; for others, it can speak to the need to live in harmony with one’s passions and values. One of the most helpful expressions of how to go about being useful in this way comes from Frederick Buechner: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s great hunger meet.” This is a succinct expression of usefulness; we become useful when we use our gifts and abilities in a way that both is needed by the world and expresses God’s eternal love.

The passage we heard from the Gospel of Luke reflects this notion as well. It speaks of the eyes being the lamp of the body and the need for them to be clear enough to expel darkness and fill one’s entire body with light. While the light in this passage has frequently been understood to symbolize faith in Jesus that is not to be hidden, I read it in another way as well. To me, the image of a person illuminated from the inside out is a representation of that place Buechner describes where one’s inner being has found perfect harmony with God and the needs of the world. It is a radiant, life-giving, and inspiring image.

Millard Fuller is a man who has made usefulness the foundation of his life. In fact, he has poured lots of foundations in the thirty-six years since he founded Habitat for Humanity. He did not set out with a mission in life to help others. In fact, his goal from the time he was a young child was, quite simply, to make a lot of money. He proved good at it, running a successful law practice in Alabama as well as several profitable side businesses at the same time. He bought a big house, a fancy car, vacation homes, boats, and household help for his wife and children. When his company treasurer walked into his office one day in 1964 and announced that he was a millionaire, Fuller wasn’t even surprised. He immediately set his next goal at ten million.

But things were not all rosy for Fuller and his wife. He had become addicted to his work and had let all other aspects of his life fall away in importance. His wife, whom he had cherished so dearly when they

were married, had in effect lost her spouse for years on end while Fuller had become more devoted to his work than to anything else. One day she announced to him that she didn't love him anymore and that she couldn't stay in their loveless marriage. It was the lightning bolt that changed his life. Up to that point, success was all he knew. It had never occurred to him that his marriage wouldn't be a success too. He desperately wanted to continue his marriage, and he resolved to do whatever it would take to keep their family together. A few weeks later, Fuller and his wife found themselves in a New York taxicab. And it was there that he was hit with a flash of inspiration. "Linda," he said, "I know what we should do. I think we need to give away all our money. We need to give it away and make ourselves available for whatever God wants us to do."

Linda whole-heartedly agreed, and they proceeded to give their money to those in need and explore new ways of acting in the world that would benefit others. They became involved in an intentional Christian community, and through that organization became aware of the desolate conditions in which some of the local poor families were living near Americus, Georgia. They started a program to build houses for people, guided by the principle that all people deserve a decent place to live. Today, Habitat for Humanity has built more than 150,000 houses in more than 89 countries. Their work has changed the lives of thousands of people who now have the confidence, pride, and security of living in their own home.

It has also changed Millard Fuller. "I doubt anyone has felt Habitat's power to transform lives more than I have," he says. "I was on the verge of losing everything that truly meant anything to me. I had gone so far down the wrong track that I hadn't even noticed how empty my life had become. But when I turned my attention to helping other people, I healed myself, and I healed my relationships with the people I loved."

Millard Fuller found a way for his abilities and skills to be used in the service of humanity, and in a way that is deeply harmonious with his values. Swedenborg wrote, "The universe has been created by God in order that uses might come into existence; and therefore the universe may be called a theater of uses" (*True Christianity* 67). My hope is that we might all consider how we can do our part toward embodying love and wisdom through our usefulness. In bringing our spirituality into everyday practice and in thinking of our very lives as an offering to creation, we *respond* in our relationship with God.

The poet Mary Oliver, in her poem "The Summer Day" poses this question:

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Amen.

Prayers

Take from me, O Christ,
All my strength that resists you,
All my fullness that excludes you,
All my ambitions that deny you,
All my hopes that refuse you.
Weaken me with the sadness of my dull certainties
That I may catch the dawn of the first new day.

- Mark Wakelin

Remember, O Lord, what you have wrought in us,
and not what we deserve;
And as you have called us to your service,
make us worthy of our calling;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

- Leonine Sacramentary, 5th century

I sit down, Lord,
to watch television,
to write a letter,
to mend clothes,
to rest my feet,
to listen to music,
to read a paper,
to shut my eyes and forget.

You sit down, Lord,
to wait for me to be ready for you.
Help me, among other things for which I sit,
to remember you
waiting for me.

- *from Pray Now: Daily Devotions with the Church of Scotland (1995)*

Monday, April 23

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

Luke 6:37-38

Charity towards the neighbor, or the spiritual affection of truth and good, is described, namely, that in the measure and after the manner that anyone is in such charity or in such affection in the world, so he comes into it after death. *Apocalypse Explained n. 629.14*

Tuesday, April 24

He also told them a parable: “Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. *Luke 6:39-40*

The Lord cannot fully lead evil people away from their evils and guide them in what is good as long as they believe that their own intelligence is everything and that divine providence is nothing.

Divine Providence n. 286

Wednesday, April 25

“Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye. *Luke 6:41-42*

It is an unalterable truth that faith and charity cannot be separated, if a man is to enjoy spiritual life and be saved. This every man may understand, even if he is not endowed with talents and the treasures of learning. Everyone sees from a certain interior perception, and consequently gives the assent of his understanding, when he hears it stated that he who lives a good life and believes aright will be saved; while he rejects from his mind, as he would a speck of dust from his eye, the statement that he who believes aright, and does not live a good life, will also be saved. *True Christian Religion n. 393*

Thursday, April 26

“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. *Luke 6:43-45*

That man is not life but a receptacle of life from God can be seen from these evident proofs, that all created things are in themselves finite, and that man, being finite, could have been created only from things finite.

True Christian Religion n. 470.2

Friday, April 27

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. *Luke 6:46-48*

In the spiritual world where spaces are nothing but appearances, wisdom causes presence and love causes conjunction, each acting in turn. There is an acknowledgment of the Lord from wisdom, and there is an acknowledgment of the Lord from love. Acknowledgment of the Lord from wisdom, which regarded in itself is merely a matter of knowledge, results from doctrine; while acknowledgment of the Lord from love results from a life according to doctrine.

Divine Providence n. 91.2

Saturday, April 28

“But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.” *Luke 6:49*

That religion is of the life and that the life of religion is to do that which is good is seen by everyone who reads the Word, and is acknowledged by him while he is reading it. *Doctrine of Life n. 2*

Jeremiah 28

In that same year, at the beginning of the reign of King Zedekiah of Judah, in the fifth month of the fourth year, the prophet Hananiah son of Azzur, from Gibeon, spoke to me in the house of the Lord, in the presence of the priests and all the people, saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, says the Lord, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon." Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord; and the prophet Jeremiah said, "Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord fulfill the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord, and all the exiles. But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet."

Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, and broke it. And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, "Thus says the Lord: This is how I will break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years." At this, the prophet Jeremiah went his way. Sometime after the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: Go, tell Hananiah, Thus says the Lord: You have broken wooden bars only to forge iron bars in place of them! For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have put an iron yoke on the neck of all these nations so that they may serve King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and they shall indeed serve him; I have even given him the wild animals. And the prophet Jeremiah said to the prophet Hananiah, "Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you made this people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the Lord: I am going to send you off the face of the earth. Within this year you will be dead, because you have spoken

rebellion against the Lord." In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died.

John 16:7-13

Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

Divine Love and Wisdom 258

Each of us is born with the ability to understand truths even at the deepest levels where angels of the third heaven live. As our human understanding climbs up on a continuum around the two higher levels, it receives the light of wisdom from those levels in the manner described above (see §256). . . The reason we do not become rational to the highest degree we are capable of is that our love, which is a matter of our intent, is not raised up in the same way as our wisdom, which is a matter of our discernment. The love that is a matter of intent is raised up only by turning our backs on evils and then by those good, thoughtful actions that are helpful to others, acts that we are then performing from the Lord. So if the love that is a matter of intent is not raised up along with it, then no matter how high the wisdom of our discernment is raised, it ultimately falls back to the level of our love.

Sermon

Give me understanding, and I will keep your law; I will observe it with my whole heart. Psalm 119:34

Our reading from Swedenborg would seem to say that the Psalmist had things backward, since it says in effect that if we observe the law with our whole hearts, we will be given understanding. There are a couple of sentences in *Secrets of Heaven* (§3207:5) that deal directly with this discrepancy: "We believe that truth enables us to sense what is good because it teaches us, but this is just the way it seems. It is the good that enables the truth to perceive, since the good is the soul and life of truth." In other words, the Psalmist would not have asked for understanding if he had not wanted to observe the law.

What we have, then, are two different views of the same process: a view from the outside and a view from within, so to speak. Much of the time, we are not thinking about how we are feeling, so in a broad sense we are relying on a kind of inertial navigation system. The Psalmist is speaking from one of those times when vague feelings of need come to the surface and prompt conscious thought. The question of understanding, of truth, does come first on that level of consciousness.

To take a more specific example, most of us go along from day to day, paying attention to what is going on around us, setting visible goals like getting the kids off to school, getting to work, getting home, and meeting the immediate needs of friends, colleagues, and family. We give our attention to figuring out what needs to be done, whether for others or for ourselves, and what our own part is in meeting those needs. This is the stuff of everyday life, the raw material of our own regeneration and of human community.

Every once in a while, though, we find ourselves asking, "What's it all about? Why am I here? What am I, really?" We look in the mirror, so to speak, and wonder what it is that we are looking at, and the mirror doesn't answer us. The answers do not seem to be on the level of our normal thought. No question, we have to look deeper.

This, when you stop to think about it, is intriguing. That is, we seem to feel that we have to look into ourselves more deeply in order to find the answers, which in turn would seem to mean that we believe the answers may actually be in there somewhere.

Are they? Doctrine says definitely, unequivocally, "Yes." We exist because we are constantly being created by the Lord. We are alive because his life is constantly flowing into us. We are human because that life is essentially love and wisdom. That wisdom is most perfect as it flows into the very center, the core of our being. It loses clarity as it comes down through the filters of the inner levels of our being, and is therefore most obscure at the lowest level, the level of our consciousness of the material world (see *Divine Love and Wisdom* 274). This phenomenon is what underlies the very familiar phenomenon of knowing what we want to say but not knowing how to say it. We cannot "think it" on the level of physical language. However, when the right words do come to mind, we have no doubt that they are right. Our deeper wisdom tells us so very clearly. The same thing

is happening when someone else says something that "makes the lights go on" for us. "That's what I believe, too, but I could never get hold of it!" In more doctrinal language we might say, "So *that's* what the Lord has been trying to tell me all these years!"

This in turn indicates that the Lord is trying to tell us profound things from the outside as well as from the inside. We are told in *Heaven and Hell* (§487) that we cannot know what our ruling love is if we want to deceive ourselves, but that if we were willing, we could learn from others who are wise, because they see what we cannot. That is one of the reasons we need true friends, people who care about us, people we can trust. It is not that they are authorities whose opinions should outweigh our own, but that they from their outside perspectives can see some things that we cannot and may offer us the "right words" that we are groping for, words that in fact will mean much more to us than they do to them. All this is summed up in a very few words in the Gospel of John: "However, when he, the Spirit of Truth, comes, he will guide you

We need true friends, people who care about us, people we can trust. ...They from their outside perspectives can see some things that we cannot.

into all truth" (John 16:13). This says two things. Most obviously, it tells us that the truth is to be found in the right spirit, namely in the Lord's presence. It also implies that it must find us, so to speak. It will come on its own schedule, not on ours.

One of my favorite Scripture passages has come to be the closing verses of Deuteronomy 18. The chapter foretells the coming of a second Moses at some future time, and the question is raised, "How can we tell which word the Lord has not spoken?" (Deuteronomy 18:21). This was a very real problem, which is the point of the graphic story told in Jeremiah 28. Here was Hananiah, with all the fire and conviction of a true prophet, saying one thing, and Jeremiah, with equal fire and conviction, saying the opposite. We know which was which. The question was answered decisively by actual events; and that is the down-to-earth commonsense counsel of Deuteronomy. "If the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the word that the Lord has not spoken" (Deuteronomy 18:22).

This criterion is not very satisfactory, simply because we want our answers now. I am reminded of Winston Churchill's remark that you can always count on Americans to do the right thing after they've tried everything else. We are currently being bombarded by solutions to our economic problems, solutions based on economic theories. The airwaves are full

of Jeremiahs and Hananiahs. There is actually a fair amount of evidence from the past that could be consulted—what the tax rates were during times of stable economic growth, for example—but the view from the ivory tower of theory is much, much easier to understand, and facts have that annoying habit of not telling us what we want to hear.

By the same token, when we try to understand ourselves, we want answers now, and on our terms. Here our third reading seconds Deuteronomy's motion, in a way. It says that if we want the answers, what we need to do is turn our backs on evils and be generous and caring toward others and toward ourselves. That is what raises our conscious thought up to the level where the answers to our questions are. It is the principle so nicely encapsulated in the advice of Wilson Van Dusen to "enter into dialogue with your works." What have I been doing when I felt most whole, most appropriate? What was different about these times? What have I been doing when I felt most fragmented, most inappropriate? What was different about those times?

This needs to be an ongoing exercise for the simple reason that no two days are alike. Every day calls for something a little different, calls us to be in the present and not in the past, to pay attention to the person who is with us—in the light of our past experiences of that person, to be sure, but with the awareness that for all we know, she may have had a significant change of heart overnight. Probably not, of course—these changes don't happen all that often—but who's to say for sure?

The main message of our Scripture readings, our Swedenborg reading, and our text is that the answers to our most basic questions about ourselves are already there within us, but gaining access to them takes time and experience. What is needed is the opening of deeper levels of thought and feeling, moving out of the shadows of materialism into the realm of the clearer light of "the Spirit of truth."

We cannot stop at this point, though. In and of themselves, moments of exceptional clarity are just that—moments. We need to come back down to our consciousness of the everyday world and to our responsibilities in it, and in that world the shallow is much more vivid than the profound; short-term goals are much more vivid than long-term ones. It is quite true that one jelly doughnut will not make any appreciable difference to our weight. The doughnut is right there, though. Next week is off in the future somewhere.

What is necessary is a fundamental shift in attitude, namely that we come to love the long-term goals. That is what experience teaches us, if we listen to it. That is what our third reading tells us in no uncertain terms. "So if the love that is a matter of intent is not raised up along with it, then no matter how high the wisdom of our discernment is raised, it ultimately falls back to the level of our love."

Here again, we need to recognize that the kind of love we need is already there within us. The simple fact that we are alive tells us that it is flowing in constantly from the Lord. It flows all the way down into our most earthbound consciousness, all the way down into our craving for jelly doughnuts, so to speak. In fact, if we could probe within our souls about what we regard as our worst cravings, we would eventually find some genuine need. We do need a sense of autonomy, for example. Without it, we have no sense of responsibility. That sense of autonomy is constantly threatened by the fact that we simply are not self-sufficient, and the effort to defend it by controlling others can lead to such dismayingly destructive behavior as brutal domestic abuse.

So the statement that in order to understand truths at deeper levels we must turn our backs on evils is not just a pious sentiment. It is, or should be, a clarion call representing the most passionate commitment of which we are capable. It should so permeate our sensibilities that we refrain from even the slightest unkindness or thoughtlessness.

That is a lot to ask, but it is just what we need. Our lives are not made up of great, dramatic choices between the perfect brilliance of absolute heaven and the abysmal darkness of utter hell but of little shades of gray, and only as we turn our backs on the darkness and turn toward the light in the little ways that make up most of our lives will we find the answers for which we long, the answers that we already know. Amen.

Prayer

Lord, show us thy face once more, that all times may exult in thy brightness; give us the light of day, darkened on earth at thy death.

Out of the prison of death thou art rescuing numberless captives; freely they tread in the way whither their Maker has gone.

Jesus has harrowed hell; he has led captivity captive: Darkness and chaos and death flee from the face of the light.

- Easter Processional, Western Rite

Monday, April 30

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. *Job 38:1-3*

The angels themselves declare that all their wisdom comes through the Word; for the light they enjoy depends upon how deep is their understanding of the Word. The light of heaven is Divine wisdom.

True Christian Religion n. 242

Tuesday, May 1

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? *Job 38:4-7*

Charity towards the neighbor, or the spiritual affection of truth and good, is described, namely, that in the measure and after the manner that anyone is in such charity or in such affection in the world, so he comes into it after death. *Apocalypse Explained n. 629.14*

Wednesday, May 2

"Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?—when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped?' *Job 38:8-11*

It is the darkness of the cloud, through which the sun's rays shine, that is turned into colors; and thus the color is such as is the darkness which is touched by the brightness of the rays. The case is the same with the spiritual man. With him, the darkness which is here called a "cloud" is falsity, which is the same as the Own of his understanding. When innocence, charity, and mercy are insinuated into this Own by the Lord, then this cloud appears no longer as falsity, but as an appearance of truth, together with truth from the Lord.

Arcana Coelestia n. 1043

Thursday, May 3

"Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this."

Job 38:16-18

Some people believe nothing except that which they grasp with the senses, and nowadays they not only reason from the senses but also do so about Divine arcana by means of a philosophy unknown to the ancients. As a result the light of understanding is utterly darkened; and that darkness is growing so deep that it can hardly be dispelled.

Arcana Coelestia (Elliott) n. 2124

Friday, May 4

Then Job answered the Lord: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.' I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

Job 42:1-6

Reasoning from the light of nature by means of knowledges can be restrained by God only.

Apocalypse Explained n. 455.18

Saturday, May 5

And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days. *Job 42:10, 16-17*

Anyone can see from reason that as there was by creation a marriage of good and truth in every created thing, and as this marriage was afterwards severed, the Lord must be continually working to restore it, and therefore its restoration, and the consequent conjunction of the created universe with the Lord through man, must be the end of Divine providence.

Divine Providence (Ager) n. 9

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- 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.