

JULY/AUGUST 2012

Body & Soul

Handwritten text in a cursive script, likely a manuscript or a page from a book, visible on the left side of the cover.



SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

OUR DAILY ✠ BREAD

Handwritten signature or text at the bottom right corner.

Prayer

May it please you, O Lord,
to enlighten me
with the fire of your love.
I offer my hands to do your work,
my lips to sing your praise,
and my life to proclaim your glory.
Look upon my neighbors
in their need
and guide me and bless me
as I serve You in them;
for Your sake.

St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

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

ISSN: 1056-3296 • Volume 64, Number 4
Jul./Aug. 2012
Published by:

**General Convention of the Church of the New
Jerusalem**
11 Highland Avenue, Newtonville, MA 02460-1852
(617) 969-4240

Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter, Editors
43 Hobart Square, Whitman, MA 02382
ourdailybreadmag@gmail.com • (781) 447-4901
www.oddb-online.com

Issued under the auspices of the
Council of Ministers of the Swedenborgian Church
USA & Canada: US \$15/year

Dear Readers,

No less a cultural icon than the cartoon character Bart Simpson once said, "There's no such thing as a soul. It's just something they made up to scare kids."

Mr. Simpson's confidence about the issue notwithstanding, scientists, philosophers, and theologians have sought for millenia to answer the question of whether the soul exists, and if so, where, how, and why – not to mention whether it exists independently of our physical bodies.

Frankly, it's a lot less work not to think about the soul. Much of the modern world, preoccupied with the material concerns Wordsworth described as "getting and spending," can think of other ways to occupy its time than worrying about something that cannot be seen or touched. Besides, a life of sensory satisfaction and physical experience beckons!

The problem is, a life directed solely by physical concerns traps us in a continual state of desire, of yearning, that no amount of money or pleasure can silence or soothe. The soul is a reality of this world, and its care, maintenance, and purpose matter right now. The Lord himself offers us a model of the beauty, struggle, and lifegiving power that result when body and soul work together to fulfill God's loving intentions for Creation.

This month's issue explores the divine dance between the soul and the body. May it inspire you to offer your hands and spirit to work the Lord's will, this day and always.

Many blessings,
Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

In This Issue

- The Homing Instinct*4
Rev. Dr. George F. Dole
- Living with the Gift of Responsibility*8
Rev. Eric Hoffman
- The Kingdom Within*11
Rev. Kit Billings
- Only This Life Counts*15
Rev. Dr. William R. Woofenden
- Have You Anything Here To Eat?*19
Rev. Sarah Buteux
- Everyday Miracles*22
Rev. Dr. George F. Dole
- Come, Follow Me*26
Rev. Dr. David J. Fekete
- Birds and Earth*30
Rev. Kevin K. Baxter
- Striking the Balance*33
Rev. Julian Duckworth

Contributors to This Issue



The Rev. Dr. David Fekete is the pastor of the Church of the Holy City in Edmonton, Canada. He also serves as the National Youth Chaplain and is one of the Swedenborgian Church's delegates to the National Council of Churches, USA.



The Rev. Eric Hoffman is the general pastor of the Illinois Association. He has served as the pastor of the Virginia Street Church in St. Paul, Minnesota and the LaPorte New Church in La Porte, Indiana.



The Rev. Dr. George Dole is Adjunct Professor of Biblical Studies at the Swedenborgian House of Studies. He is also the pastor of the New Church of Bath, Maine.



The Rev. Sarah Buteux is an ordained Swedenborgian minister serving the First Congregational Church of Hadley, Massachusetts (UCC). She previously served as the pastor of the Cambridge Society of the New Jerusalem.



The Rev. Kit Billings has served as the pastor of churches in St. Louis and St. Paul, and has been called as the new pastor of the La Porte New Church in Indiana.



The Rev. Kevin Baxter is the pastor of the Cambridge Society of the New Jerusalem in Massachusetts and co-editor of Our Daily Bread. He also serves as the Swedenborgian chaplain to the Harvard Chaplains.



The Rev. Julian Duckworth is the president of the New Church in Australia. He is also the minister of the Roseville New Church in Sydney.



The late Rev. Dr. William Woofenden served several churches and taught at the Swedenborg School of Religion. He passed fully into the spiritual world in the spring of 2012.

Numbers 9:15-23

On the day the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the covenant; and from evening until morning it was over the tabernacle, having the appearance of fire. It was always so: the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night. Whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, then the Israelites would set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the Israelites would camp. At the command of the Lord the Israelites would set out, and at the command of the Lord they would camp. As long as the cloud rested over the tabernacle, they would remain in camp. Even when the cloud continued over the tabernacle many days, the Israelites would keep the charge of the Lord, and would not set out. Sometimes the cloud would remain a few days over the tabernacle, and according to the command of the Lord they would remain in camp; then according to the command of the Lord they would set out. Sometimes the cloud would remain from evening until morning; and when the cloud lifted in the morning, they would set out, or if it continued for a day and a night, when the cloud lifted they would set out. Whether it was two days, or a month, or a longer time, that the cloud continued over the tabernacle, resting upon it, the Israelites would remain in camp and would not set out; but when it lifted they would set out. At the command of the Lord they would camp, and at the command of the Lord they would set out. They kept the charge of the Lord, at the command of the Lord by Moses.

John 14:1-7

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

It is recognized that we have one state in infancy, another in childhood, another in adolescence, another in maturity, and another in old age. It is also recognized that we shed our state of infancy and its games when we make the passage into the state of childhood and that we shed the state of childhood when we make the passage into the state of adolescence, shed this, in turn, when we make the passage into the state of maturity, and shed this again when we make the passage into the state of old age. And if we reflect we can also recognize that each age has its delights and that through these, in sequence, we are led to those appropriate to the next age—that these delights serve to bring us through from one stage to another, eventually to the delight in intelligence and wisdom appropriate to old age.

Heaven and Hell 44, 519

Kindred souls gravitate toward each other spontaneously, as it were, for with each other they feel as though they are with their own family, at home, while with others they feel like foreigners, as though they were abroad. When they are with kindred souls, they enjoy the fullest freedom and find life totally delightful.

The Lord... takes each angel to her or his community. This happens in various ways, sometimes with detours. When they arrive at their own communities, their inner natures are opened, and since they are in harmony with the inner natures of the angels who are members of that community, they are recognized instantly and accepted with joy.

Sermon

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself, so that you too may be where I am. You know where I am going, and you know the way.
John 14:3-4

The paleontologist-theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said it very concisely: “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.” If we look at the Gospels in their place in the biblical narrative, this is surely one of the main messages they intend. A central theme of the Sermon on the Mount is that controlling outward behavior is not enough. We must reject not simply murder but also the anger that can prompt it. We are to address our behavioral problems at their source, in our hearts.

Taken with full seriousness, this is an incredibly severe discipline. Put it together with the Lord’s

statement that anyone who is unjust in trivial matters is unjust also in great ones (Luke 16:10), and it shines a spotlight on all the little self-indulgences that don't seem to matter all that much, the antisocial impulses that we hide beneath a necessary screen of social graces.

It tells us that if we were to take these self-centered impulses out and look at them under a microscope, they would be alarmingly ugly—in fact, terrifying. The desire not to have someone else in the same room is no different in quality than the desire not to have that person (or that class of person) in the same world. It is essentially dehumanizing the other. We ignore this principle at our peril, because left unrecognized and unchecked, it leads straight to genocide.

That's the bad news. The good news is that in its "least forms," this lethal tendency is cut down to our size. It is something we can deal with. Day after day, we are given opportunities to recognize and reject such impulses. This is surely why the Ten Commandments have such a forbidding tone and why our theology lays so much stress on fleeing from evils as sins. It can sound negative, but it embodies the same sanity as the medical principle *primum non nocere*, "First of all, do no harm."

The trouble is that self-indulgence feels good, and it feels good *right now*. It feels good because in some measure it is good—it is just not good enough, not good enough to last. Ideally, though, it points beyond itself. The Lord is constantly calling us to the pleasures of heaven, but we are so embroiled with this transitory material world that sometimes all we can hear is the call to pleasure here and now. Wordsworth said it well: "The world is too much with us; late and soon, Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." We mistake the material shadow for the spiritual substance, treasure on earth for treasure in heaven.

The fact is, of course, that it is treasure in heaven that we really want. That is, we want warmth and understanding, appreciation, safety and comfort, meaning. We want something fresh and new as well as something solid and trustworthy. We want two things that are often in tension with each other—we want our freedom, and we want to belong; and in the words of our third reading, it is when we are with kindred spirits that we are most fully free.

These immaterial needs cannot be met on the level of reality, where there is only so much "stuff"

to go around and where outward appearances are so often deceiving, where the physically homely may be spiritually lovely and the financially poor spiritually rich, and vice versa. How can we find where we truly belong in such capricious circumstances? Small wonder the nineteenth-century hymnologist Thomas R. Taylor wrote, "I'm but a stranger here, heav'n is my home." Small wonder that a heartfelt melody by Antonin Dvorak inspired the haunting song "Goin' Home."

Heaven is our home, and deep down inside, we know it. According to a *Nature Bulletin* from Illinois,

"We share with our dogs, cats and other domestic animals an attachment to a place we both regard as home. If one of these animals strays, or is sold to a new owner, or is carried away and abandoned, it acts lost and homesick as it struggles to grope its way back. This is easy to see in pets and among livestock on farms. Surprisingly, many such displaced animals do find their way home, often through miles of strange country."

One of the central features of our human nature is our own subtle, powerful homing instinct.

It could serve as a parable for our own journey, "often through miles of strange country." It could serve as a statement of the theme of the biblical narrative—Israel following the ark in search of her homeland, a quest that the New Testament sees as leading to the "kingdom of heaven" announced by both John the Baptist and Jesus. One of the central features of our human nature is our own subtle, powerful homing instinct.

Oliver Wendell Holmes's poem "The Chambered Nautilus" comes to mind. The nautilus shell is an expanding spiral in form, with each successive chamber larger than the previous one. Holmes saw this as a parable of spiritual growth. "Year after year beheld the silent toil That spread his lustrous coil; Still, as the spiral grew, He left the past year's dwelling for the new," leading up to the climactic lines, "Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul, As the swift seasons roll! Leave thy low-vaulted past! Let each new temple, nobler than the last, Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast, Till thou at length art free, Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!"

For the past few decades, we have witnessed the building of one "more stately" physical mansion after another. When we read Swedenborg's descriptions of mansions in heaven, we can well believe that this is our homing instinct at work. We can also believe—we

cannot help but believe—that unless Oliver Wendell Holmes’s call is heard, unless more stately mansions are being built for the souls that will live in these structures, the physical houses will be empty of all that truly matters, of all that matters forever.

It is striking that Wordsworth’s lament over our worldliness does not turn us away from the world. After those first two lines, it continues,

Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon,
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.—Great God! I’d rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

The poet would have us turn away from our own “getting and spending” to hear the voice of God-given nature. Paganism may be primitive, but at least it sees some form of divinity in the surging of the sea. But no, “we are out of tune,” and we are out of tune not because we are deaf but because we are so tuned in to our own compositions.

Here again, we can see clear evidence of our homing instinct as millions of city dwellers use the freedom of vacation time by “heading for the hills,” or the shore or the woods, as soon as they can. Something inside us answers to the extraordinary range of nature’s beauties—from exquisite tiny flowers to scenes of epic grandeur, from forest silence to deafening ocean surf. We are at home in the world of nature.

This brings us close to the heart of our homing instinct: our attraction to beauty. For commercial evidences of this, we need only turn to the cosmetic and fashion industries. For the damage that can be done by its superficiality, we can turn to cases of anorexia. What we cannot afford to ignore is that physical beauty is persuasive. In a way, it amplifies emotions. The more we are attracted to someone, the more that individual’s approval means to us, and the more that individual’s disapproval or rejection hurts.

This again is a shadow of something heavenly. We read in *Heaven and Hell* (§414) of women who “come more and more into the flower of growing youth and into a beauty that surpasses any notion of beauty accessible to our sight. Their goodness and caring is what gives them their form and gives them its own

likeness, making the pleasure and beauty of caring radiate from every least bit of their faces. . . . Some have seen them, and have been stunned.”

We treasure beauty. It may irritate us when we drop an empty peanut-butter jar and it breaks, but it hurts when we drop a Steuben vase. Lovely things should be cared for.

This is a vivid shadow of the far more essential fact that lovely people should be cared for, and that the Lord has created every one of us to be lovely. Our spiritual homing instinct is the Lord’s call to surround ourselves with beautiful people, people whom we treasure and who treasure us. Each motion we make toward what we perceive as beautiful can bring us nearer to this goal if we can see through it, looking beyond its confines to something larger and more genuine. “Let each new temple, nobler than the last, Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast, Till thou at length art free, Leaving thine outgrown shell by life’s unresting sea!” Amen.

Prayer

Break my bonds, O Lord, and raise my heart. Keep my whole being fixed on you. Let me never lose sight of you, and while I gaze on you, let my love of you grow more and more every day. - J. H. Newman

ODB Online Sign-up

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

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

Step One: Go to www.swedenborg.org

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

Step Three: Enter your email address.

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

Monday, July 2

“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. *Matthew 6:1*

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. *True Christian Religion #440*

Tuesday, July 3

“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. *Matthew 6:2-4*

“Alms” in the most general sense signifies every good that man wills and does, and “to pray” signifies in the same sense every truth that man thinks and speaks. Those who do these two things “to be seen,” that is, that they may be manifest, do good and speak truth for the sake of self and the world, that is, for the sake of glory, which is the delight of self-love that the world affords. *Apocalypse Explained #695.5*

Wednesday, July 4

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. *Matthew 6:5-6*

Loving good and truth for the sake of good and truth is reward, for the reason that the Lord and heaven are in that love. *Ibid.*

Thursday, July 5

“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. *Matthew 6:7-8*

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

Friday, July 6

“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

Matthew 6:9-13

The spirit of one who is in correspondence (that is, with whom the external man corresponds to the internal) is fair and beautiful, such as is heavenly love in form; but the spirit of one who is in what is opposed (that is, with whom the external man is opposed to the internal), however great may be the outward resemblance to the other, is black and ugly, such as is the love of self and of the world, that is, such as is contempt of others and hatred in form.

Arcana Coelestia #3425.3

Saturday, July 7

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. *Matthew 6:14-15*

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 #1017*

JUL 8 LIVING WITH THE GIFT OF RESPONSIBILITY

Rev. Eric Hoffman

Genesis 18:17-27, 31-33

The Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." Then the Lord said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know." So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord.

Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" And the Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." And the Lord went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

John 7:14-18

About the middle of the festival Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach. The Jews were astonished at it, saying, "How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?" Then Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or

whether I am speaking on my own. Those who speak on their own seek their own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and there is nothing false in him."

Sermon

When I was in college, I took a class in field ecology. We took a field trip one weekend to a place called Calamus Swamp, about forty miles south of Columbus, Ohio, to observe some of the unique environmental dynamics there. Calamus Swamp was a glacial lake, we were told, which is a rarity in southern Ohio, where the glaciers only lightly danced across the land.

Now that I have moved to Minnesota, I have discovered the real reason glacial lakes are rare in Ohio: Minnesota has been hoarding them!

In an effort to learn more about my adopted state, I not only spent some time at the science museum with exhibits that explain why Minnesota is the way it is, but I also borrowed a few books on the subject from the library out in Plymouth. One particular book, *Minnesota's Natural Heritage* by John R. Tester, is proving very educational. It highlights all of Minnesota's major biomes—coniferous forests, deciduous forests, tall-grass prairies, and wetlands—and the wildlife we can expect to find there. I recommend it not only to someone moving into the state, but also to those who have lived here all their lives and might not fully understand the richness in their own backyard. It seems to me that nature is one of the things Minnesota does very well, and I've been impressed by the effort I've seen that goes into making sure the nature stays natural.

One of my favorite cartoons shows an angelic cleaning lady standing amid the stars with a feather duster. She's ready to clean the planet Earth, suspended there in front of her. God walks by and says, "Oh, don't touch that one. I'm trying to teach them something about responsibility."

Looking at some of the environmental challenges we've created for ourselves, it doesn't seem that as a species we have, in fact, learned responsibility. Now, I know this world has no shortage of people who are willing to jump up on a soapbox and inform everybody else that we need to pay more attention to the environment. I tend to be one of those people, but this isn't going to be one of those sermons. I'm not going to subject you to a message that you've

undoubtedly heard many times over, and that most of you probably agree with. Instead, I'd like to share with you part of the introduction of a book that I've come to value quite highly for its message and its clarity of expression. The author begins by admitting:

It is already too late to save our planet from harm. Too much has happened already: farms have been turned into deserts, forests have been clear-cut to wasteland, lakes have been poisoned, the air is filled with harmful gases. It is even too late to save ourselves from the effects of other harmful processes, for they have already been set in motion, and will inevitably take their course. The global temperature will rise. The ozone layer will continue to fray. Pollution will sicken or kill more and more living creatures. All those things have already gone so far that they must now inevitably get worse before they can get better.

The only choice left to us is to decide how *much* worse we are willing to let things get.

We still have time, however, to save, or restore, a large part of the gentle and benevolent environment that has made our lives possible. We can't, however, do it easily. We can't do it at all without at the same time making considerable social, economic, and political changes to our world. These changes go far beyond anything we can accomplish as individuals, and to describe why these large-scale changes are necessary, what they must be, and how we can make them happen is what this book is about.¹

The author is trying to inspire in us a sense of stewardship toward the planet. We talk about stewardship quite a bit in the context of our church, and we have realized that if we do not take care of our church, it will cease to function. When it does function efficiently, everyone will be nourished who is part of its community. The same is very much true of this planet Earth. We only have to go up a few miles to see that there's just a thin layer on the surface of the planet in which all of its life exists. That thin, onion-skin biosphere has to feed, clothe, and shelter 6.5 billion human beings, plus many, many times that number of non-human individuals that call the earth their home. Unfortunately, we've proven that we can damage that biosphere much more rapidly than it can heal itself.

When there is a disruption in our environment, we suffer. When we take care of the planet, all life is nourished. So you see, in many ways, environmental stewardship is not that different from church stewardship. Both come from the same place within

a person—that deep place where covenants are made. Both are responsibilities that we accept and embrace and that enlighten us in the doing of them.

But, more than that, environmental responsibility is a gift that God offers us. You see, out of all the lifeforms that grace this planet, only humans can function as its caretakers. Only humans have the right combination of gifts to function in that capacity—to understand how an ecological system works and how all of its parts interrelate—to be able to devise means of regulating our environment for the sake of equilibrium. It is part of our purpose in this world.

It's as though God the Eternal Parent has sent us to study in the great university called the Natural World. We need to learn all that we can, but also get a job as a caretaker to help pay for our education and "build character." As many of us have already discovered, sometimes a job can teach us more about life than classes can. So when we elect to be environmentally responsible, we learn more about what it is to be human. What greater gift can there be than an opportunity to discover our selves?

As the author correctly points out, there is much we need to change in order to lessen harm to the environment, and one person can only do so much. One person needn't feel responsible for producing a huge result. We are all responsible for doing our part. As the story in the book of Genesis reveals, just a few people can make a big difference in the fate of an environment. Margaret Mead once wrote, "It is not only true that a few concerned people, working together and out of compassion, can turn the world around—in fact, such an effort is the only thing that ever has." Amen.

Prayer

There is no plant in the ground but tells of your beauty, O Christ.

There is no creature on the earth, there is no life in the sea, but proclaims your goodness.

There is no bird on the wing, there is no star in the sky, but is full of your blessing.

Lighten my understanding of your presence all around, O Christ;

Kindle my will to care for Creation.

- J. Philip Newell

¹ Frederik Pohl, *Our Angry Earth* (New York: Tor), pp ix-x.

Daily Meditations

Monday, July 9

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. *Matthew 6:16*

When a person has been regenerated; he is then indignant if anyone thinks that he benefits his neighbor for the sake of reward, for he feels delight and blessedness in imparting benefits, and not in recompense. *Arcana Coelestia #8002.8*

Tuesday, July 10

“But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. *Matthew 6:17-18*

Anointing was instituted for the reason that the oil with which the anointing was done, signified the good of love; for they knew that the good of love was that essential thing from which all things of the church and of worship live, because it is the being of life. For the Divine flows in with a man through the good of love, and makes his life, indeed that heavenly life in which truths are received in good. *Arcana Coelestia n. 9954*

Wednesday, July 11

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. *Matthew 6:19-20*

A person who is in high office in the spiritual world is in magnificence and glory, like that of kings on earth; yet such do not regard the dignity itself as anything, but the uses in the administration and discharge of which they are engaged. They receive every one indeed of the honours of his high office, but they do not attribute these to themselves, but to the uses; and as all uses are from the Lord. *Divine Providence #217.5*

Thursday, July 12

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. *Matthew 6:21*

It is otherwise, however, with those to whom dignities and wealth in the world were curses. Because they attributed these to themselves and not to the uses, and because they did not desire that uses should control them but that they should control uses, which they regarded as uses only so far as they ministered to their own honour and glory, they are accordingly in hell, where they are vile slaves, despised and miserable. *Divine Providence #217.6*

Friday, July 13

“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! *Matthew 6:22-23*

He opens the interior sight or understanding; which is effected by an influx into man's rational, or rather into the spiritual of his rational. This is done by the way of the soul, or the internal way, unknown to the man. This influx is his state of enlightenment, in which the truths which he hears or reads are confirmed to him by a kind of perception interiorly within his intellectual. *Arcana Coelestia n. 2701*

Saturday, July 14

“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. *Matthew 6:24*

If a man knows and is wise about many things, and does not shun evils as sins, he is nevertheless not wise... he is wise from himself and not from the Lord. If, for example, he has an accurate knowledge of the doctrine of his church and of all things that belong to it...still he is not wise unless he shuns evils as sins, because his knowledges [*cognitiones*] are devoid of life, being of his understanding only and not at the same time of his will. *Doctrine of Life #27*

THE KINGDOM WITHIN

Rev. Kit Billings

Matthew 13:44-51

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.”

Matthew 5:17-20

“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. 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. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Sermon

Let’s talk today about a beautiful spiritual subject, shall we? Let’s talk about something that the Lord spoke about more than fifty times in his ministry—the kingdom of heaven, which is within you.

To begin with, what are some basic ways of trying to define what God’s kingdom is—knowing, of course, that, as the Chinese people learned through the Tao Te Ching, any attempt to label and define what the infinite God is and what heaven is will be approximations. The Lord’s kingdom will be unique to each person. Thus, what you’re about to hear from me are some of my best attempts to describe a spiritual reality that Jesus himself knew would take many parables and special sayings in order to help draw a higher perspective out from the shadows of ignorance and doubt. As a New Church minister, I will be drawing heavily from the revelations about the kingdom of God found in Swedenborgian theology. But whenever greater clarity comes, it is only

due to greater light from the Lord and his kingdom entering our minds.

15 JUL

Please understand that what you’re about to hear today is intended to help you explore this subject—this very, very beautiful subject—for yourself, using your own unique mind. So let’s talk about heaven and how the Lord described it as something special that lives within you.

Simply put, God’s kingdom is that which receives the Lord—it is a collection of very, very good spiritual energy, which is often referred to as “love.” The kingdom is also, therefore, the true thoughts that grow from love. We’re dealing here with the most precious stuff of life, that which cannot easily be quantified, proven, or tested by science. So to get into talking about God’s kingdom, we must open ourselves to internal treasure—the goodness of the kingdom, the spiritual stuff that impels soldiers to die for their countries or that inspires a mother to stay up all night long with her child.

The Lord’s kingdom may also be seen as the immense collection of angelic spirits who are the subconscious conduits of God’s grace—the interconnected web of conscious minds who receive the warm light from the Lord, who is the effulgent Sun of heaven. The Lord’s kingdom is made up of angels, but it’s probably most helpful this morning to focus on his kingdom as a very real and powerful force of infinite love. So we’re dealing here with that which corresponds to or is represented by the morning sunrise. When was the last time you just soaked in a good sunrise? Wasn’t it gorgeous beyond words? All that golden light bathing you and inspiring the beauty of life! Remember the peace and stillness such a sunrise elicits, and how it connects you with a feeling of being one with its source. Doesn’t it bring out the serenity from within?

The kingdom of heaven encompasses all that we treasure most about life—heaven contains the Lord! It is his Spirit manifesting blessedness and grace. Heaven is the energy that Jesus brought in abundance into our world—or, as Swedenborg said, it is mutual love and the innocent desire to be helpful.

Heaven is charity living in the heart. The kingdom of God is the direct love with which God fills our hearts, and it creates something equally beautiful in return, which is a beautifully ardent love that we feel for Him. Two of the greatest reasons to celebrate life every day and on Sundays during worship are, first, that the Lord is alive (or, said differently, that divine love is alive!); and second, that the Lord’s kingdom of compassion and innocence has been placed inside of us. This is a given.

You don't have to work for this reality. And this is a reason to celebrate!

What isn't a given is each person's unique and wonderful consciousness and overt involvement in this kingdom. We are quite free to reject the kingdom of God within, strange as that may sound. And what's even odder to hear is that in reality, there are some people who actually choose to reject this gift of inheriting God's kingdom of love.

Every individual is given the freedom, over many years' time on Earth, either to seek out and be sought out by the kingdom of love or to choose not to let this saving force have an enormous influence within him or her. We can reject the transforming love and goodness of God and allow the hells to develop instead. If we do choose the hellish path, then the "evil yeast" that Christ spoke of will spread like cancer. If we choose to run from God's kingdom, then we will inherit "spiritual death," so to speak, and wind up in hell forever—very much alive, but alive with evil and falsity and the negative energy these forces make use of.

But the central focus of my sermon is that the wells of salvation that exist inside of your spiritual heart are real—there is a kingdom of beauty within you! I heard a lovely story a couple of years ago that illustrates a crucial element of what I mean.

The Rev. John Sanford, an Episcopalian priest and Jungian pastoral counselor and preacher who's written many books on spiritual psychology, tells a story from his childhood about an artesian well near his family's home. This well they were blessed to enjoy was always faithful, even during drought seasons: it offered cool, clean, pure water for them to live on. The faithful capacity of this well to offer up water that gave them and their animals life and nourishment astounded John as a young lad.

Then the family's finances evolved to the point where they were able to afford to drill a conventional well, and so the family put a cover over the deep artesian well. Several years later, young John was very curious to peer down again into that old family well, which he had admired and loved so much, so he took the covering off. And what do you think he found?

Bone dry it was! But why?

John did some investigating and discovered that artesian wells are fed by tiny rivulets or veins of water, and that the little rivulets are kept active only when the well is being tapped and used. Thus appears the correspondence of such wells to our spiritual lives and our connection to the kingdom of God within—

the never-ending spiritual wells within us that supply fresh, life-giving waters of truth (which come from the Divine's supply of love) only remain active and accessible if we continue drawing upon their resources. If we do not, they dry up, and so does our relatively easy access to the kingdom within. There is a living well of spiritual truth inside of you, whose rivulets of inspiration are flowing from the very love of God! But to keep it forever intact and renewing as a well springing up with everlasting life that satisfies all your spiritual thirsts, you have the responsibility of drawing from it regularly. And so one of the many ways of describing the kingdom of heaven is to look at how it behaves like a well dug in the ground.

Another way of describing God's kingdom is to talk about the quality and character of the religion it creates. The Lord intensely disagreed, in a host of ways, with the religion being taught by the authorities of his day. One had to do with the way in which many of the authorities interpreted the laws of God to focus entirely on religious obedience. "If you toe the line and behave correctly within these commandments and follow these prescribed rituals, then you'll be righteous before God," they taught. They were not concerned about an individual's personal engagement with and experience of the living kingdom within. Jesus was concerned about people feeling heaven and gaining a true understanding of it, too; the Lord wanted us to feel love and all the derivative feelings it births.

So in a sermon like this, I would be remiss if you never heard me say, "Use what I'm talking about as a springboard for launching into your seeking the Lord's kingdom as an experiential involvement in the now, being vulnerably and tenderly open to the actual flow of the merciful and healing love coming into you from heaven."

Our Lord Jesus zeroed in very quickly and wisely upon the dangerous focus of the religious authorities. He saw the evil within their shallowness; he recognized the affection for outward control being promoted thereby. They were after an external religion and a dry spirituality. They wanted people to follow what some call the "herd mentality"—that is, to be mindless and passionless members of the group and forget about exploring life, God, and religion from their own unique vantage points. "Toe the line or be damned! And whatever you do, don't think deeply for yourself or engage the divine through internal or mystical avenues!"

The simple and extremely serious problem with this approach to spirituality was that it didn't allow people to embrace the essential and simple quality of God that

saves us—that is, they were avoiding personal contact with what can make a grown man bawl joyfully, like a little baby being picked up and held by his mother or father. They were simply afraid of God as love! And this is why we hear the Lord exclaiming to them, “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You lock up the kingdom of heaven from people. For you don’t go in, and you don’t allow those entering to go in.” So the kind of approach the authorities of the day were into won’t get people into the kingdom of heaven—either here on earth or after death. It may get people to the doorway of heaven, but it won’t allow them in. Obedience to the truth must lead to a passion for the truth. The Lord said, “For I tell you, if your uprightness does not surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.” It doesn’t get much plainer than that.

One of the awesome gifts that Christ brought into the world was a whole new premise for what the kingdom of heaven is. The Lord brought the thrill of the truth that the kingdom was not to be evidenced by external things like physical good health and worldly prosperity, which is why we hear Christ saying, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.”

Another helpful way of understanding what the kingdom of God is, is to internalize the truth that this kingdom is not a passive force; in fact, it is actively searching for you and wanting you like a merchant in search of fine pearls. The Lord’s kingdom of angels is seeking you out! You and I, when we’re open to higher living, are as valuable and desirable to the Lord as pearls being sought out by a merchant. Most people misinterpret this parable of Jesus, thinking that He’s talking about heaven being as beautiful as a pearl. If you listen to the Lord carefully, you’ll recognize that heaven is being compared to the merchant in this case, while you are the pearl of great price.

The Lord realized that he had to use a second example to show how very active and outreaching heaven is for us all, and how wanted we are by the Lord and his kingdom. Thus we hear the Lord sharing this powerful story about the kingdom of heaven being like a fisherman casting his dragnet into life...knowing, of course, that some will fall short, with weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The kingdom is so very good and worthy of our deepest and most ardent searching! And so we find the Lord sharing another parable about a man in search of treasure hidden in a field. When one of us stumbles upon the kingdom within us, we are so awestruck and

moved by its sheer beauty and meaning—that is, that we have stumbled upon the source of all love and life itself—that we will give up everything in life to possess such a treasure.

Heaven is a kingdom of love that strives for usefulness. The application of this fact on the practical level of life will inevitably rub elbows with some of our more deeply seated evils, however, such as not wanting to love and be of use to the growth and betterment of those in this world we feel don’t deserve our help and good wishes. In the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom that lives and breathes down deep within you, everyone, and I mean everyone, deserves your loving care and concern. Everyone deserves your compassion and mercy. Everyone in this world deserves to be thought of as a child of God—even those hell-bent on hurting and hating.

One of the keys to understanding Swedenborg’s theology of heaven is what we read in paragraph 60 in *Divine Providence*: “Everyone who has any religion thinks about heaven and wishes to go there. Yet heaven is granted only to those who know the way to it and walk in that way.” The growth of the kingdom of God inside of us doesn’t typically happen overnight. It slowly grows and grows, like good yeast within a lump of bread dough, as the spiritual truths from the Lord’s Holy Word work their subtle miracle within you while you deeply live whatever good religion or spiritual path makes the most sense to you; this subtle, gradual growth makes your heart “rise” like bread dough with yeast inside of it, becoming ready to be eaten, so to speak.

So it is with our human hearts and wills, which must become warm and “edible” to others with God’s Spirit inside of them. And with this subtle yet expansive increase of the kingdom within us, we’ll begin to see the effects of the growth of the kingdom within: feeling the warm softness of God, given that God is love; the reality of the Lord’s spiritual presence in all good religions and people; a greater tolerance for differences in others while simply wanting to facilitate the spiritual growth of everyone; a lessening of fear about death; and lastly, a very simple and consistent desire to help—whether it be at home, at work, or at church. Heaven brings with it joy in being useful, which is what can turn doing taxes or cleaning the cat box into a spiritual practice.

What examples do you have, from your life experience, of signs of the kingdom of God developing inside of you? May your engagement with the kingdom within you be real, one that may put you into difficult anxiety or even depression at times (as the anti-heaven elements within you fight against and resist it), but that will ultimately yield its saving and succulent fruit. Amen.

Daily Meditations

Monday, July 16

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? *Matthew 6:25*

Man has two faculties receptive of life from the Lord, the one called the will, and the other the understanding. To the faculty which is called the will belongs love, for the goods of love make its life. But to the faculty which is called the understanding belongs faith, for the truths of faith make its life. *Arcana Coelestia #9050*

Tuesday, July 17

“Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? *Matthew 6:26-27*

Good is good so far as it has innocence in it, for the reason that all good is from the Lord, and innocence is a willingness to be led by the Lord.

Heaven and Hell #281

Wednesday, July 18

“And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?” *Matthew 6:28-30*

Truth can be conjoined to good and good to truth only by means of innocence, and therefore an angel is not an angel of heaven unless he has innocence in him; for heaven is not in any one until good is conjoined to truth in him; and this is why the conjunction of truth and good is called the heavenly marriage, and the heavenly marriage is heaven. *Ibid.*

Thursday, July 19

“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. *Matthew 6:31-32*

He who looks at the subject no deeper than from the sense of the letter may believe that all care for the morrow is to be cast aside, and thus that the necessities of life are to be awaited daily from heaven; but he who looks at the subject deeper than from the letter... is able to know what is meant by “care for the morrow.” It does not mean the care of procuring for oneself food and raiment, and resources for future times; for it is not contrary to order for anyone to be provident for himself and his own. But those have care for the morrow who are not content with their lot; who do not trust in the Divine, but in themselves. *Arcana Coelestia #8478.2*

Friday, July 20

“But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. *Matthew 6:33*

With those who have regard for only worldly and earthly things, and not for heavenly things, there universally reigns solicitude about things to come, and a desire to possess all things and to dominate over all, which is kindled and grows according to the additions thus made, and finally does so beyond all measure. They grieve if they do not obtain the objects of their desire, and feel anguish at the loss of them; and they have no consolation, because of the anger they feel against the Divine, which they reject together with everything of faith, and curse themselves. Such are they who have care for the morrow. *Ibid.*

Saturday, July 21

“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” *Matthew 6:34*

Be it known that the Divine Providence is universal, that is, in things the most minute; and that they who are in the stream of Providence are all the time carried along toward everything that is happy, whatever may be the appearance of the means; and that those are in the stream of Providence who put their trust in the Divine and attribute all things to Him. *Ibid.*

ONLY THIS LIFE COUNTS

Rev. Dr. William R. Woofenden

Apocalypse Explained, #934, and the other from the small work *Doctrine of Life*, #22.

22 JUL

John 3:1-21

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

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

Sermon

Swedenborg makes two statements about the things required of us that I should like to set before us at the outset: one from the large, unfinished work

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

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

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

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

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

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

The "training ground" concept of earthly life is one possible answer; perhaps we need a reasonable period of life experience in order to become fit to inhabit heaven. There is also what the philosopher would call

the “ontological reason” for our starting life on this earthly plane. Actually, the ontological reason and the training-ground reason are inseparable. Ontology has to do with what exists, what the basic nature or structure of reality is. Thus, the ontological reason as to why we start life on earth is that that’s the way things are; that’s the way God designed and planned it. It has been noted in our teachings that whatever proceeds from the divine does not stop midway in the process but continues on till it terminates in a fixed form, which is called its ultimate form—its last or lowest form. The natural world is such a form. From this lowest form, we are intended to use Earth as a training ground for the later, more real life God has in mind for us.

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

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

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

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

Before I go any further, let me stop and talk a little about the word “evil.” I know that for many people it is a loaded word, a word to be feared, avoided, and certainly not used in a seemingly indiscriminate and

condemnatory way. And this is not too surprising. It’s hard to find a dictionary with a short entry for the word “evil.”

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

More often than not “evil” means simply some state or degree of disorder, especially something that is not in harmony with the order of God’s creation. And ontologically, we are all born into greater or lesser states of disorder—that is, into states not in harmony with God’s ways. That should not surprise or startle us at all. Compared to the way people who have

worked to become angels live, we all lead decidedly disorderly (i.e., evil) lives. But there is no moral stigma attached to that fact unless we stubbornly refuse to make any attempt to improve our way of life.

Now, to get back to where we were: what is it that prevents us from doing good habitually and at all times? It is because there is disorder, self-love, evil in our hearts. This disorder tends to “harden” our hearts, make them stiff and

unyielding. Some of the fixed and stubborn falsities in our minds shut out much of the light from heaven that constantly falls on us, preventing the Lord’s love and truth from even entering our minds.

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

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

We all start with the same basic possibilities, the same potential—namely, to become angels.

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

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

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

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

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

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

(1) It is very hard for any of us to see clearly, or to feel strongly enough about, and thus really become

motivated by the idea that the process of rebirth, of regeneration, of purifying ourselves from disorder (i.e., ridding ourselves of evil), of putting our lives in order, is the most important thing we have to do in this world. That's obstacle number one.

(2) The second obstacle should really be called the first, as it is the cause of the one we have just defined. And that is this: none of us is really willing to believe how deeply disorderly the unregenerate human heart is. Most of us are disposed to think of ourselves as being tolerably good, of imagining that on the whole we are—or ought to be—quite acceptable just as we are.

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

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

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

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

But the deep, radical disorders of our natures are, to most of us, hidden. Our eyes are blinded to them. We are for the most part not conscious of them. We might not be able to handle the shock if we were. It calls for close self-examination, guided by the light of divine truth, to see the human heart as it is. This sort of soul-searching is not something to be entered into either often or lightly. Swedenborg makes this recommendation: that we examine ourselves once or twice a year to see our own evils; that we then confess them in the presence of God and pray earnestly for his help (*Apocalypse Revealed* #224.6).

Heaven has to be within us.

Daily Meditations

Monday, July 23

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

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

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

Good question! It's so easy to oversimplify. Actually, we are told that there are four possible ruling loves: love of the Lord, love of the neighbor, love of the world, and love of self. All of them are okay, if they are kept in the right order. Love of the Lord and the neighbor must always have higher priority than love of the world and self. If they're kept in that order, there is no law that prohibits us from loving ourselves and the things of the world. In fact, many people are in serious psychological trouble because they really hate themselves instead of loving themselves in the right proportion.

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

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

Prayer

O Lord Christ, send me not with the proud empty away; be born in me, abide in me. Be born as a babe, that I may be lowly; be born as a master, whom I will obey; be born as a savior, that I may give thanks, and grow into your likeness. - *Eric Milner-White*

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. *Genesis 21:1-5*

The soul is the Being itself of man, and the sensitive or corporeal faculty is its coming forth, for the former comes forth in the latter. *Arcana Coelestia #2621*

Tuesday, July 24

Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. *Genesis 21:6-8*

It is known that a man cannot be regenerated until adult age, because he then for the first time has the full exercise of reason and judgment, and thus can receive good and truth from the Lord. *Arcana Coelestia #2636.2*

Wednesday, July 25

But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." *Genesis 21:9-13*

The more one is confirmed in [looking to the Lord], the more is he led into the light of truth respecting these things, till at last he believes that all good and all truth are from the Lord. *Arcana Coelestia #2657.5*

Thursday, July 26

So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.

Genesis 21:14-16

They who are being reformed are reduced into ignorance even to despair, and then they have comfort and enlightenment; for the light of truth from the Lord cannot flow into the persuasive which is from man's own; for this is of such a nature as to extinguish that light. *Arcana Coelestia #2682.2*

Friday, July 27

And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." *Genesis 21:17-18*

Those who have been in vastation or desolation there, after being comforted by the hope of help, are elevated by the Lord into heaven, thus from a state of shade which is a state of ignorance, into a state of light which is a state of enlightenment and of the refreshment therefrom, thus into a joy that affects their inmosts. *Arcana Coelestia #2699.2*

Saturday, July 28

Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt. *Genesis 21:19-21*

It is said that "God opens the eyes" when He opens the interior sight or understanding; which is effected by an influx into man's rational, or rather into the spiritual of his rational. *Arcana Coelestia #2701*

HAVE YOU ANYTHING HERE TO EAT?

Rev. Sarah Buteux

29 JUL

Luke 24:36-8

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have."

And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

Sermon

Note: Four times a year there are five Sundays in a month. When one of these Fifth Sundays rolls around, Rev. Buteux's congregation meets for a brief worship service and then goes out into the community to perform acts of service. Below is the short meditation from one of their worship times together.

I'd like to share two stories for you this morning:

The first involves my brother-in law Will, a minister in New York, who recently returned from a trip to Ghana. He was over there with a few members of his church, exploring how they might partner with the King Jesus Charity Home, an orphanage that houses about 200 children. While he was there, he spent a lot of time talking with the kids themselves. He asked them what their favorite part of living at the home was, and they said that at the home they had finally found a family. That was what they most valued. The

kids there think of each other as their brothers and sisters. The older ones take care of the younger ones. In fact, many of them spoke of their plans to grow up, get an education, and come back to live, work, and support the orphanage because for them it truly is their home.

He then asked them what the hardest part was, and they said, "Not having enough food." Will told me that these kids sometimes go for two or three days without enough to eat, and when that happens, it is the teenagers who go without. They fast and pray during meals so that the littlest ones can eat. What struck Will as he talked to them was the fact that the teenagers do this willingly and with great love in their hearts for the young ones. They don't like going hungry, but they take great pride in caring for one another so well.

My second story involves my other brother-in-law, Sean, who told me that, on the way up to see us on Easter Sunday, he and my sister had stopped at a McDonald's, where they saw two teenage boys sitting at a table. The boys had a bet going to see if one of them could eat twenty McDoubles. As they were leaving, Sean could see that the kid who'd made the bet still had at least five to go and wasn't looking so good. His friend, on the other hand, was laughing and saying, "All you have to say is, 'I quit, man,' and this will all be over."

I'm not sharing these two stories with you in order to say that the first kids are good and the second kids are bad. They're all just kids! I'm sharing these stories side by side as a way of highlighting the absurdity of the world we live in: a world of hunger and excess, deprivation and waste—a world where people are dying every day, some from eating too much, others from eating too little. It isn't fair, and it isn't pretty. But it is real. Everywhere you look, it is real, because hunger is real.

Hunger is part and parcel of what it is to be human. No matter how much you eat at any given time, in any one sitting, you will invariably be hungry again. No matter how good you get at fasting and prayer, at letting go of the material and embracing the spiritual, you will be hungry again.

Because hunger is a fact of life. Hunger is a law of nature. Hunger is part and parcel of what it is to be human.

That is, no doubt, why Luke felt the need to include this strange story of Jesus' resurrection appearance, the one where he shows up and asks—while the disciples are busy inspecting the nail holes in his

hands and his feet—if anybody brought snacks. "Have you anything here to eat?" he asks, and they bring him some broiled fish.

I love that detail in this story because it is there to impress upon us that this Jesus is no ghost. He is real. He is risen. He is embodied. Our Jesus is still a man, and as such, he is hungry, because hunger is indeed part and parcel of what it is to be human.

"Have you anything here to eat?" asks Jesus.

"But, knowing Jesus," says Martin Copenhaver, "the follow-up question is this: 'Does your neighbor have anything to eat?' After all, this is the same Jesus who taught us to pray, 'Give us this day our daily bread.' Not *my* daily bread, *our* daily bread" (*Stillspeaking Devotional*, April 10, 2012).

This is the same Jesus who told us that when we give food to the hungry and water to the thirsty, we are taking care of no less a one than him.

"Have you anything here to eat?"

It is such a simple, mundane, prosaic sort of question for the risen Messiah to ask, but it was foremost on his mind back then—and I do believe that it is foremost on his mind even now, because the sad truth, if Jesus is to be believed, is that he is still asking it, every day, all over the world, even here in this valley.

"Have you anything here to eat?"

Friends, as long as there is one person on this earth still asking, then so is our Savior.

So thank you for being here this morning, for responding to the question, for responding to his call. Jesus said, "If you love me, feed my sheep." I know you do, and I know you will. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers

You, O Christ, are the table set for all,
The inextinguishable light of the saints;
The sun shining in our midst,
And you are joy and grace to your people.

- *Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022)*

Lord, when the suffering look to me, may I see your eyes. When the poor ask for comfort, may I see your face. When the hungry cry out, may I hear your voice, that one day I may hear you say, "As you did it to one of these, you did it unto me." Amen.

- *Frank Topping*

Monday, July 30

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. *Isaiah 49:1&2*

Those love the Lord who do and keep His commandments and His words, because His commandments and words signify Divine truths, and all Divine truth proceeds from Him, and that which proceeds from Him is Himself; when, therefore, a man is in that truth in respect to his life, the Lord is in him and he in the Lord. *Apocalypse Explained #433.2*

Tuesday, July 31

And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God." *Isaiah 49:3&4*

To look to heaven as a reward on account of the good that is done is natural, for the natural considers good to be from itself, thus heaven to be a reward; and this makes good meritorious. But it is otherwise with the spiritual, which acknowledges good as being not from itself but from the Lord, and thus heaven to be not from any merit but from mercy.

Apocalypse Explained #695.20

Wednesday, August 1

And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength—he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." *Isaiah 49:5&6*

As the Lord in the heavens is Divine truth, and the Divine truth there is light, so in the Word He is called Light. *Heaven and Hell #129*

Thursday, August 2

Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you." *Isaiah 49:7*

Every man who has eyes, and a mind that has been opened by means of them, sees that God, who is one, descended and became man, in order to effect redemption. Who cannot see this as in the light of morning when he gives any attention to these Divine declarations themselves which have been presented?

True Christian Religion #83

Friday, August 3

Thus says the Lord: In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; saying to the prisoners, "Come out," to those who are in darkness, "Show yourselves." They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be their pasture;

Isaiah 49:8&9

The quality of spirits in regard to truth is known from the way in which they go; for all truth leads to its own love, because that is called truth which confirms what is loved. From this it is that in common human speech "way" denotes truth.

Arcana Coelestia n. 10422.2

Saturday, August 4

They shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them. And I will turn all my mountains into a road, and my highways shall be raised up.

Isaiah 49:10&11

The spiritual life itself needs nourishment and support just as much as the natural life does; so it is said to be famished when a man is deprived of these knowledges, or when they fail, or when they are unknown and yet are desired.

Apocalypse Explained n. 386

Exodus 16:1-15

The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days." So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?" And Moses said, "When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but" against the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

John 6:25-40

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."

Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."

The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Teachings 212-213

[Spiritually understood,] the the Lord's body or flesh, like the bread, is the good that love does, and the Lord's blood, like the wine, is the good that faith does, while eating is internalizing and union. The angels who are with us when we are observing the Holy Supper understand it in this way and in no other. They in fact take everything spiritually; which is why some holy touch of love and some holy touch of faith flows in for us from angels—through heaven from the Lord, therefore—bringing about union.

We can see from this that when we take the bread that is the body, we are united to the Lord through the good done out of love for him from him; and that when we take the wine that is the blood we are united to the Lord through the good done out of faith in him from him.

Be it known, though, that the union with the Lord through the sacrament of the Supper is effected only for those who are devoted to the good of love and faith in the Lord from the Lord. For them there is union through the Holy Supper; for others there is presence but not union.

Sermon

For the bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. John 6:33

It is astonishing, when you stop to think about it, how much we take for granted, hour after hour, day after day, year after year. There is the fact that matter is made out of energy, that what we experience as solid is mostly “empty” space. There is the wondrous reliability of what we refer to as “gravity”—which etymologically simply means “heaviness”—a force that refuses to be accounted for in the language of quantum mechanics. Perhaps above all, there is the miracle of our human bodies, with matter constantly passing through them and with extraordinarily precise chemical balances being maintained during this life-and-death process.

This last wonder is the one we celebrate when we take Communion, if we do so in the spirit of our text—recognizing that we are alive at this moment because the Lord is giving us our daily bread not only this day, but this moment, this instant. If that giving were to cease even for an instant, it would be like pulling the plug of a lamp. We would “go out,” and we would have no power whatever to turn ourselves back on. I suspect that the same thing would happen if our metabolic processes suddenly shut down.

The Lord feeds our souls in two ways—from the inside and from the outside, so to speak. In more technical theological language, there is a direct inflow of life into the very core of our being, and there are indirect inflows through our spiritual and material environments. Just as our bodies need food and drink to digest and incorporate, our minds and hearts need input from others to process and assimilate. Think of writing down some of your thoughts, and then trying to sort out what is “really yours” and what you learned from others. On the one hand, it seems as though everything is learned “from the outside,” and yet there is a way in which what you write does not belong to the people who taught you. You are the one who is selecting from that immense mass of knowledge and arranging it in some intelligible sequence. No one else would do it in exactly the same way.

This is what gives each of us a distinct, unique value and place in the fabric of human community. Each of us is in that sense irreplaceable. To be sure, others can fill in for us, but their own uniqueness is compromised by their having to do something a little other than what they do best. So in that lovely image from *Last Judgment* 12:

Heaven’s perfection increases as the number of its inhabitants increases. This follows from its form, which determines the patterns in which people associate and the ways communication flows there.

This is the most perfect form of all, and in the most perfect form, the more constituents there are, the more people there are who are involved in a shared motion toward oneness, and the more intimate and unanimous is the union. The agreement and consequent union increase with numbers because each individual there comes in as a congenial intermediary between two or more others, and whatever comes in strengthens and unites.

This is little like being able to take a low-resolution digital photograph and add pixel after pixel, making it constantly clearer and crisper. To enlarge the analogy as far as possible, we can see it as the underlying design of the process that has been going on ever since the Big Bang, beginning with the differentiation of the simplest atoms and continuing to the completion of the atomic table, the formation of distinctive molecules, increasingly complex compounds, chemical interactions between them, until at some point there was a physical assemblage complex enough to be directly responsive to life. From then on, we find life taking increasingly complex and distinctive forms until it has reached its present state.

While all this is going on, though, there is something else happening—the increasingly complex whole is being held together in some coherent form. Apparently, the laws of physics apply equally to every atom in the whole. Things separate, yes, and the distances become literally astronomical, but it remains a single universe. Life forms increase in number and variety, but they form an ecologically coherent system. Every new pixel has its place and contributes to the coherence of the whole—“strengthens and unites.”

Something quite fascinating happens, though, when we apply these principles to our process as physical beings. It works beautifully for about the first third of our years. We grow bigger, stronger, and faster. At some point, however, the growth slows, then it stops, and then a physical decline sets in. The first

law of entropy takes over. The curve can be plotted, and its destination is clear and inevitable. The time comes when we can no longer ingest and process and assimilate at all.

Our bodies do not disconnect from their surroundings, not at all, except to the extent that we use artificial means to disconnect them—artificial means such as embalming and encasing in caskets. Left to themselves, they gradually “undifferentiate” themselves, a process we can accelerate by the deliberate decomposition of cremation.

Our inner selves do not necessarily follow this curve. We certainly do not become less distinctive individuals. It sometimes seems, in fact, that we become more and more “set in our ways,” whether for better or for worse. It is fairly obvious that some of us identify so strongly with our bodies that we do everything possible to deny the decline, devoting more and more of our resources to maintaining the illusion of youth—Botox, wrinkle cream, plastic surgery, hairpieces, red convertibles—anything but the rocking chair.

It is, of course, a losing battle, and it is a pointless one—worse than pointless, in fact, for while our bodies are absolutely necessary for our functioning in this world, to put it bluntly, they are really a drag. Our theology puts it this way:

[The Lord’s life] flows in by stages, and in its course, or at each new stage, it becomes more general and therefore coarser and hazier, and it becomes slower and therefore more viscous and colder.

(Secrets of Heaven 7270:3)

At some level, we must know this, since every day we have the experience of our bodies not being able to keep up with our intentions, our tongues not being able to keep up with our thoughts. This has been the case all along: it just becomes more obvious as our bodies slow down in our later years.

What, then, should we do? There are religious approaches that see the body as the enemy of the soul and advocate “mortifying the flesh,” apparently impatient with the slow pace at which the flesh irresistibly mortifies itself. The main objection to this from a Gospel perspective (and it is surely a significant objection) is that this bears little relationship to the second great commandment, to love the neighbor. In fact, it looks much more like an obsession with oneself.

No, for all their limitations, our bodies are our primary and precious means of interacting with the people we love, and they should be treasured and cared for with that end in mind. Object relations theory provides an excellent image for the needed transition. It describes a series of transitions in which we “objectify” some aspect of our being that we have previously identified with. In childhood, for example, we at some point become able to objectify our impulses. Then and only then can we deal with them consciously. As long as we identify with our bodies, we cannot stand back from them to see what they are good for and what they are not. We are as obsessed with them as are those who mortify them. They claim our attention so completely that there is little if any left for the neighbor.

So the aging process presses us to recognize that our bodies are not who we are but are things, quite marvelous things, that we have. It is quite fascinating and certainly suggestive that while people who have had near-death experiences often speak of their reluctance to return to their bodies and have no fear

of death, they find new meaning in life here and now and show no inclination to hasten their own departure. Those who live in the here and now give their lives meaning.

There is, then, good reason that in central sacrament of the church, the Holy Supper, we do something both absolutely commonplace and absolutely essential.

We feed and refresh our bodies. This is caring for our primary means of communication with the people we love.

We do this by accepting food and drink freely given, symbolizing that care. We do it “in communion,” together, symbolizing the reason for that care. When we do so by coming forward, we may take this as a symbol of the fact that some initiative seems to be required of us. When we remain in the pew, we may take this as a symbol that the Lord is constantly coming to us where we are, wherever we are. We come forward, then, “as if of our selves.” We remain seated in acknowledgment that it is in fact wholly “from the Lord.” Our bodies cannot do both at once: our souls can. Amen.

Prayer

Lord, let me continue to drink from the streams of your salvation, until I lose the thirst for the passing things of earth; through Christ our Lord.

- Ann Griffiths (1776-1805)

Monday, August 6

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." *John 12:20-23*

The Divine assumed the Human, that is, united itself to it, as a soul to its body, so that they were not two, but one Person. *Doctrine of the Lord n. 35.2*

Tuesday, August 7

"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor."

John 12:24-26

In the Lord's sight the church is seen as a single man, and this larger man must pass through his stages of life like an individual, that is to say, from infancy to youth, from this to manhood, and finally to old age; and then, when he dies, he will rise again.

True Christian Religion n. 762

Wednesday, August 8

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." *John 12:27-28*

It is the truth of faith by means of which man is regenerated, consequently by means of which sins are removed; and because the faith of truth is from the Lord, it is the Lord Himself who effects this.

Arcana Coelestia n. 9937.8

Thursday, August 9

The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. *John 12:29-33*

The Lord imputes good to every man and evil to none; consequently He does not condemn anyone to hell, but so far as man follows raises all to heaven.

True Christian Religion n. 652

Friday, August 10

Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light." *John 12:35-36a*

As the Lord in the heavens is Divine truth, and the Divine truth there is light, so in the Word He is called Light, likewise all truth is from Him.

Heaven and Hell n. 129

Saturday, August 11

Then Jesus cried aloud: "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world."

John 12:44-47

The Lord and His Father are one as soul and body are one; God the Father descended from heaven and assumed the Human to redeem and save men; and His Human is what is called the Son sent into the world.

Conjugal Love n. 118

AUG 12 COME, FOLLOW ME

Rev. Dr. David J. Fekete

Psalm 62

For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.

He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken.

How long will you assail a person, will you batter your victim, all of you, as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence?

Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence. They take pleasure in falsehood; they bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse.

Selah

For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.

He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. Selah

Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath.

Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God,

and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay to all according to their work.

Jonah 3

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

And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human

beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Mark 1:14-28

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Sermon

In preparing this sermon, Rev. Dr. Fekete drew on a lecture by Rev. Dr. George Dole titled "A Four-Step Model."

Our reading from Psalm 62 ends with a simple and seemingly obvious statement: "You reward everyone according to what they have done." It is self-evident that our spirituality shows in what we do, not just what we believe or think.

Our Bible readings this morning call our attention to what we do, as well as to what we are. They bring up the

sometimes unwelcome topics of evil and repentance. I see three steps in these Bible stories. The first is leaving our home and family to follow Jesus' call. The second is repenting from evil by our own effort. The third is allowing God to purify us through our recognition that everything good we do is God acting in us.

Jesus' call to Simon, Andrew, and James represents the first of these three steps: leaving home and family to follow Jesus. On the natural level, this story speaks of the maturing process whereby a person comes into his or her own. In a sense, we all leave our parents when we become adults and start to think and make life decisions for ourselves. Whether we actually leave home or not, we come to a point at which we outgrow our parents as authorities in our lives and become our own people. On a spiritual level, we go through an analogous process. We outgrow what Swedenborg calls "proprium." The very sense of self that we acquire upon attaining adulthood becomes a stage we need to move past. The early self is self-interested, egotistical, and filled with worldly ambition. We have unhealthy drives and passions. Swedenborg claims that we inherit a tendency to evil that we may or may not act upon. All these things are in the part of our personality called the proprium, which we must outgrow.

Nearly every world religion sees spirituality as a growth process. Some see the process as one of moving from ego and limited consciousness to all-loving compassion and expanded consciousness. I like the symbol used by Hinduism and Buddhism. Both traditions see our spiritual development paralleled in that of the lotus flower. The lotus flower begins as a seed in the mud at the bottom of a pond. As it grows, it rises up through the murky water of the pond; then it reaches the air and sunlight and becomes a beautiful flower. The Hindus and Buddhists compare our growth toward enlightenment to the growth of the lotus flower up into the sunlight. It is God's voice that calls us out of the murky depths of our proprium. When we hear His voice, we begin our spiritual journey into heavenly joy.

The story of Jonah represents the second step in our spiritual growth. The people of Nineveh are told to repent by the prophet Jonah—and they heed his word. They fast and put on sackcloth. The king even issues a proclamation that everyone and all the animals should fast, and that the residents should call upon God for his compassion.

In this story, we have what Swedenborg calls an "appearance of truth"—a statement in the Bible that is

not factual and yet bears truth within it. In the story of Jonah, we are told that God planned to destroy the city of Nineveh. This is how God appeared to the writers of Jonah. But God never destroys any person, let alone any city. God is only love, and cannot do any evil thing to humans. Stories about God bringing destruction to people or cities are all appearances of truth. But let us not stray too far from the main point of today's Bible stories—the subjects of evil and repentance. When the people of Nineveh hear Jonah's preaching, they respond to him. They repent of their evil ways. We are not told exactly what is evil about them; the Bible does mention violence, and the Israelites would have considered the Ninevites idolaters. But whatever they did wrong, they repented and called on God.

I consider their action to be on the second level of repentance because it is done by human effort. The people of Nineveh act by their own power and strength. They perform public displays of repentance, such as fasting and wearing sackcloth—and the king himself sits down in the dust, calling upon God. In our early stages of repentance, we too fight sin as if from our own will power. Some people perform outward acts as the people of Nineveh do. Many people are leery of human effort in the process of salvation. They are suspicious of people who repent and who perform good acts as a way to salvation, and for good reason: sometimes people who do these things to believe that they have earned heaven by their good deeds. The truth is, if we

do good deeds, we cannot think that we have earned heaven or deserve it in any way. When we do good, it should be because we love what is good and do it for good's own sake—not for the sake of reward. But we must by all means do good deeds. We must flee from or fight evil intentions, thoughts, and actions, and we must do good, kind, and loving things.

These considerations bring us to the third step in spiritual growth. I find this stage in the story of Jesus and the evil spirit. The man who is possessed by the evil spirit says nothing to Jesus. He does not cry out to be healed. It is all Jesus' doing. As Jesus is preaching, an evil spirit cries out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." This story develops in an interesting way. Jesus doesn't set out to heal the demon possessed man; rather, he is preaching in a synagogue, and suddenly the evil spirit cries out. I take this to mean that the evil spirit felt the power of Jesus' presence and couldn't bear it. This is how spiritual temptation happens to us. As God enters

When we do good, it should be because we love what is good and do it for good's own sake.

our souls more deeply, our own sins become more apparent by virtue of the presence of goodness. God is indeed always in our souls at the deepest level, but our consciousness is not always filled with God's love and wisdom. God needs to enter all the levels of our lives, from the lowest to the highest. And as God flows down into our lives, we make room for him by removing all that would block his love.

God gives us the power to remove any and all obstacles to his love and life. Swedenborg tells us that

a person must purify himself from evils and not wait for the Lord to do this immediately; otherwise he may be compared to a servant with face and clothes fouled with soot and dung, who comes up to his master and says, "Wash me, my lord." Would not the master say to him, "You foolish servant, what are you saying? See; there are water, soap, and towel. Have you not hands, and power in them? Wash yourself." And the Lord God will say, "The means of purification are from Me; and from Me are your intentions and ability; therefore use these My gifts and endowments as your own, and you will be purified. (*True Christian Religion* 436)

So God gives us the insight to see what we need to work on, and God gives us the power to make changes in our lives.

But I cannot stress enough how important it is that we realize that the power we have to make changes in our lives comes from God. Trying to battle the evils in our proprium with our own strength is like one of those Chinese handcuffs—you know, those woven tubes that you can easily put your fingers into, but when you try to pull them out, the tube tightens around your fingers and you can't pull your fingers out. Our very effort is what makes the tube tighten up. Or it's like that joke in which a person says, "Whatever you do, don't think about a pink elephant." What is the first thing that will come into our minds? When we dwell on our shortcomings and try to fight them by our own power, spiritual progress will be a never-ending struggle. We need to realize consciously that God has given us the illumination to see where our lives need amendment, and we need to realize that God can lift us up out of the murky waters into the light.

This is all contrary to appearance. It looks like we are doing the good work. It looks like we have decided to follow Christ's call. But what we are actually doing is allowing God into our lives and minds. In *Divine Providence* #191, Swedenborg writes, "Our own prudence is nothing. It only seems to be something, as it should. Divine Providence, since it involves the smallest details, covers everything." Our own prudence is nothing. Everything we direct ourselves to do—every choice we make, every evil we recognize,

every prayer to God for help—none of this is done by our own power. It is all God acting in us. All those little choices we make in our lives, all those little decisions we make moment by moment, all our best decisions are God working in our minds to lead us out of proprium and into heaven. When we look back on our lives and see where we have come in our development, we are at a loss to say just how we got to where we are. It was the sum total of all those small decisions—God working in us—that brought us to where we are today, and made us who we are today.

Swedenborg compares this process to the shooting of an arrow. If an arrow is just slightly off when it leaves the bow, it will miss a target meters away. God watches over these small increments of our spiritual direction and corrects us when we veer from the mark. In *Divine Providence*, Swedenborg writes,

What else can the Divine Providence have for its end than the reformation of the human race, and its salvation? And no one can be reformed by himself, by means of his own prudence, but by the Lord, by means of His Divine Providence. It thus follows that unless the Lord leads a person every moment, even every part of a moment, the person falls back from the way of reformation and perishes. . . . It is like an arrow shot from a bow, which if it missed the direction of the mark in the least when leaving the bow, at a distance of a thousand paces or more, would miss it immensely. So would it be if the Lord did not lead the states of human minds every part of a moment. The Lord does this according to the laws of His Divine Providence; and it is in accordance with these laws for it to appear to a person as if he led himself; but the Lord foresees how he leads himself, and continually provides accordingly. (#202)

This is how I see the miracle of Jesus casting out the demons in our Mark story. Jesus saw the sickness and acted to purify the demon-possessed man. So God sees what we need, purifies us, and brings us into ever clearer heavenly light—without our even knowing it.

When we realize and accept that God is giving us the insight and power to change, the Chinese handcuffs magically fall off, and we are delivered. When we recognize and accept that God is giving us the insight and power to change, we won't conjure up the pink elephant. We will see heaven's beautiful sunbeams. We are lifted up into the light. As we approach God, God approaches us. I have heard it said that when we take one small step toward God, God takes three giant steps toward us. Let us, then, make room in our souls for the descent of the Holy Spirit, which begins when we hear the call of God and his prophets, and when we make room for his divine love in our hearts. Amen.

Monday, August 13

“I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. *Jonah 2:2*

It is common in all Divine worship for a person to first wish, desire, and pray, and for the Lord then to reply, instruct, and effect. A person does not otherwise accept anything Divine . . . In the Word we frequently read that the Lord answers when people call on Him or cry out to Him, and that He gives to people when they ask. Yet, even so, it is the Lord who gives people to ask and what they should ask for, and the Lord knows it, therefore, beforehand. *Apocalypse Revealed n. 376*

Tuesday, August 14

“You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. *Jonah 2:3*

But still it is the Lord’s will that a person first ask, in order that the person may do so as though on his own, and that the petition may thus be assigned to him. Otherwise, if the petition itself did not emanate from the Lord, it would not have been said in those passages that people would receive whatever they ask. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, August 15

“Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?’ *Jonah 2:4*

They who are in temptations, and not in some other active life than that of prayers, do not know that if the temptations were interrupted before they had been fully carried through, they would not be prepared for heaven, and thus could not be saved. For this reason, the prayers of those who are in temptations are but little heard; for the Lord wills the end, which is the salvation of each person, which end He knows, but not the person; and the Lord does not heed prayers that are contrary to the end, which is salvation. *Arcana Coelestia n. 8179.3*

Thursday, August 16

“The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me for ever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God. *Jonah 2:5-6*

He who conquers in temptations is also confirmed in the truth; whereas he who does not conquer entertains a doubt with respect to the Divine aid and power, because he is not heard; and then sometimes, because he slacks his hand, he partly yields. From all this it can be seen what is meant by there being no need of intercession, namely, that prayer is not to be relied upon. For in prayer from the Divine it is always thought and believed that the Lord alone knows whether it is profitable or not; therefore the one praying submits the hearing to the Lord, and immediately after prays that the will of the Lord, and not his own, may be done.

Arcana Coelestia n. 8179.3

Friday, August 17

“As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. *Jonah 2:7&8*

That, regarded in itself, external worship is nothing, unless there be internal worship to make it holy, must be evident to everyone . . . What is prayer of the lips, if the mind is not in it, but mere babbling? . . . In itself every external thing is an inanimate affair, and lives solely from what is internal. *Arcana Coelestia n. 1094*

Saturday, August 18

“But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!” Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

Jonah 2:9-10

If a person prays from love and faith, and for only heavenly and spiritual things, there then comes forth in the prayer something like a revelation (which is manifested in the affection of him that prays) as to hope, consolation, or a certain inward joy. It is from this that “pray” signifies in the internal sense to be revealed. *Arcana Coelestia n. 2535*

AUG 19 BIRDS AND EARTH

Rev. Kevin K. Baxter

Genesis 28:10-19

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. 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."

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.

Matthew 13:31-32

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

Sermon

Many of you have probably read the novel *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. If not, you may have seen a movie version or the Tony Award-winning Broadway production. For those of you who have not, *The Secret Garden* is the story of Mary, a self-absorbed little girl recently orphaned by her parents' death from cholera, who is sent from India to her uncle's enormous house in Yorkshire, England. The uncle, like her, is withdrawn, angry, and self-obsessed.

While exploring the manor and its grounds, Mary finds a key that leads to a locked, walled garden left untended for at least a decade. She understands that she is forbidden to enter the secret garden, but her fascination with it (lush, green gardens were unknown to her in India) possesses her. Then her uncle speaks with her before he leaves on a trip and asks her whether she needs anything. She replies that she would like a bit of earth to plant some seeds in. He gives her permission to take a bit of any earth she can find; he has forgotten about the secret garden, which he locked up following his young wife's death.

During her uncle's absence, she disobeys the servants' orders not to explore the source of a mysterious wailing noise and finds her uncle's son, Colin, in a remote wing of the house. He has been kept hidden away, a remnant of her uncle's grief and self-blame.

Mary befriends Colin, and their shared love for the secret garden, which they have begun tending together, becomes the driving force that impels him out of his wheelchair and helps him to walk again. Eventually, the uncle returns home and finds his recovered son, his now-blooming niece, and a restored garden awaiting him. The garden itself becomes a place of restoration for Mary, Colin (her cousin), and Uncle Archibald, who had abandoned his son out of grief in much the same way he did the garden when his wife died. In this story, the secret garden represents love, or the heart. Mary steals in and takes just a little piece, which brings her closer to her uncle; from there, transformation occurs.

A side note: one of the other significant characters in the story is a robin that helps lead Mary to the garden. But more on this later.

Both of our Bible readings today tell of a profound transformation. Jacob, living in a pre-enlightenment state, is transformed by a vision of a ladder leading to heaven. In our Gospel reading, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed that grows as tall as a tree, so that birds can land and nest in its branches. On the surface, we might not see these stories' connection, but if we look more deeply, a profound link emerges between the two.

The mustard-seed parable is often quoted in conjunction with the Lord's statement that faith like a mustard seed can move mountains. The mustard seed is effective in this image because it is the tiniest of seeds, and yet it grows into a plant larger than many of those with seeds five times its size.

I want to challenge that traditional understand of the mustard seed as faith a bit. More to the point, I want to challenge our idea of what faith is.

The great thing about a seed is that it contains all of the genetic information of the plant to come. All that is required to bring it forth is the right conditions. A seed symbolizes the basic elements of being; spiritually, we might understand those elements as will and understanding. When the seed's will and understanding are filled with the love and wisdom of God, it sprouts forth its hidden self. A seed embodies potential.

The idea of a mustard seed moving a mountain depicts faith in action, or "true" faith. But comparing the kingdom of God to a mustard seed seems, well, a bit ridiculous. When we think about something regal, we think of it being large and impressive—but this is the point, isn't it? The kingdom of God does not initially appear in our lives as something big and impressive, but as something unassuming and small, yet hard to destroy—something that contains a tremendous amount, if only we nurture it.

In Jesus' image of the mustard seed, something that needs to be nurtured transforms into something that nurtures: a seed becomes a bird sanctuary. We often focus on the idea that something tiny can become larger and more powerful. What we rarely talk about in this story, however, are the birds that nest in the branches.

In our faith tradition, birds symbolize an affection for thinking heavenly thoughts. The analogy of birds with thought is a great one: thoughts can dwell high or low; thoughts can flutter about; thoughts can glide; thoughts can require a great deal of work to make them fly.

The higher our thoughts fly, the more heavenly they become, but our thoughts also need a place to land and rest safely. If you have cats, you know when birds are in danger: when they are on the ground. When birds find shelter in a tree or bush, they are far less vulnerable to predatory animals.

Building a faith life can mean many things, but how do you know if you have done it? I will posit this idea: if you are providing shelter for your spiritual birds, then you are building a faith life.

So here is a yardstick for you: What do you spend your time thinking about? How often do your thoughts rise toward awareness of neighborly or heavenly things?

Our reading from Genesis actually touches on a similar idea. Many people pay attention in this

reading to the angels going up and down the ladder, and we understand the ladder to refer to the divine-human connection, but few people pay attention to where Jacob has that dream. Specifically, he falls asleep on a rock (an analogy for faith). Have you ever tried to rest your head on a rock? Believe me: it's more comfortable to sleep on the ground.

We learn from our tradition that sleeping with his head on a rock means that Jacob was living a life unaware of the Lord and yet had a foundation of love and goodness from the Lord. When Jacob's eyes were opened, he saw that mountaintop as the gate of heaven, and that rock became an altar. Jacob's descendants were destined, like the branches of the mustard tree, to reach out in all directions, which means more than where his family ended up. It means that a life of faith dedicated to the Lord will reach every part of a person's being. Put simply, a life of faith transforms a person's existence into one in which thoughts of goodness and truth are all that person can think about. I don't know about you, but I'm not fully there yet.

In *The Secret Garden*, a bird—that robin I mentioned earlier—reveals the key to Mary and leads her into the garden. Mary then discovers something new that becomes her secret place. Like her own sense of empathy, love and regard for others, the garden is overgrown and unused. Cultivating that secret garden and sharing it with Colin and their friend Dickon opens her bitter and angry self up to the world around her. As a result, she transforms her embittered, grief-stricken uncle into a loving man who learns how to express his love to others. That bit of earth Mary asked for, like the mustard seed and Jacob's rock, offers a place from which she could both nurture and be nurtured.

To be loved, we must love—and vice versa. Loving is the first step, but nurturing things in our lives does not stop with us; caring for others creates a vibrant tree that nurtures heavenly thoughts and transforms the people around us.

We choose how we live, and it's not the big things that define us but the small things—the little choices we make each day about what we choose to bring into our consciousness. We can choose to sleep through life, controlled by the things of this world; or we can choose to seek out points at which God is active in our lives. If we choose the latter, we become active agents in how we see the world. Then we begin to nurture the seeds of love and life. And then we are transformed. Amen.

Daily Meditations

Monday, August 20

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. *Luke 7:36*

A "house" in the internal sense is the natural mind, for the natural mind, as also the rational mind, is like a house: the husband therein is good, the wife is truth, the daughters and sons are affections of good and truth, and also goods and truth derived from the former as parents. *Arcana Coelestia #5023*

Tuesday, August 21

And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. *Luke 7:37-38*

"He that hath been washed, needeth not save to wash his feet" signifies that he who has been reformed, has need only to be cleansed as to natural things, that is, has need that evils and falsities should be removed from them; and then all things are disposed into order by the influx of spiritual things from the Lord. Moreover, to wash the feet was an office of charity, as meaning not to reflect on the evils of another; and it was also an office of humility, as meaning to cleanse another from evils as from impurities.

Arcana Coelestia #3147.8

Wednesday, August 22

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak."

Luke 7:39-40

For good is continually flowing in from the Lord, but when it comes through the internal or spiritual man to his external or natural man, it is there either perverted, turned back, or suffocated. But when the things which are of the love of self and of the love of the world are removed, then good is received there and is made fruitful; for then man practices the works of charity. *Arcana Coelestia #3147.2*

Thursday, August 23

"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Luke 7:41-43

"Peter" signified truth from good which is from the Lord, and consequently also doctrine, and thus he represented those who are in truths from good and in the doctrine of genuine truth from the Lord, and since such as these instruct others, and are instructed by the Lord. *Apocalypse Explained #820*

Friday, August 24

Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." *Luke 7:44-47*

The natural man, which is also the external man, is purified, when he shuns the evils which the spiritual or internal man sees to be evils and that they ought to be shunned. *Apocalypse Revealed #49.5*

Saturday, August 25

Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." *Luke 7:48-50*

The first of all is to acknowledge that the Lord is the Savior of the world, for without this acknowledgment no one can receive anything of truth and good from heaven, thus no faith; and because this is the first and most essential of all, therefore in order that the Lord might be acknowledged when He came into the world, in healing the sick He questioned them concerning their faith, and those who had faith were healed.

Arcana Coelestia #10083

STRIKING THE BALANCE

Rev. Julian Duckworth

Sermon

26 AUG

*God has spoken once, twice I have
heard this:
that power belongs to God.*

Psalm 62

For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him
comes my salvation.
He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I
shall never be shaken.
How long will you assail a person, will you batter
your victim, all of you, as you would a leaning
wall, a tottering fence?
Their only plan is to bring down a person of
prominence. They take pleasure in falsehood; they
bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse.
Selah
For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is
from him.
He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I
shall not be shaken.
On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my
mighty rock, my refuge is in God.
Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your
heart before him; God is a refuge for us. Selah
Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high
estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up;
they are together lighter than a breath.
Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes
on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart
on them.
Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that
power belongs to God,
and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you
repay to all according to their work.

True Christian Religion 658-659

No spiritual credit or blame is put on us simply from what we think. It comes only from what we will and intend. Our will is our love, but our thinking isn't; it is our understanding of things. So our will and love is always searching what we think about, wanting it to back up and support what we love. This, of course, can be for good or for evil, but whatever it is for, we will feel it as good. Now, our first state is for us to be led by our own wills and for ourselves. The Lord gives us what is good and true from himself, and in our thinking our own will and the Lord's will are weighed against each other like a pair of scales. If we choose our own will, we will make everything from the Lord fit with that. If we choose the Lord's will, we will make everything from the Lord fit with that.

A man who went on to write a groundbreaking book said that his understanding about life was completely changed when he once went walking along a beach and noticed the tide and the way it surged and shrank. Up it came, down it went, forwards and backwards all the time, and no doubt it always had, and very regularly, in a perfect kind of rhythm. Now this man was a scientist, but he had also studied the religions of the East, and from this beach experience he went on to write a book that described how what we call physics and its laws closely resembles and even matches all the spiritual ideas in Eastern religions. They are the same, he said, exactly the same.

So what does the tide do? Basically, it gives us a great picture of the balance present in everything—in our life, in nature, but most importantly in our personal experiences and decisions. We walk ... left foot, then right foot, left then right. Amazing. So simple we miss it. Seasons—there's another. Being awake and being asleep: too obvious even to mention. One that always stuns me is that air pressure and blood pressure are equal, so they cancel each other out, leaving me unaware of either of them and feeling as free as a bird. Balance—balance—balance, in everything.

OK, that's all very interesting, but is it relevant? Is there anything we're supposed to *do* as a result of knowing it? Well, probably not for a lot of it. Tell someone that walking along, going left right left right, is incredibly fascinating, and they will give you a funny look.

But there are things about balance that become extremely relevant. I'll give you one to begin with that is a kind of halfway house. You probably know that inside our ears, each ear (note the balance there!), are semi-circular canals with liquid in them. They regulate our physical balance all the time and keep us standing up while we're doing all kinds of things. If you get vertigo, there's a problem in your middle ear with this fluid.

Now, I want you to notice that this balance is being kept up inside your *ears*. Not in your elbows, not in your backbone, but inside your *ears*. What do our ears do? Well, that's easy: they hear. Our hearing is very closely connected to the world around us, and

sounds bounce off walls and trees almost like a kind of sonic radar, like bats with moths. But I want to push this further and say that hearing God, hearing what the Lord says, hearing about good and truth, hearing about good and evil, right and wrong—all that spiritual hearing and the moral things in life that they talk about work in exactly the same way. Think about Jesus' parable about the sower. What did he say at the end? "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." There you have it.

So balance in everything becomes really relevant to us; it's not just philosophy. Let's go right inside ourselves into what life can feel like. I know that sometimes life is plain sailing, straightforward, maybe for ages—and then suddenly it's not. Something happens to change all that and it is hard, frightening, and panic-inducing. Why? What do we make of that? How do we handle that? Sometimes it's not just one thing but a number of things that happen together to upset everything, as if life actually bunches things up. What do we make of *that*?

What we probably do is think that the plain-sailing time was the normal set-up and the frightening change of events was abnormal. And we'd be partly right. Life, even the gift of life from God, is generally meant to be even-keeled. We don't go around expecting crises and disasters or upsets, of course, or else we'd go crazy. But we're missing something even so. We're missing the balance in it all, the reality that life as a whole is going to involve this basic rhythm that the man on the beach was discovering. Physical life will always be like that, because we just don't live in a cotton-wool kind of world. So to say, when something happens, "This shouldn't have happened" is a bit out of balance. It's much more helpful to start out from the idea that what happens, happens—the whole caboodle.

And, of course, it's easy to start thinking that maybe God is making it happen. "Perhaps he is punishing me for something, but I have no idea what it is." I would say to that, "Keep right out of that kind of thought." God does not punish people. God does not send events. All God does is create the world as it is and then help us deal with it, but on another level that is not just physical. And God, in making the world as it is, permits balance to exist in everything. So a healthier outlook is to see everything as being part of everything together.

Another experience we have—and this one is much more within our ability to do something about it—is that sometimes we feel right, confident, and bright, but sometimes we feel frail, uncertain, and not right.

That is pretty universal to us all, and both of those feelings just come and go, come and go. I'm not talking about feeling rundown or heading for the flu. I mean the state we're in, pure and simple, perhaps inexplicably. Again, it's a balance, and the best thing to do is simply to take it as exactly that—the rhythm of it all. This is now personal to us, not physical. And at this point I would bring God into it much more directly and say God is very involved on this level. Don't get me wrong, though: God is not looking at his wristwatch or pulling levers saying, "Time you got a bit stressed, Julian," or "That's long enough; I'll switch it off." It's actually far more purposeful, because God really wants things to get somewhere and get *better*. God is always into "better than it was," and if I were starting up a new religion, I would undoubtedly base it on the worship of "betterment."

I want to say two things on God's involvement with us as our feelings of brightness and frailty switch back and forth. First of all, there is the whole business of there being heaven and hell. Never mind what they are or why they are; they are in some way connected to us, and they do influence us. Think of heaven and hell as energies for good and bad, rightness or wrongness, love for others or love only for yourself. More usefully, think of them as efforts to build us up or break us down. And there we are in the middle, in this balance or equilibrium. Both of them connect with us in our thoughts and feelings, which of course seem to be our own, but these thoughts and feelings are coming into us and going out of us all the time. The most important point is that we are not at their mercy. No! We also have our state and what we want to do about our state. That is ours. It is also the thing that God is really closely involved with.

This point brings us to the second thing, which was put very well in that reading from our teachings.

No spiritual credit or blame is put on us simply from what we think. It comes only from what we will and intend. Our will is our love, but our thinking isn't; it is our understanding of things. So our will and love are always searching what we think about, wanting it to back up and support what we love. This, of course, can be for good or for evil, but whatever it is for, we will feel it as good. Now, our first state is for us to be led by our own will and for ourselves. The Lord gives us what is good and true from himself, and in our thinking our own will and the Lord's will are weighed against each other like a pair of scales. If we choose our own will, we will make everything from the Lord fit with that. If we choose the Lord's will, we will make everything from the Lord fit with that.

That's it. What a balance! Part of me wants to have everything fit what I want, but the Lord doesn't leave it like that, so he makes darn sure that part of me is aware that there's a different and less selfish way to be. And we're going to feel both, because we must in order to choose. I'd say we are going to keep on feeling both, as we keep on dealing with these fluctuations of feeling right or feeling wrong, feeling strong or feeling weak. They aren't going to come to an end, either, because there will always be new and as yet undiscovered parts to make choices about.

In the Bible, in Psalm 62, it says, "God has spoken once, twice I have heard this: that power belongs to God." Twice? I've heard that hundreds of times! But that's not the point. Power belongs to God when everything feels good and I can say, "Thank you, God" and mean it. But I also find out that power belongs to God when nothing feels right. When I choose well, I am brought out of that which had its use for me, and I am back to myself, my true balance. Amen.

Daily Meditations

Monday, August 27

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

Now since the Lord is Divine truth itself coming from the Divine good, and this is His essence, and since everyone acts as he does by reason of his essential nature, this proves that it is constantly the Lord's will to implant truth and good, that is, faith and charity, in every person, and His will could not be any different. *True Christian Religion #145*

Tuesday, August 28

My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Psalm 139:15

[Heaven] remains with man to eternity, if he has become spiritual by means of the knowledges of truth and good applied to life in the world
Apocalypse Explained #199

Wednesday, August 29

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. *Psalm 139:16*

No one except the Lord alone can judge anyone according to his acts; because all acts proceed from final causes, which lie deeply concealed within. Man is judged according to these causes; and no one knows them but the Lord. *Arcana Coelestia #8620*

Thursday, August 30

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them! *Psalm 139:17*

The Lord united the Divine truth to the Divine good, thus His Human to the Divine itself.
Heavenly Doctrine #304

Friday, August 31

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts. *Psalm 139:23*

A person, being midway between these two opposites, and at the same time in spiritual equilibrium, can freely choose, adopt and make his own one or other. If he chooses evil and falsity, he links himself with hell; if good and truth, he links himself with heaven.
True Christian Religion #383

Saturday, September 1

See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting. *Psalm 139:24*

"An age," when said in the Word about the church, signifies its duration even to the end; and consequently when it is said of heaven, where there is no end, and when it is said of the Lord, it signifies what is eternal.
Arcana Coelestia (Potts) n. 10248

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

Our Beliefs in Brief:

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

Our Daily Bread Subscription Form

- New Subscription (\$15 per year, U.S. dollars)
 Renewal (\$15 per year, U.S. dollars)

Name _____

Street Address _____

City, State/Province, Zip Code, Country _____

\$ _____ is enclosed for a subscription for _____ years.

I would like to make a donation to *Our Daily Bread*. \$ _____

Please send me information about the Swedenborgian Church.

Please make checks payable to: The Swedenborgian Church
and mail to:

The Swedenborgian Church attn: *Our Daily Bread*
11 Highland Ave, Newtonville, MA 02460

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.

All Returns to:
Leah Goodwin, Editor
11 Highland Ave.
Newtonville, MA