

MAY/JUNE 2013

SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

OUR DAILY BREAD



Feed My Sheep

Prayer

Inflame us with your love,
O Christ,
That we may fly to the assistance
of the needy,
That we may clothe the nakedness
of the vulnerable,
And that with your endless compassion
We may bind up the wounds of the broken;
For your name's sake.

Hildegard of Bingen
(1098-1179)

Cover Image:
Jesus heals a leper (Mark 1:40-45).

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"Peter, do you love me? . . . Feed my sheep."

Dear Reader,

This issue of *Our Daily Bread* focuses on the work and spiritual thought of chaplains throughout the Swedenborgian Church. Chaplains are a diverse group, meeting a myriad of spiritual needs in countless settings. Many of our ordained ministers and certified lay leaders bring God's comfort, love, and guidance to individuals and groups in hospitals, universities, nursing homes, private homes, the military, and more.

Change, uncertainty, and challenge define chaplaincy. While church pastors occupy the relatively stable parish setting, chaplains feel called to focus their ministries on people in transitory life situations. Most of the time, chaplains encounter people living at existential edges, in liminal zones—birth, old age, death, job transitions, unemployment, family crises, homelessness, drug addiction, war. These "in-between times" are hard places to be, often involving physical and spiritual vulnerability, as well as emotional upheaval. The ideas shared and relationships created during these times are frequently brief, intense, and life changing. For these reasons, chaplains do incredibly important work.

The Lord calls all his people to care for one another, to "feed his sheep." It is our prayer that you will know the joy of both giving and receiving loving care.

Many blessings,
Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

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MAY 5 CALLED TO HOPE

Rev. Kathy Speas

Ephesians 1:15-18

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.

Sirach 44:1-15

Let us now sing the praises of famous men,
our ancestors in their generations.
The Lord apportioned to them great glory,
his majesty from the beginning.
There were those who ruled in their kingdoms, and
made a name for themselves by their valor; those
who gave counsel because they were intelligent;
those who spoke in prophetic oracles; those who
led the people by their counsels and by their
knowledge of the people's lore;
they were wise in their words of instruction;
those who composed musical tunes,
or put verses in writing; rich men endowed with
resources, living peacefully in their homes—all
these were honored in their generations, and were
the pride of their times.
Some of them have left behind a name, so that others
declare their praise.
But of others there is no memory; they have perished
as though they had never existed;
they have become as though they had never been
born, they and their children after them.
But these also were godly men, whose righteous
deeds have not been forgotten;
their wealth will remain with their descendants, and
their inheritance with their children's children.
Their descendants stand by the covenants; their
children also, for their sake.
Their offspring will continue forever, and their glory
will never be blotted out. Their bodies are buried
in peace, but their name lives on generation after
generation.
The assembly declares their wisdom,
and the congregation proclaims their praise.

Sermon

Anybody need more Kleenex? I brought some extra, because I knew this would be a three-hanky service.

It is moving beyond words when we say the names of those who have gone from us. It is such a profound experience to speak these souls into our world by saying their names out loud.

Hearing a list of names is no big deal. Nobody cries when the professor calls the class roll. There are no tears when they call the names for jury duty. I turn the radio off when they get to that roster of producers and directors at the end of an NPR show.

But on this day, when we say their names, it's not *as if* they are right here with us. This is when we are reminded that they are *always* right here with us.

We can feel their essences, their personalities—the core of them that was expressed in their faces and gestures, their clothes, the sound of their voices, their laughter, the shape of their bodies, and the feel of their hugs. We can see it, and we can feel it again.

Swedenborg's most profound legacy is in his experience of the world that we perceive only through the eyes of our hearts enlightened, and its living connection with the world that we see, hear, feel, taste, and touch with our conscious minds.

I don't want to call them the "spiritual world" and the "material world," because that implies that they are two separate places, that you have to undertake some journey to get there, that there is some distance between them.

This is not the day we summon people back here from another world; this is the day we remember that this world is around us all the time, that we are in that world as we walk through our days. Heaven and the human race are such that each has a permanent existence with the other.

In *Our Town*, Thornton Wilder says, "Now there are some things we all know, but we don't take 'em out and look at 'em very often. We all know that *something* is eternal. And it ain't houses and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and it ain't even the stars. . . . Everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings . . . There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being."

Orthodox churches are covered from ceiling to floor with ethereal, otherworldly images, icons, which are created to manifest the spiritual essence of the person

represented and lead the viewer into heaven through the icon's eyes.

This is what Swedenborg calls "correspondences." This is the visible effect of an invisible cause, the physical evidence of a spiritual reality.

This is what we call his sweater, her favorite painting, the knickknack that always sat at his desk, the salt and pepper shakers that were in her kitchen all those years, that picture of all of us that Christmas. These are icons. Correspondences. The link. The bridge.

Thornton Wilder hits the nail on the head. "We ourselves will be loved for a while, and forgotten. But that love will have been enough. All our impulses of love return to the Love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living, and a land of the dead, and the bridge is love."

I noticed that when we said these names today, we didn't sing the praises of any famous men or women. Nobody mentioned Mozart, or Ella Fitzgerald, or Swedenborg, or even Jesus.

A lot of those names belong to people who gave us our names, who spoke our names for the very first time, who taught us our names.

Others of these names belong to people who, in a spiritual sense, knew our names, our essences, because they were closest to our truest selves.

These are the people who called us into being. They called us in from play to dinner; they called us on the phone; they called us daughter, son, lover, friend; they called us on the carpet; they called us silly names we'd never tell anybody.

They called us to imagination, to courage, to creativity, to loyalty, to humor, and to our talents. They called us to faith and to forgiveness.

I carry my dad's pocketknife, which is my icon of him. Through it, he calls me to be resourceful, versatile, prepared, sharp, careful.

So, this day is more than just a litany of names and an hour of memories.

It is about the hope to which we have been called by this communion of saints. I can't tell you what that hope is. The Bible doesn't tell you what that hope is. But you know what it is. Your icons will tell you what it is.

Call that name again—this afternoon, this week sometime, whenever it hits you, say it, say it out loud,

a couple of times. And listen. Listen with the eyes and ears of your heart enlightened. Listen to your hope.

Prayer

Make speed to aid her, ye saints of God;

Come forth to greet her, ye angels of the Lord,

Receiving her soul, presenting her before the face of the most highest.

May Christ receive her, who hath called her;

And may angels bear her into the bosom of Abraham,

Receiving her soul, presenting her before the face of the most highest.

Rest eternal grant unto her, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon her,

Presenting her before the face of the most highest.

Amen.

- *Commendation of a Soul, Western Christian Rite*

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.

Daily Meditations

Monday, May 6

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. . . . Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. *I Corinthians 15:12-14, 18-19*

Love is our life. For most people, the existence of love is a given, but the nature of love is a mystery. As for the existence of love, this we know from everyday language. We say that someone loves us, that monarchs love their subjects, and that subjects love their monarch.

Divine Love & Wisdom #1

Tuesday, May 7

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

I Corinthians 15:20-22

We say that a husband loves his wife and that a mother loves her children, and vice versa. We say that people love their country, their fellow citizens, their neighbor. We use the same language about impersonal objects, saying that someone loves this or that thing.

Ibid.

Wednesday, May 8

But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. . . . The last enemy to be destroyed is death. *I Corinthians 15:23, 26*

Even though the word “love” is so commonly on our tongues, still hardly anyone knows what love is. *Ibid.*

Thursday, May 9

But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.

I Corinthians 15:35-36

When we stop to think about love, we find that we cannot form any image of it in our thoughts, so we say either that it is not really anything or that it is simply something that flows into us from our sight, hearing, touch, and conversation and therefore influences us.

Ibid.

Friday, May 10

And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.

I Corinthians 15:37-38

We are wholly unaware that love is our very life—not just the general life of our whole body and of all our thoughts, but the life of their every least detail. *Ibid.*

Saturday, May 11

There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.

I Corinthians 15:40-41

Wise people can grasp this when you ask, “If you take away the effects of love, can you think anything? Can you do anything? As the effects of love lose their warmth, do not thought and speech and action lose theirs as well? Do they not warm up as love warms up?” Still, the grasp of these wise people is not based on the thought that love is our life, but on their experience that this is how things happen. *Ibid.*

SPRING AND RESURRECTION: A NEW WAY OF LIFE

Mrs. Betsy Coffman

Psalm 51

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.
You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Revelation 21:1-5

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new

Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

12

 MAY

Sermon

Good morning on this beautiful spring day! I really struggled this week with what I would focus on in my message today. I knew I wanted it to have something to do with the spiritual significance of spring and I felt I would like to tie it in somehow with Jesus' life, death and resurrection. I don't think the time of year of Jesus' death is ever mentioned anywhere in the Gospels, yet Easter has always been celebrated in the spring, and this for obvious reasons. It is the time when we see the world around us spring to life from apparent death. Springtime evokes in most of us an awareness of our basic, primal connection to creation and life—and we often experience a renewed enthusiasm and energy as we watch the greening of grass and trees, enjoy the rich colors of spring flowers, and hear the early-morning chorus of birdcalls once again.

The natural world around us is almost achingly beautiful. With this beauty comes a sense that, no matter what difficulties we may be facing, we can indeed overcome and go on. And friends, it is not by chance that we feel this. It is truly by divine design! It's coded into our DNA, so to speak, that we see spiritual reality mirrored in the world of nature around us. We are told that "every single thing in nature, from the smallest to the largest, corresponds to, or expresses, something spiritual. This is because the natural world and everything in it [actually] exists and endures from the spiritual world, and both of these worlds exist and endure from the Divine..." from God's creation.

In other words, we are created to be capable of perceiving the world around us in a way that helps us understand ourselves as spiritual beings and grow accordingly.

Many native cultures have long understood this and made great use of their deep connection with the

world of nature to develop themselves. Their sense of a holy and purpose-filled life is deeply embedded in living with “an attitude of gratitude,” as well as stewardship for the beauty of God’s world. A Navajo prayer expresses this wonderfully:

I walk with beauty before me;
I walk with beauty behind me;
I walk with beauty above me;
I walk with beauty below me;
I walk with beauty all around me;
Your world is so beautiful, O God.

Matthew Fox, in his book *Creation Spirituality*, suggests that “beauty is the habit of the universe” and that therefore “it is essential that humans be about the good work of showering each other with beauty, and of bringing out the beauty in one another.” He notes that

we all share beauty. It strikes us indiscriminately. It may be when our child was born into this world, or a simple flower; or a song; or a smile on a face; or a great act of courage; or a dance well done; or a child’s laugh; or a loaf of bread baking; or finding a worthy job; or a snowfall; or laughter among friends; or the death of a loved one returning to his or her Source; there is no end to beauty for the person who is aware. Even the cracks between the sidewalk contain geometric patterns of amazing beauty...we walk on beauty every day, even when things seem ugly around us. (p. 49)

This idea made me think about what it would be like if we were all so caught up in the beauty and wonder of this created universe—if we could really see it and feel it—how it might affect our outlook and behavior. What would it mean to “bring out the beauty” in ourselves and others? Is that not our real purpose for being? Is that not, in effect, what Christ’s life was all about—to help us see the beauty within ourselves and others, and to bring it forth so it can live and flourish? We often refer to that as seeing the “Christ” or “God” within others. It means seeing one another as made in God’s image, as precious beings.

Jesus went around the countryside redefining, by his words and actions, what beauty really is. Carroll E. Simcox gives a powerful description of this. He says, “How can anybody read the Gospels and fail to see how Jesus, in his contacts with all sorts and conditions of people, even the apparent

good-for-nothings and worse, seemed to find in them possibilities for sublime development?” (April 18, *In God’s Care: Daily Meditations*)

Jesus touched the “untouchables,” forgave those thought to be unforgivable, sat down and broke bread with outcasts and women, and brought out, in all those who were willing, the beauty within them. He recognized and taught that true beauty abounds where love is—and that ugliness is anything that disconnects us from love: injustice, hatred and intolerance, vanity and greed, selfishness and violence. That is why, even in the ugliness of the death he suffered, we are left with the overwhelming beauty and power of his ability to continue to love. Some, such as Jean Houston, suggest that the resurrection was possible because the power of Jesus’ ability to love became so “interwoven in his human structure” (physical cells) that Jesus became Christos, or Divine Human, and “all matter [was] shown to be holy and the human [became] love” (*Godseed*, p. 108). In this view, his continual struggles between his human side and his spiritual, inner nature, over the course of his lifetime, had led slowly but surely to an internal transformation where he overcame his human limitations, modeling for us all the changing power of love and the eternal nature of existence.

Even in the ugliness of the death Christ suffered, we are left with the overwhelming beauty and power of his ability to continue to love.

Although none of us can know for sure exactly what happened in terms of Jesus’ death and subsequent resurrection, we do know this: The whole story is about dying to one form of self and being resurrected or changed into a new form of self.

This is what we call “regeneration”—the process of continually moving to new levels of spiritual awareness and growth. This is also what we see in the seasonal cycles of the world of nature. Erich Jantsch notes that “the ultimate principle of evolution does not seem to be adaptation, but transformation and the creative diversification of evolution....Similar to the death of individuals, the death of whole species in ecosystems, too, furthers evolution.” In other words, the death of certain species actually makes way for new, more advanced species.

In the same way, our spiritual growth over our lifetime involves allowing parts of us to die so that new understandings and feelings can be born in us—so that we can evolve as spiritual beings. But for this to occur, we must be willing to go through a process

very much like that expressed in David's Song to God in Psalm 51:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your
unfailing love;
according to your great compassion,
blot out my transgression.
Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my
sin.
Create in me a pure heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast and right spirit within me.

Here we see David's awareness that his "sin"—those things within him that block him from God's loving, transforming power—must be removed if he is to grow and be renewed.

Last weekend, I spent several hours in our backyard raking up dead leaves, picking up old sticks and branches, and burning them all. In the midst of clearing away this old detritus, I was acutely aware of the delicacy of tiny flowers in the grass, of the almost-budding daffodils in my flower gardens, and the florescent green of the grass itself. I dug and planted some rhubarb and asparagus and looked at all the worms wriggling and the weeds that had already begun to grow. It was a wonderful example of a spiritual correspondence in process—all the old, dead vegetation is a symbol for that within each of us that must be recognized, picked up, cleared away, and burned. Although we can put it in the fire and even start the fire, the actual burning and transformation process is not something we "do." As the fire burns and purifies, eventually all that matter will become part of the earth, food for new growth.

And by clearing the yard and gardens, the new plants have room to develop, grow, and bear blossoms or fruit, yet we don't actually do the "growing" itself. Do you see the correspondence with our spiritual growth as human beings? It all works together, doesn't it? Death and life, life and death—a never-ending cycle of existence, simply moving from one state to another.

The words from Revelation 21:5—"Behold, I make all things new!"—are not some kind of empty promise. They are about what Rev. Kit Billings calls "the Lord's power to change and transform us deep down inside, where it really counts... We are being called to allow our everyday thinking and expectations to be lit up by the great power and energy that feeds the Lord's regenerating forces all around and within us."

As we experience the beauty and renewal that comes with spring, the newness of life welling up

around us, we are called to a conscious awareness, as Rev. Billings reminds us, that "every one of these wonderful blessings associated with spring represent and reveal to us the positive and beautiful changes that happen to us when the Lord comes to us anew and afresh!"

Let us open ourselves to that change and renewal within that is so needed if we are to be part of the change we want in this troubled world in which we live.

I close with a section from a poem of Robert Frost:

But God's own descent
Into flesh was meant
As a demonstration...
Spirit enters flesh and for all its worth
Charges into earth in birth after birth
Ever fresh and fresh.

Amen.

Prayers

O Tree of Calvary,
Send thy roots deep down into my heart.
Gather together the soil of my heart,
The sands of my fickleness,
The stones of my stubbornness,
The mud of my desires;
Bind them all together,
O Tree of Calvary;
Interlace them with thy strong roots,
Entwine them with the network of thy love.

- Chandran Devanesen

The reign of God is here, and we are invited to enter.

The door is a humble and hidden Messiah whose moving force

is the power of God, totally directed to the life about to be born...

to liberate, to give growth, to render fruitful.

Human violence and power cannot compare with this quiet force,

for they are marked with the sign of death.

This quiet, life-giving force, we call it Love.

- Pierre Claverie

Daily Meditations

Monday, May 13

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.

I Corinthians 15:42-44

We cannot know what our life is unless we know what love is. If we do not know this, then one person may believe that life is nothing but sensation and action and another that it is thought, when in fact thought is the first effect of life, and sensation and action are secondary effects of life. *Divine Love and Wisdom #2*

Tuesday, May 14

Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven.

I Corinthians 15:45-47

Thought is the first effect of life, as just noted, but there are deeper and deeper forms of thought as well as more and more superficial ones. The deepest form of thought, the perception of ends, is actually the first effect of life. But more on this below [€€179-183] in connection with levels of life. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, May 15

As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven. What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

I Corinthians 15:48-50

We can get some idea that love is our life from the warmth of the sun in our world.

Divine Love and Wisdom #3

Thursday, May 16

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed . . . When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” *I Corinthians 15:51, 54-55*

We know this warmth acts like the life shared by all earth’s plants because when it increases in the spring, plants of all kinds sprout from the soil. They dress themselves in their leafy finery and then in their blossoms and eventually in fruit. *Ibid.*

Friday, May 17

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. *I Corinthians 15:56-57*

This is how they “live.” When the warmth ebbs away, though, as it does in fall and winter, they are stripped of these signs of life and they wither. Love works the same way in us because love and warmth correspond to each other. This is why love makes us warm. *Ibid.*

Saturday, May 18

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

I Corinthians 15:58

God alone—the Lord—is love itself, because he is life itself. Both we on earth and angels are life-receivers. I will be offering many illustrations of this in works on divine providence and life. *Divine Love and Wisdom #4*

TESTING GOD

Rev. Sage Currie

Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?"

But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink."

Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

John 4:5-42

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." **19** MAY

Sermon

It has been a long journey—longer for some of us than for others. I've been traveling for just over twenty-eight years, which to some may seem like a short weekend trip, but to the children gathered for Sunday school, I assure you, it is a very large number.

However many years we each may claim to have been journeying in this physical human form, I imagine that we all share a common experience of every now and again—for a second, sometimes longer than a second—feeling that, no matter how far we may have come or how long we've been at it, we haven't gone anywhere. Something happens, a perspective shifts, we lose a job or start smoking again or resume doing something we thought we had gotten past, or we become vulnerable, needy, anxious, fearful, or angry at ourselves or the people in our lives or the world. All of a sudden we look at ourselves and think, "I'm supposed to be a grown up? I'm supposed to have 'it' or at least something figured out? I'm not growing at all! I haven't learned anything! It's not worth it."

This is what the Israelites are feeling in today's passage from Exodus—as if they have not gotten anywhere.

Forget that Moses had lead them out of Egypt, out of slavery and bondage; that God has parted the Red Sea, protecting them from the Egyptian army in hot pursuit; that when they had cried out in hunger God had provided manna, and when they had asked for meat he had given quail from heaven; that when they had earlier cried out in thirst, unable to drink the bitter waters at Marah, the Lord had made the water sweet. This story of the Israelites crying out once more comes after all of that. After all of these blessings, after all that God has done for them, they find themselves thirsty once more, and instead of trusting that God will provide—the God that had cared for them every step of the way—they again cry out: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" In their moment of need they reconsider every step they have taken so far. They question where God is leading

them and wonder whether they would not have been better off remaining in the state of bondage they were in before.

At this place called Massah and Meribah, the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?" Massah means "trial, test or proof" and Meribah means "contention or quarrel." The Israelites quarrel with Moses, not believing that God will provide. They want proof. They want to know that the Lord is still with them. They don't care that the Lord has provided for them every day before today; they need proof today. Today is a new day. They are experiencing a new thirst. After all, just because God was there for you yesterday, why should you believe that God will be there for you tomorrow?

This feeling can be so real. It is amazing how shortsighted we can become when things go wrong. We become so absorbed by our thirst that we cannot think or feel or remember anything else. In an instant, we feel totally and completely abandoned.

This past Friday, the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle* caught my attention. It was an article on the proposal to put up a suicide barrier on the Golden Gate Bridge. It is believed by many whose loved ones have jumped from the bridge that such an act is impulsive. They believe that if their loved one had had just one moment to think about it, he or she would not have committed suicide.

The most compelling testimony came from a man who had actually survived the jump and suffered a broken back. He spoke of the impulsive nature of his decision and said that if there had been a barrier he would not have jumped—that all he really needed in that moment was someone to talk to.

The subject of suicide, as painful and difficult as it is to grapple with and talk about, describes the power a single moment has to totally engulf our sense of gratitude, purpose, meaning and especially hopefulness. In a single moment, like the Israelites, we can slip into a belief that God has abandoned us, and that we will never make it to the Promised Land.

But God does not, cannot, and will not abandon us. If for a second God were to abandon us, Emanuel Swedenborg tells us, we would cease to exist. Our very existence depends on the constant inflow of love from God. God is Love and God is our very life.

This is the great benefit of the scriptures—that they contain the stories of the Israelites' journey, a story that Swedenborgians believe contains a picture or a template for each of our personal journeys. We are lucky enough to be able to read the story from start to finish. We get to read Exodus 17, we get to read of the Israelites' thirst and murmurings, we get to hear them question whether God is with them or not—but then we get to read on.

We read on and hear that Moses pleads with the Lord on behalf of the people, and that the Lord responds by bringing fresh, gushing waters from the rock. In the Swedenborgian tradition, both rocks and water symbolize truth. But rocks (especially the large boulder we assume the rock of Horeb to be) stand for those large, heavy, strong, immovable, often straightforward, but foundational truths that we hold. "God is love." "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." "Life has meaning."

It is for the sake of these foundational truths that the Lord leads Moses to bring water to the people, and it is to these basic foundational truths that we must now go when we fall into the false belief that we have been abandoned by God. We cry out, we complain, we ask for proof that God is there, and we are led to the rock. We try to remember those foundational truths, which perhaps we had forgotten. We meditate on them and what they mean for us. We repeat them.

And God will be standing there. God will lead us, like Moses, to strike the rock, and refreshing waters or refreshing insights will flow forth. From the foundational truths that we had forgotten about or taken for granted will flow forth the useful truth we thirst for and need—the truth that applies to our situations, answers to the questions that have brought us to this place of abandonment and solitude. When we feel abandoned and we take the step of talking to someone, this is what they help us to do. "It will be all right." "God is present." "Just hold on and have faith." "I've been there, too." "You are not alone."

We help each other to see the rocks in our lives, the boulders that are always present, that cannot be washed away. This is what brings us to spiritual community, to friendships, to scripture. I feel this way. Oh, and sometimes you do too? And the Israelites too? We are part of a community that stretches across the globe, throughout time, and into the spiritual world. This grand community has seen temptation and trial, has been on the desert journey time and time again.

We have grown and will continue to grow unto eternity. We have gotten somewhere. We will at times feel abandoned, but we will hold to what we know to be true, and we will be given drink. Ultimately we will be given the drink that Jesus offers to the Samaritan woman at the well when he says, "Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Daily Meditations

Monday, May 20

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

Psalm 42:1-2

Divinity is not in space. Given the divine omnipresence--presence with everyone in the world, with every angel in heaven, and with every spirit under heaven--there is no way a merely physical image can compass the thought that Divinity, or God, is not in space. *Divine Love and Wisdom #7*

Tuesday, May 21

My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"
Psalm 42:3

There is one human God who is the source of everything. All the elements of human reason unite in, and in a sense center on, the fact that a single God is the Creator of the universe.

Divine Love and Wisdom #23

Wednesday, May 22

These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

Psalm 42:4

It is because the divine essence itself is love and wisdom that the universe and everything in it, whether living or not, depends on warmth and light for its survival. *Divine Love and Wisdom #32*

Thursday, May 23

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.

Psalm 42:5-7

All human feelings and thoughts arise from the divine love and wisdom that constitute the very essence that is God. *Divine Love and Wisdom #33*

Friday, May 24

By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.

I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?"

As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?" *Psalm 42:8-10*

Since we have been created to be recipients, then, and since we are recipients to the extent that we love God and are wise because of our love for God (that is, the extent to which we are moved by what comes from God and think as a result of that feeling), it therefore follows that the divine essence, the Creatress, is divine love and wisdom. *Ibid.*

Saturday, May 25

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God. *Psalm 42:11*

There is a union of love and wisdom in every divine work as well. This is why it endures, even to eternity.

Divine Love and Wisdom #36

MAY 26 HOPE IN DEPRESSION

Rev. Kit Billings

I Kings 19: 1-13

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

James 5: 13-18

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up;

and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

Sermon

As I begin my spiritual message this morning on our Sabbath of Hope concerning depression, the first thought I want to lift up is, *sadness is not a sin*. The truth of your emotions and why you are feeling them matters. We all deserve to experience and live out one of my favorite spiritual and psychological truths given by the Lord our Savior, which we find in John 8:32, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Have you ever felt really blue or "down in the dumps"? Ever feel depressed or hopeless? Also, have you ever been through psychological depression that lasted more than three weeks, and which perhaps became debilitating in some way?

If so, then you may have experienced what psychology calls "depression." The hallmark symptoms of clinical depression are as follows:

- Persistent sad or empty mood
- Loss of interest in activities once enjoyed
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Restlessness and irritability
- Difficulty concentrating
- Change in sleep habits (insomnia or excessive sleeping)
- Loss of energy
- Change in eating habits (overeating or loss of appetite)
- Ongoing aches and pains that do not go away with treatment
- Thoughts of suicide or death, or suicide attempts

Depression is often referred to as the "common cold of the psyche." It is estimated that each year more than 19 million Americans suffer from clinical depression. Approximately one in five adults will experience depression in his or her lifetime. Clinical depression has been on the rise over the past fifty years. Additionally, *depression will likely have a serious affect upon a person's faith in and perceptions about God.*

There was a time for me, during my mid-twenties, when I found myself clinically depressed. I can say for certain that it seriously impacted my faith and

my deeper hopes in life. My depression affected my spiritual mind: I found myself more often doubting that the Lord truly cared about me, and my thinking in general was confused, as was my ability to access the deeper levels of my spiritual reasoning. Life, during my six months of depression, felt like a fog. I felt as though I was in a spiritual desert. I felt disconnected from the Lord. And instead of feeling hopeful about many things in life, I felt hopeless about it all. It seemed that most things in my life were much harder than they had been prior to my depression. Things like wanting to get out of bed in the morning, organizing my weekly schedule, wanting to hang out with my family and friends, making out a grocery list, or feeling like I was a worthwhile person in God's and my own eyes were all far more difficult because I felt depressed.

Now, of course, we need to draw a distinction between the everyday, normal kinds of moods, which last for a period of minutes or hours or even a few days, and clinical depression, which I described already—the kind that affects one's ability to function normally in life. We sometimes say of the regular "ups and downs" in life (such as missing out on a job or promotion), "I feel depressed!" Or we might experience that unwanted feeling of being really down or "in the dumps" after breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Jesus himself felt sad sometimes, such as after his close friend Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, died. We read in John 11:35 concerning the Lord's grief over his friend's death, "Jesus wept." Or think of his grief over the people in the city of Jerusalem, his fellow countrymen, in John 19:41-42: "Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, 'If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.'"

Spiritual and emotional struggles are part of life. In New Church theology, we understand the common human spiritual and psychological journey of life to be poignantly and symbolically revealed in the overall biblical story, from Genesis to Revelation. And when I look at that epic story in the light of New Church theology, what stands out to me is this:

- The Lord's divine love, his grace, loved us into being and remains our constant blessing forever.
- Our psychological-spiritual journey is long! It contains seven distinct stages that contain many periods of growth and victory when we are living in relationship with God—as well as

many times of deep doubt, fear, anxiety, and perhaps despair and depression.

- Each stage of spiritual development is necessary—each one builds into the next.
- The end goal, the purpose, within this journey is really, really beautiful. The angel-person God has in mind for us to become is *worth the struggle*.
- Our periods of spiritual and psychological trial or temptation battle usually are intricately involved in our current spiritual developmental process. In other words, many people find that many of their journeys of suffering wind up leading them into vitally useful inner growth and transformation.

The riveting story in I Kings 19 illustrates where real-life spirituality and depression come together. Elijah's journey following his awesome defeat of 450 of Queen Jezebel's prophets contains a number of signs of clinical depression, or at least spiritual and emotional hopelessness.

Elijah felt so terrified and upset about the imminent threat to his life that he ran away in fear, going off to Beersheba, where he chose to isolate himself, leaving his servant and companion there. And then, after reaching that broom tree in the wilderness, Elijah actually calls out to God in prayer and asks that his life end right then and there! "It is enough!" the prophet exclaims. "Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!"

I hear severe low self-esteem here. And clearly Elijah neglected to take in food and nourishment, for what does the angel of the Lord say to him not once but twice before helping him find spiritual balance? "Arise and eat."

But one meal was not enough for the disillusioned, and perhaps depressed, prophet Elijah. For after he ate and drank once, he lay down and slept again. Perhaps, like many, he just felt hopeless inside and wanted to oversleep.

For some vital reason, Elijah's faith and psychological strength were not up to the task of taking on Jezebel's wrath. But another powerfully important thing comes out of this time of spiritual and emotional suffering for Elijah—he experiences help and support from the Lord, from the angels, and ultimately from others.

We see here that indeed, the Lord cares about us in our darkest times, in those spiritual deserts and valleys we encounter in life. In fact, Swedenborg teaches, it is during our times of suffering, doubt,

and despair that the Lord is closest to us. No wonder we find in the story of Saul and David a story of compassion, in which God cared mercifully for the troubled King Saul by providing him with a skillful harpist—none other than the shepherd, David.

I like that story a lot for another reason, which is that it lifts up for us the importance of having compassion for those experiencing mental illness and choosing to provide faithful ministry to them, as David did for Saul. Unfortunately, in our society it is still easy for people suffering with some kind of mental illness to encounter insensitivity, misunderstanding, and avoidance from others.

But the church is meant to be a place where anyone suffering from physical, mental, or spiritual distress or disease can find solace and support. The Lord's Church is meant to be a place of spiritual and emotional solace and healing. As we read in James 5, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven."

This morning I want to make clear that debilitating depression is something to be aware of and not to hide. Let us choose to shed a compassionate light on "the common cold of the psyche," and help our brothers and sisters among us and around us learn that there are many good reasons to have hope concerning depression.

Depression is something worth paying serious attention to—and it is something that we can have a lot of hope for in learning how to manage and heal. Approximately 70 to 80% of those suffering with depression will find healing and transformation through some or a combination of therapeutic modalities—through medication prescribed through a physician or psychiatrist, through a nutritious diet, from better exercise, through psychotherapy and/or support groups, through developing one's spiritual life and disciplines (i.e., prayer, meditation, reading God's Holy Word, attending regular worship, spending time listening to music or walking in nature, or volunteering to help others instead of isolating by one's self), by visiting with clergy and pastoral counselors, and through ongoing education and learning.

We read in Isaiah of the power with which the Church—you, me, our religious community, and

beyond—is anointed to aid those facing depression and other emotional and mental battles:

"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound....to comfort all who mourn, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified."

May the Lord our God continue inspiring and guiding us in our faith communities to reach out with faith, hope, and love to those suffering with mental illness. Amen.

Prayers

O Christ of the road of the wounded,

O Christ of the tears of the broken,

In me and with me, the needs of the world;

Grant me my prayers of loving and hoping,

Grant me my prayers of yearning and healing.

- J. Philip Newell, Celtic Prayers from Iona

As the hand is made for holding and the eye for seeing, thou hast fashioned me for joy. Share with me the vision to find it everywhere: in the wild violet's beauty; in the lark's melody; in the face of a steadfast man; in a child's smile; in a mother's love; in the purity of Jesus.

- Gaelic, tr. Alistair MacLean

May He support us all the day long, till the shades lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done! Then in His mercy may he give us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last.

- John Henry Newman, 1801-1890

Monday, May 27

I am one who has seen affliction under the rod of God's wrath; he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; against me alone he turns his hand, again and again, all day long. He has made my flesh and my skin waste away, and broken my bones; he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation; he has made me sit in darkness like the dead of long ago. *Lamentations 3:1-6*

Divine love and wisdom are substance and form in and of themselves, and are therefore wholly "itself" and unique. *Divine Love and Wisdom #44*

Tuesday, May 28

He has walled me about so that I cannot escape; he has put heavy chains on me; though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer; he has blocked my ways with hewn stones, he has made my paths crooked. He is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding; he led me off my way and tore me to pieces; he has made me desolate; he bent his bow and set me as a mark for his arrow. *Lamentations 3:7-12*

Divine love and wisdom cannot fail to be and to be manifested in others that it has created. The hallmark of love is not loving ourselves but loving others and being united to them through love.

Divine Love and Wisdom #47

Wednesday, May 29

He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes; my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, "Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the Lord." The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. *Lamentations 3:16-20*

The hallmark of love is also being loved by others because this is how we are united. Truly, the essence of all love is to be found in union, in the life of love that we call joy, delight, pleasure, sweetness, blessedness, contentment, and happiness. *Ibid.*

Thursday, May 30

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."

Lamentations 3:21-24

The essence of love is that what is ours should belong to someone else. Feeling the joy of someone else as joy within ourselves: that is loving. *Ibid.*

Friday, May 31

The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth, to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it. *Lamentations 3:25-28*

What is loving ourselves alone, really, and not loving someone else who loves us in return? This is more fragmentation than union. Love's union depends on mutuality, and there is no mutuality within ourselves alone. *Divine Love and Wisdom #48*

Saturday, June 1

For the Lord will not reject forever. Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone. When all the prisoners of the land are crushed under foot, when human rights are perverted in the presence of the Most High, when one's case is subverted—does the Lord not see it? *Lamentations 3:31-36*

We can see from this that divine love cannot fail to be and to be manifested in others whom it loves and who love it. If this is characteristic of all love, it must be supremely characteristic, infinitely characteristic, of love itself. *Ibid.*

Numbers 15:37-41

The Lord said to Moses: Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God.

Matthew 9:18-26

While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, 'My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.' And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.' Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, 'Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.' And instantly the woman was made well. When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute-players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, 'Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district.

Matthew 14:34-36

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. After the people of that place recognized him, they sent word throughout the region and brought all who were sick to him, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Sermon

This has been—well, I'll be polite.

This has been quite a week.

I don't know about you, but this week shook me. Over the past six days, I've wondered about human nature. I've grieved for the people injured in Boston and Cambridge and Watertown and Waco and Sichuan, China. I've struggled with the age-old question of why terrible things happen, out of nowhere, to people who are minding their own business. I've worried about friends and family who live in Cambridge and Watertown, and about my husband Kevin, who pastors a church very close to the scene of both of the gun fights.

This week shook me in another way, too. On Monday, I watched, along with the rest of you and the rest of the country, as people ran toward the explosions instead of away. I watched as people helped stop people from bleeding to death, comforted the injured, ran two miles past a marathon finish line—28.2 miles in all—to give blood at the nearest hospital. Then, over the rest of the week, I watched law-enforcement officers and public-safety officials and politicians from dozens of different groups—city, state, federal, Republican, Democrat, you name it—work together tirelessly and effectively to help make this region—this nation—safer. That was awe-inspiring to witness.

What a week.

* * *

This week has left me feeling pretty ragged and in need of cheering up. So, just to lighten things up a bit for a few moments, I'm going to conduct a survey with you all.

Question One: If I put a pan of brownies in front of you and offered you either an edge piece or an inner piece, who here would go for the edge piece? Hands? Okay. Who here would go for an inner piece?

Question Two: Pizza. Do you love the crust, or do you leave the "pizza bones" and focus on the toppings or the soft center? (It's OK to vote twice.) Crust? Center and toppings?

Last question: Bread. Say you have a nice loaf of baguette, or a delicious whole-grain loaf. Do you love the middle part, or live for the crust? Again, you can vote twice. Middle part? Crust?

All profound questions, huh? Here are my answers: Brownies: I love the goopy middle part. Pizza: I

love the crust but usually eat the toppings first and generally hand the crust to Maudie to teethe on. Bread: Bread is yummy, period. But I'm a sucker for the grilled-cheese crusts Ephraim leaves on his plate.

We all have our food preferences when it comes to centers and edges. But when it comes to life, it's usually at the edges, at the margins, at the fringes, that things get interesting.

Moving to a new place. Losing a job, or starting a new one. Graduating from school. Getting married. Having a child. Retiring. Losing a parent, or anyone we love, whether it's been a long goodbye or is a tragic, sudden event. Even finishing one book and starting another. Strange things, intense things, sad and beautiful things, happen where one thing ends and another begins.

There's another kind of edge, too, and we've all been on it this week.

On Monday, we were stunned by the bombing of the Boston Marathon. On Wednesday night came the accidental explosion in Waco, Texas. On Thursday night, we began nearly twenty-four hours of seat gripping when two police officers were injured or killed in the line of duty and the Boston metro area came to a screeching halt. On Friday night, we rejoiced and felt deep relief here in Massachusetts—and yet still, all is not as it should be. "Normal life," whatever that is, isn't quite back in place yet. We've been shocked, tense, sad, angry, scared, relieved, jubilant. That's a lot. Edges, edges, everywhere.

Our readings this morning are about edges—and, more specifically, about fringes, which I'll get to in a minute. In our reading from Matthew 14, we are told that, after an eventful boating trip (the one where Jesus walked on water. Remember that one?)—after that trip, "when the disciples and Jesus had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret." In other words, they re-entered Israelite territory from Gentile territory; they crossed over the edge from one place to another.

Once people figure out just who has just disembarked from the boat, more edges emerge. People come looking for Jesus. And the people who come looking for him live on the edges, socially speaking—they are the sick. In first-century Palestine, sick people were often considered to be that way because they deserved it—because they were cursed, or because they were sinners. Even on the off chance that no one blamed them for their situation, being sick in this society made a person something of an outcast, a useless weight dragging society down.

These sick people, these folks on the margins, come to Jesus hoping that he can heal them. Edges again: these people are hoping to find healing if they can just touch the "fringe of his cloak"—the edge of Jesus' garment. So people who are (1) socially on the fringes come to (2) a place located on the fringe of the Holy Land to be (3) healed by a holy man's garment fringe. Edges, edges, edges. Fringes. Things happen on the fringes. Healing and new birth—God—happens at the fringes.

Matthew 9, our other reading for this morning, contains three verses telling another story about edges, about fringes. In verses 20 through 22, we read, "Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.' Jesus turned, *and seeing her* he said, 'Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.' And instantly the woman was made well."

Edges, fringes, again. A woman, bleeding for twelve years. She is on the fringes of society, for sure. Because of her illness, she is considered, at least by those who know about her problem, ritually impure. She understands herself to be spiritually contagious. She can't touch another person, especially a man, without dirtying that person too. If someone even sits down where she has just sat before a certain amount of time has passed, her uncleanness, her sin, passes on to them—just because she's sick. She must wash constantly in the mikvah, the ritual bath used to purify oneself—but no matter how much she washes, she is never, ever clean.

This woman may also be on the fringes of psychological stability, of sanity. In Mark and Luke's versions of this story, we are told that this woman has spent all she has on physicians, but none can cure her. She has spent every cent she has—and maybe every cent her family has, too, if she still has a family—but there is no hope for her. Try to imagine the emotional toll that kind of life would take. Imagine the isolation of having a secret—or maybe not-so-secret—shame. Imagine the fear of being so ill for so long. Imagine trying so hard to clean, to be pure, to be upright and good and hardworking, knowing that it can never be enough.

Actually, maybe those things aren't so hard for us to imagine, after all.

This woman, too, seeks healing from Jesus—and like others, she seeks it at the edge, the fringe, of his cloak. She wants this healing badly enough that she

is willing to break purity laws and sneak up behind him to let the strands of the fringes run through her fingers. She is willing to get in big trouble—and maybe even to make public to other people that she is, as they understand it, dirty—that she is sick, that she needs help, that she is on the edge. “If I only touch his cloak,” she whispers to herself, “I will be made well.”

And she is. Jesus turns and sees her—in the Greek, the word translated here as “see” can mean not only “to see” with the eyes but also “to understand,” “to know,” “to have regard for,” “to cherish.” Jesus turns, sees and *understands* and *cherishes* this woman, and says, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And she is instantly well.

Healing happens at the fringes.

Faith happens there, too. Because it’s at the fringes of life, at the edges—at the turn from one thing to another, or when we feel lonely, or when no one understands us, or as we step into a scary situation—at these fringes, faith happens. When people run toward explosions to help, instead of away to escape, faith happens. When people put their lives on the line, and even when they give their lives up for others, faith happens. Sometimes it’s the people on that edge, the people in the middle of the situation, who find faith blooming like a rose in the desert out of what they’re doing. Sometimes it’s the bystanders, the people on the edge of *the situation* who find their faith—their faith in God, their faith in the goodness of humanity—created or renewed by the goodness they see.

That’s part of the healing at the fringes, this faith we find that we didn’t know we had.

Sometimes the line is awfully blurry between faith and doubt, or faith and desperation. It is for this woman with the hemorrhage. “If I only touch his cloak, I’ll be made well.” It’s just a hope. Maybe a faint one.

And that’s OK. It’s enough. “Your faith has made you well,” says Jesus.

Could be that Jesus’ cloak has healing powers, could be it doesn’t. In Matthew’s version of the story, at least, it doesn’t matter. This particular woman finds healing at his cloak’s fringes, and at least part of that healing comes from the fact that she is willing—or desperate enough—to grasp frantically for it, to open herself up to danger and humiliation and failure. This is not a reasoned, confident, high-flying faith. This is not a comfortable faith. This is a faith the erupts out of this woman’s place on the edge.

Sometimes our faith can surprise us. Sometimes we don’t know how faithful we are until we’re on the edge, on the fringes, with no choices except scary ones. The band Cloud Cult puts it this way: “You’re afraid of the dark, but that’s where you learn to see.” Just as truly we could say, “You’re afraid of the edge, but that’s where you learn about the real ground beneath you.”

Another thing about that fringe. Let’s look at Numbers 15:37-41. Here’s what we read:

The Lord said to Moses: Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God.

This passage explains what the fringe of Jesus’ cloak actually was. That fringe that people touched wasn’t just decorative. It wasn’t just the edge of his outfit; it was his *tzitzit*, the tassels worn by observant Jews, of which Jesus was one.

These tassels signify several things. For one, they visually and tactilely recall for the wearer the commandments of the Torah¹—they remind the wearer to hear God’s word and live by God’s word, to unify thought and action in following God. They remind the wearer that the world doesn’t begin and end with human understanding—that it is God’s ways, and not our ways, that run the show.

But there’s another meaning too. Rabbi Arthur Waskow says that “the strings of the tassels are an extension of the person who wears them, reaching out like so many fingers into the universe. The spaces between the strings are the universe itself, reaching in toward the person. The fringe as a whole is made up of both the strings and the spaces; it is the powerful place where the person and the world meet and overlap, like two intertwined hands.”²

1. Quinn G. Caldwell, “Fringe,” *Stillspeaking Devotional*, accessible at http://act.ucc.org/site/MessageViewer?em_id=46863.0&dlv_id=61621.

2. Cited by Quinn G. Caldwell, “Fringe,” *Stillspeaking Devotional*, accessible at http://act.ucc.org/site/MessageViewer?em_id=46863.0&dlv_id=61621.

It makes sense that Jesus' fringes heal the people in these readings. It makes sense that the bleeding woman and the sick from Gennesaret find wholeness at the edge of Jesus' garment. It makes sense that when we find ourselves at the fringes of being, on the edge, whether it's the edge of our seats or the edge between life and death, we see things we did not see before, and find holiness where before there was just the everyday. It makes sense that all that has happened this week has left us ragged, on the edge, and yet with eyes opened to God's magnificent power and love in this world.

Because, as Quinn Caldwell says, "Jesus himself is not so different from that *tzitzit*, that fringe: he is the place where heaven and earth overlap, where God and humanity intertwine, where the Realm of God reaches into the world and the world reaches into the Realm of God, and the two become forever linked. And it is exactly in that place that God's most powerful work is done."

There is healing for all of us at the fringe of Jesus' garment—that place where fear and loss and sadness and faith blur together to yield hope, where heaven and earth mingle, where the fierce love of Christ Jesus sees and knows and cherishes us.

Paul tells the church at Corinth, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). I pray that when you find yourself at the edge, you will run toward things rather than away. I pray that you will know the presence of the Lord God who reaches from one edge, one fringe, of creation to the other to make everything new, the Lord who heals all wounds and orders all things mightily and sweetly in his image—you and me included.

Prayer

Lord, let me be yours.

Let me not draw back, neither from heaven, nor from your divinity, nor your cross.

Let me be yours, to whom I owe both my creation and my redemption.

Touch my heart and sanctify it, and consecrate me in your service, forever.

- Lucy Herbert (1669-1744)

Songs of Innocence by Missing Rachel

It has been about eight years since Missing Rachel, a philanthropic a capella ensemble, released its 2004 first album, *The Thundered Word*, to benefit the restoration and ministry of Swedenborg Chapel in Cambridge, MA. It has been a busy and blessed time since: several weddings, a few professional transitions and career advances, new homes, new academic heights, six kids (and counting!), an epiphany or twenty, and of course lots of laughter and tears and singing and living. Although most of the group's members no longer reside in the immediate Cambridge area, in July of 2011 they gathered at Swedenborg Chapel to record a new album.

Songs of Innocence is a collection of beloved hymns, lullabies, and children's songs (written by New Church musicians Lori and John Odhner; the album also includes a setting of the Lord's Prayer by the late Heather Childs. The album's title is derived from William Blake's poetic anthology *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, and the album in fact includes a setting of Blake's poem "The Lamb." *Songs of Innocence* offers the same ethereal harmonies and clear voices that characterized Missing Rachel's first album.

Missing Rachel is devoting the funds generated by this album to the protection of innocence; the proceeds will go to several organizations that aid and protect children. These organizations vary in their mission focus: some are orphanages, while others assist children within the family setting. Visit <http://missingrachel.baxtonia.com> for more information, track samples, and bulk-ordering details.

CDs are \$15 (\$10 if you order five or more) plus shipping and can be purchased through the Bryn Athyn Cathedral bookstore, the Cambridge Swedenborg Library, one of the members of Missing Rachel, or by sending a check made out to Rebecca Esterson to the following address:

Missing Rachel CD
c/o Leah Goodwin
43 Hobart Square
Whitman, MA 02382



Daily Meditations

Monday, June 3

I love you, O Lord, my strength.
The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,
my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield,
and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.
I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, so
I shall be saved from my enemies. *Psalms 18: 1-3*

Divinity is present in absolutely everything in the created universe and that the created universe is therefore the work of Jehovah's hands, as it says in the Word. *Divine Love and Wisdom #59*

Tuesday, June 4

The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of perdition assailed me;
the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me.
In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears.
Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry.
Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him. *Psalms 18:4-8*

Even though Divinity is present in all things great and small in the created universe, there is no trace of intrinsic divinity in their own being. While the created universe is not God, it is from God; and since it is from God, his image is in it like the image of a person in a mirror. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, June 5

Wednesday, June 5
He bowed the heavens, and came down; thick darkness was under his feet.
He rode on a cherub, and flew; he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.
He made darkness his covering around him, his canopy thick clouds dark with water.
Out of the brightness before him there broke through his clouds hailstones and coals of fire.

Psalms 18:9-12

Divinity fills all space in the universe nonspatially.
Divine Love and Wisdom #69

Thursday, June 6

The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice.
And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; he flashed forth lightnings, and routed them.
Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare at your rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.
He reached down from on high, he took me; he drew me out of mighty waters. *Psalms 18:13-16*

Divinity is the same in the largest and smallest things. This follows from the two preceding sections, from Divinity being nonspatially present in all space and nontemporally present in all time.

Divine Love and Wisdom #77

Friday, June 7

He delivered me from my strong enemy, and from those who hated me; for they were too mighty for me.
They confronted me in the day of my calamity; but the Lord was my support.
He brought me out into a broad place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me. *Psalms 18:17-19*

It is obvious from actual experience that love generates warmth and wisdom generates light. When we feel love, we become warmer, and when we think from wisdom, it is like seeing things in the light.

Divine Love and Wisdom #95

Saturday, June 8

The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me.
For I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not wickedly departed from my God.
For all his ordinances were before me, and his statutes I did not put away from me.
I was blameless before him, and I kept myself from guilt. *Psalms 18:20-23 Bible*

With a little elevation of understanding, everyone can see that it is quite impossible for the Lord to dwell with angels in anything but what is his, that is, what belongs to him, which is love and wisdom.

Divine Love and Wisdom #114

MY CHAPLAINCY MENTOR IS JESUS

Rev. Susannah Currie

Mark 10:46-52

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Sermon

I have come to an understanding of my personal theology of spiritual care through my fourteen years of experience as a Swedenborgian minister in parish ministry, and through my three years of work as a board-certified chaplain working in hospice and nursing-home settings. My practice of pastoral care as a chaplain in a healthcare setting is also influenced by my Swedenborgian theology, in which Jesus plays a central role.

Through our denomination's doctrinal teachings about Scripture, I have found a key to understanding that Jesus was the greatest of all chaplaincy mentors. My pastoral practice in parish ministry and chaplaincy is modeled on the incarnation of God as lived through the life of Jesus. Jesus and his caring, listening, responding, and inspiring ministries are central to my understanding of how God exists in the world within our human relationships. I believe that in my relationships with parishioners, I can provide an opportunity for an incarnation event when I support them in actively engaging their relationship with God. I believe that human beings are created to have the choice to live as he taught and modeled. I believe that God calls all persons into relationship, and my spiritual care of hospice and nursing home residents embodies that belief by being truly multifaith. My theology offers me interfaith appreciation, and I

believe that a universal human need exists for spiritual care and support for relationship with God throughout any patient's hospital experience, the journey of hospice for the patient and family, and in the daily life of the nursing-home resident. Indeed, this need is present throughout anyone's life. **9 JUN**

The primacy of love as modeled by Jesus' caring is a foundational theological belief for me, because I believe that we are all one in God. I see God in all persons, and I welcome and invite these persons to share themselves with me, in whatever way they desire. I also believe that all persons need to feel loved—which reminds me, moment by moment, to check in with myself and make certain that I am available to see and hear the resident fully, so as to be truly caring, before entering the room. If I am not authentically clear and ready to be present and truly attentive, it is better for both of us that I allow myself time to rest, reflect, or process whatever is interfering with my ability to willingly present myself, in that moment, as attentive to their words and caring of their feelings. To love one another as oneself, we have to love ourselves too!

Jesus' model of listening to each person he ministered to is a high ideal to aspire to. Attempting to follow his example has made me attentive to the many layers of meaning communicated by residents' stories and concerns. I have found transformation through the training I received at the Rhode Island Hospital Chaplaincy Center's Clinical Pastoral Education Program, and particularly through reading and discussing the book *Generation to Generation* by Edwin H. Friedman. In particular, I have discovered the profoundly deep impact our families make on our lives, past, present, and future. I have begun to add many questions and reflections with residents in my chaplaincy work, and I ask patients more about their families to assess the presence and support of family and to encourage communication when it seems appropriate. Jesus asked the question, "Do you want to be healed?" which reminds me that the patient's willingness to change or become aware is what opens the doors to greater understanding—not what I say. Drawing from Jesus' question, I more frequently repeat back the patient's own words or ask for clarification to help draw out of them what they need to hear.

I feel that the deepening of the relationship with God is the purpose of the relationship between the resident and the chaplain. And it is through greater self-awareness that we come to new realizations of

God's presence in us and working through us, both resident and chaplain!

I seek to model Jesus' non-anxious response to whatever faced him in my interactions with residents, staff, and peers. In the healthcare setting, balancing the human need for love and connection is the patient's need for autonomy in relationship with the chaplain. I make it a point to allow patients to answer questions, or not, and to accept my visit, or not, as suits them at the time of the encounter. I have found that I am most comfortable with accepting that sometimes it is "not me, not now" that will be of most help to the patient. At a number of visits, I felt that I was the only person entering the patient's room about whose presence they felt they had a choice: saying "No, thank you!" empowered them during a time of deep vulnerability. I believe that trust between the patient and the chaplain can be instantaneous in some instances but takes time in others. To allow trust to grow, I try to express my friendly interest in the well-being of the person I'm visiting, and I allow time and the gradual unfolding of conversation to show my willingness to accompany the resident wherever he or she wishes to go with the visit.

Lastly, Jesus inspires me through his way of asking people to look within themselves to release whatever blocks accepting his love. This example guides me sometimes to challenge patients by asking them to clarify how they will accomplish the steps they feel they need to take on, whatever they see as their path to peace with God. This theology of the importance of spiritual inquiry particularly empowers my pastoral practice with residents who have difficult family histories. Another Swedenborgian teaching, that all things in the material world have a corresponding spiritual element, guides my listening and watching so that I can hear and see beyond the externals of situations and stories to the intentions, feelings, fears, joys, and dynamics these situations and stories reveal.

Jesus was the ultimate chaplain. He offered a loving presence and accepted all people; he listened patiently and taught faithfully, and he questions and challenges us to become aware of the obstacles to our deepening faith. He healed many souls during his incarnation, and through his grace, I pray that I may continue to walk toward the light of his love and wisdom through my ministry and chaplaincy.

Prayers

Holy Spirit, come down and enter into our being;
To those who are anxious or perplexed, give peace;
To those who are weary, give rest;
Comfort those who mourn;
And according to your wisdom and will for us,
Heal the sick, or give strength to endure,
So that whatever happens,
Your love will live in our hearts,
Be written in our faces,
And shine reflected in our lives.

- Frank Topping

Bless the head, the hands, the feet,
The ears, eyes, lips, and heart
Of this your servant, Lord,
That enfolded and upheld by your spirit
He may put his trust in you,
Knowing that your will for all your children
Is only ever good;
We ask this of you, O Holy Spirit,
Who reigns with the Father and the Son,
One God,
Now and forever.

- Frank Topping

Of your goodness, O God,
Give yourself to me,
For you are sufficient for all my needs.
Though I am not worthy to receive you,
I cannot ask for anything less.
Without you I shall always be in want.
In you alone do I have all I need,
Now and forever.

- Julian of Norwich (1342-1416)

Monday, June 10

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us."

Luke 7:1-5

The goal of creation—that everything should return to the Creator and that there should be a union—becomes manifest in outermost forms.

Divine Love and Wisdom #167

Tuesday, June 11

And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." *Luke 7:6-8*

First of all, I need to say something about "ends." There are three, which follow in sequence: They are called the first end, the mediate end, and the final end; and they are also called the purpose, the means, and the result. These three must all be present in anything in order for it to be something, since no first end occurs without an intermediate end and a final one at the same time. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, June 12

When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health. *Luke 7:9-10*

This is the same as saying that no purpose occurs apart from its means and result, or no means by itself, without a purpose as its source and a result that contains it, or no result by itself without a means and a purpose. *Ibid.*

Thursday, June 13

Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep."

Luke 7:11-13

For a purpose effectively to be a purpose, that is, it must be defined, and it finds its definition in its result. That is where it is first called a purpose, because this is its purpose. *Ibid.*

Friday, June 14

Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" *Luke 7:14-16*

A purpose cannot exist in itself alone, but must exist in something that takes place because of it, something in which it can dwell with its total being, something which it can accomplish by its effort as long as it lasts. The reality in which it "lasts" is that final end that is called its result. *Divine Love and Wisdom #168*

Saturday, June 15

This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country. *Luke 7:17*

The grand purpose, or the purpose of all elements of creation, is an eternal union of the Creator with the created universe. This does not happen unless there are subjects in which his divinity can be at home, so to speak, subjects in which it can dwell and abide.

Divine Love and Wisdom #170

JUN 16 THE LAMPSTAND

Rev. Kevin K. Baxter

Exodus 25:31-40

You shall make a lampstand of pure gold. The base and the shaft of the lampstand shall be made of hammered work; its cups, its calyxes, and its petals shall be of one piece with it; and there shall be six branches going out of its sides, three branches of the lampstand out of one side of it and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side of it; three cups shaped like almond blossoms, each with calyx and petals, on one branch, and three cups shaped like almond blossoms, each with calyx and petals, on the other branch—so for the six branches going out of the lampstand. On the lampstand itself there shall be four cups shaped like almond blossoms, each with its calyxes and petals. There shall be a calyx of one piece with it under the first pair of branches, a calyx of one piece with it under the next pair of branches, and a calyx of one piece with it under the last pair of branches—so for the six branches that go out of the lampstand. Their calyxes and their branches shall be of one piece with it, the whole of it one hammered piece of pure gold. You shall make the seven lamps for it; and the lamps shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it. Its snuffers and trays shall be of pure gold. It, and all these utensils, shall be made from a talent of pure gold. And see that you make them according to the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.

Sermon

This sermon was offered at Urbana University's 2005 baccalaureate service.

When I graduated from high school, our closing benediction was an old Gaelic saying:

May the road rise up to meet you;
May the wind be always at your back;
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
The rains fall soft upon your fields;
And until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of His hand.

This is not quite the sentiment I would like to leave you with. In many ways, I would like to wish you the opposite.

But before I get into that, I want to talk about today's Bible readings. The verse from Exodus is rarely read in churches and is often overlooked in personal readings and devotions. Many people might claim that readers can glean little from a set of instructions about how a lampstand is made.

Before I take you down the rabbit hole of my understanding of this passage, I want to talk about the context of the lampstand in question. This is not a lampstand used while camping or to light a dinner table at a house. It is the lampstand for the temple of the Israelites. The Reverend Dr. George Dole, in an unpublished manuscript, asks the question, "Where is the temple?" The temple started out as a tent—a tent that held the Holy of Holies, the Ark of the Covenant. When the wandering Israelites started to move, so did the temple. The temple moved from place to place until it came to rest in a more permanent structure in Jerusalem, which was sacked and rebuilt and then sacked again. In the time of the exile, Isaiah speaks of a time when the Messiah will come and rebuild the temple.

Where is the temple? The Apostle Paul tells us where it is in 1 Corinthians 6:19: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?" Jesus rebuilt the temple, not physically, but spiritually, within each of us. The temple is within us.

If the Temple is in us, where is the lampstand?

This obscure Bible reading is not just an ancient set of instructions for the building of a temple light; rather, this verse speaks to us here and now. It instructs us as to how our own spiritual temple lamps should be made.

The lamp, spiritually speaking, gives light to our sight in the darkness. We are told that our lampstands should be pure gold, made from one piece, not by casting but by hammering—by hand, through work and labor. That the lampstand should be "made of one piece" means it is to be crafted over time, built up organically without a seam or a joint. The three branches extending out on either side represent the fullness of God, the fullness of the Divine Trinity, balanced on each side. These branches are detailed with buds and fruits, representing the maturation of God's work. Moreover, we encounter not one lampstand but seven. Each of these lampstands must be made according to the pattern we received on the mountain: the pattern of the Word as it was handed to Moses.

What does this symbolism all mean for us? Gold, precious and malleable, can be viewed as a symbol of love. In contrast to a wedding band, which symbolizes the love between a married couple, a golden lampstand, found in the temple, still symbolizes love—but it is love in the context of its purpose, which is the worship of God. The gold of the lampstand represents our love of God, which is pure and true. But this

love must be molded and fashioned through work, through hammering. This love is molded through our understanding and living of the Law, the Word of God, which we receive on the mountaintop.

The branches reaching out to either side are numbered to remind us of the completeness of God; they form a seamless connection with our love of God. They reach out as if to touch all of the things that surround them. Like the branches of the tree, they are decorated with fruits and flowers. It is often said that we know people by their fruits—in other words, by their actions and deeds. These fruits and flowers are symbols of the knowledge and truths we have incorporated into our love of God.

I have left off one characteristic of a lampstand that is vital to its purpose: the lampstand gives off light! This light is the love we have for God, the love that spans from the roots of our souls to the tops of our heads; it is adorned with images of the truth we have assimilated and lived, the love and the truth fashioned in the shape of the Word of God. The merger of these two things allows the divine to shine through us, to dispel the darkness.

Our university seal has a book in the center of it. I believe this book is a Bible, but one could substitute it with another deeply meaningful book if preferred. This book is a symbol of truth, of knowledge. Around the book are lines leading from the book outward to the edges of the seal, which also represent light. These lines, like the book, represent truth, but they are more than that. The lines show us the movement of truth from the book out into the world. They represent the activity of truth as it dispels the darkness around it. Our seal therefore shows us what the founding fathers of Urbana University intended to accomplish with the creation of our school.

They believed that the quest for knowledge, for understanding, is not just about gaining competency in specific fields. The education that you receive is not merely about the education of our children, the principles of business, or the other majors that are offered here. Rather, the quest for knowledge is about reaching out and embracing the highest principles of humanity. It is about embracing the divine.

And this quest for knowledge is not for us to hoard or control, but to share. Education is not truly education unless it is put into action, into right use. A person who knows all the facts in the world but fails to use them, or uses them for wrongful purposes, is not educated. Such a person may be knowledgeable or clever, but he or she does not demand the high regard due an educated person. The divine proceeding from our lives is about our uniting what we know with what we do. We have

not the foundation for illuminating the world around us if we have not love. Our actions are, spiritually speaking, the fruits on our lampstands, the proof of our love to our neighbor, the world, and God.

As we act with both love and wisdom, we are as Jesus said in Matthew 5:14: “the light of the world[, a] city on a hill [that] cannot be hidden.” But life can be tough. We must maintain our saltiness even in the face of trial. If we live according to the truths we know, if we aspire to our highest character, we will be the light of God in this world. We will not lose our saltiness.

Emanuel Swedenborg, the Christian theologian whose teachings on scripture guided the founding fathers of Urbana University, believed, like many before and after him, that character is defined and purified through struggle. It is easy to be good when no real choice is present. For instance, we are courteous to our customers; we give them the satisfaction they demand. If we do not, they go elsewhere. Yet the true divine act is in compassion for others—when we choose someone else’s well-being over our momentary self-gain. But this is a truly difficult choice that we encounter in every stage of our lives. Life will always involve struggle.

Here is my commission to you: I would like each graduate here today to live a life of the highest principles to which humanity can reach. The education you have received while at Urbana University is only the first step. Now you must apply it to the world! Now you are going into the world. Now you have the choice to practice your trade or art; you can choose to express the highest goals and aims of humanity. You have the choice to be a bright and vibrant lampstand, illuminating the world so that everyone you touch can find the darkness in their lives illuminated. You can be on a mountaintop, even in the darkest and deepest valleys of life, if you embrace what education is truly meant for.

This is why I want to re-write the old Gaelic saying I heard at my graduation.

It is not, “May the road rise up to meet you”; rather, it is, “May you always rise up to meet the road.”

It is not about the wind always being at your back; rather, it is, “May the strength of your character endure the strongest wind.”

It is not about feeling the warmth of light on your face; rather, it is, “May the warmth of the divine light shine from your face.”

And while I would change the above lines, the ending is perfect: “Until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of His hand.”

Daily Meditations

Monday, June 17

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" When the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'" *Luke 7:18-20*

We are not human because of our faces and bodies but because of our abilities to discern and intend, so "earthly-minded person" and "spiritual-minded person" refer to our discernment and volition, which can be either earthly or spiritual.

Divine Love and Wisdom #251

Tuesday, June 18

Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." *Luke 7:21-23*

We can see from this that earthly-minded people, being a kind of image of the earthly world, love whatever has to do with the earthly world, while spiritual-minded people, being a kind of image of the spiritual world, love whatever has to do with that world or heaven. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, June 19

When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet." *Luke 7:24-26*

Spiritual-minded people do love the earthly world, it is true, but only the way householders love their servants, who enable them to be of service. *Ibid.*

Thursday, June 20

"This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." *Luke 7:27-28*

In fact, the earthly-minded people become spiritual in a way through their service. This happens when an earthly-minded person feels the joy of service from a spiritual source. This kind of earthly-minded person is called "earthly-spiritual."

Friday, June 21

(And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John's baptism. But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.)

Luke 7:29-30

Spiritual-minded people love spiritual truths, not only loving to know and understand them but intending them as well; while earthly-minded people love to talk about these truths and carry them out as well. Putting truths into action is being of service.

Saturday, June 22

"To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.'" *Luke 7:31-32*

This ranking comes from the way the spiritual world and the earthly world go together, since anything that surfaces and exists in the earthly world has its cause in the spiritual world.

We can tell from this that spiritual-minded people are completely distinct from earthly-minded people, and that the only communication between them is the kind that occurs between a cause and its effect. *Ibid.*

A BORROWED TOMB

Rev. Nadine Cotton

said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

23 JUN

Sermon

John 20:1-22

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had

Here's an opening bit of humor for this Easter day:

The Sunday school teacher told her class that Jesus was buried in a borrowed tomb. One student said that she knew why: "Jesus only used it three days."

Easter Sunday—the day on which we gather to celebrate that the stone sealing up the life and love of God has been rolled away, that our hopes are alive in the resurrection of Jesus. By his risen presence he assures us that the grave is not the end, but that to die to this world is to live again!

One of my very dear friends used to say to me, "This too shall pass," whenever I was in the midst of turmoil. It's a helpful thought, when we are caught up in an emotional event, to remember that most things that happen in our life eventually are resolved, and that we continually move forward on our life journeys. It is a saying that works to help us retain our perspective during both bad times and good.

Let me tell you a story. A farmer owned a beautiful mare that was praised far and wide. One day, this beautiful horse disappeared. The people of his village offered sympathy to the farmer for his great misfortune. He said simply, "We shall see."

A few days later, the lost mare returned, followed by a beautiful wild stallion. The village congratulated the farmer for his good fortune. He said, "We shall see." Some time later, the farmer's only son, while riding the stallion, fell off and broke his leg. The village people once again expressed their sympathy at the farmer's misfortune. The farmer again said, "We shall see."

Soon thereafter, war broke out, and all the young men of the village except the farmer's lame son were drafted. All were killed in battle. The village people were amazed as the farmer's good luck. His son was the only young man left alive in the village. But the farmer kept his same attitude: despite all the turmoil, gains, and losses in his life, he gave the same reply, "We shall see."

Taoist Farmer stories are based on the Chinese belief that life has its ups and downs and does not always work for the best. This may not be the most passionate way of living life, but it certainly imparts serenity to experiencing its vicissitudes. In Buddhism, letting go of emotional attachments—all

attachments, actually—is necessary to attain a state of enlightenment—in other words, a heavenly state.

So why am I telling you this? Well, reading over the passion story, I was reminded of how much the Lord embodied this attitude of “this too shall pass” and “we shall see.” He rode into Jerusalem as messiah and king, knowing that this acclamation too would pass. In his turmoil in the Garden of Gethsemane, he said, “Father, if it is your will, take this cup away from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done.” He asked for the cup to pass from him if it could. He came back to Jerusalem, knowing the outcome of his life, of the betrayal and crucifixion and death, but he knew that even those too would soon pass, and that he would soon arise from death.

The Easter story doesn’t begin in the light of day. It begins at dawn, when it’s still a bit dark, a time when we cannot see clearly. It begins with Mary. Mary had experienced in her own life how the Lord loved her. He transformed her own darkness within and removed it from her life, letting her be reborn. But Mary came to the tomb in darkness—not just the darkness of the sky, but the darkness in her soul. She had no hope left to hold onto. Jesus was gone.

If you’ve ever found it hard to see the love of God during dark times, you can appreciate how Mary might have felt that morning. She didn’t realize that Jesus had risen from the dead. She didn’t know that his death was a passing state. She was grieving the very real loss of someone she loved tremendously. Her hopes were dead—her hopes, and the hopes of all that had followed Jesus. Their hopes appeared to be sealed in that tomb, in that dark place that we all go to when love and hope are taken from us, that place where we do not realize that this too shall pass, and love and hope will live again.

But Easter morning penetrated that darkness. What Mary clearly saw that Easter dawn would change her life forever.

It can change ours, too. Jesus came to Mary because she needed him. He comes to us too, because we all need him. But Mary wasn’t to cling to his bodily appearance, for that too would pass, and the hope that was alive was not in the limited presence of his body, but in his unlimited presence, which could now transcend time and space as the living hope for us all.

In the midst of our losses and sadness, we can anchor our souls with the presence of our risen Lord, with his divine strength. Knowing that events in life will pass—and with his help, guidance, and strength—we too can look upon the events of life, good and bad,

and find serenity in the idea that this too shall pass, that the values we practice in our lives will stay and continue on with us as we pass into the life eternal.

A teacher asked her class what each wanted to become when they grew up. The kids offered the usual noble goals: doctor, fireman, teacher. One by one, they answered, until it was Billy’s turn.

The teacher asked, “Billy, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

“Possible,” Billy responded.

“Possible?” asked the teacher.

“Yes,” Billy said. “My mom is always telling me I’m impossible. When I grow up, I want to become possible.”

Sociologists have a theory of the “looking-glass self”: that you become what the most important person in your life (wife, father, boss, etc.) thinks you are. How would your life change if you really believed the truth about God’s love for you, if you looked in the mirror and saw what God sees? Would you be able to let go of the faults and mistakes that you have taken on as a part of yourself? Would you realize that they too can pass away and that you could gradually become “possible” as an angel of God, with God’s love and God’s living hope for you in this world?

Easter gives us the greatest truth of all: the truth the Lord showed us by coming out of the tomb. The truth of how much God loves us. The truth that this life too shall pass to a heavenly eternal life, where we will be much more than our “looking-glass selves” and will become the inner self embodying all our loves. In this heavenly life, we will do what we love, and that love will take us to new places.

We, in the wake of the Resurrection, have the advantage of knowing that death does not have the final word. We know that the death of Jesus was just a temporary state, and that he only needed to borrow that tomb. His death was not final; this too passed from him and became a glorified, triumphant victory, so that He could be with us always.

A divine love and goodness beats at the heart of the world that was made warm and human in the person of our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. He moves in our midst and is now both God and human, present with us, alive among us to guide us and bless us.

Jesus said: “I will not abandon you as orphans—I will come to you. In just a little while, the world will not see me again, but you will. For I will live again, and you will too. When I am raised to life again, you will know that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.” (John 14:18-23)

Monday, June 24

“For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.” *Luke 7:33-35*

Once [the spiritual level has been opened], we are actually in the company of angels in heaven at the same time that we are in the company of people on earth, living under the watchful care of the Lord in both realms. Spiritual-minded people derive their imperatives from the Lord through the Word and carry them out by means of their earthly selves.

Divine Love And Wisdom #252

Tuesday, June 25

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. 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 7:36-38*

Earthly-minded individuals whose spiritual level has been opened do not realize that they are thinking and acting from their spiritual selves. They seem to themselves to be acting on their own, though in fact it is not on their own but from the Lord. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, June 26

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.” *Luke 7:39*

Earthly people whose spiritual level has been opened do not realize that their spiritual minds are filled with thousands of hidden treasures of wisdom and with thousands of love’s joys as gifts from the Lord. *Ibid.*

Thursday, June 27

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.” *Luke 7:39*

The spiritual level is not opened in us but still not closed when we are leading a reasonably thoughtful life but do not know very much real truth. This is because that level is opened by a union of love and wisdom, or of warmth and light. *Divine Love and Wisdom #253*

Friday, June 28

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*

Love alone, or spiritual warmth alone, will not do it, and neither will wisdom alone or spiritual light alone. It takes both together. So if we do not know the real truths that constitute wisdom or light, love cannot manage to open that level. *Ibid.*

Saturday, June 29

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*

Everything true is a matter of spiritual light and that everything good is a matter of spiritual warmth, and that what is good opens the spiritual level by means of things true, since goodness does what is helpful by means of truths. Helpful acts are the good that love does, deriving their essence from the union of what is good and what is true. *Ibid.*

JUN **30** Do You Love Me?
Rev. Sarah Buteux
John 21:1-19

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (He said this to indicate the kind

of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

Sermon

"I do not understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us." ~ Anne Lamott

I was not the world's best student back when I was in high school. Actually, truth be told, I was not a very good student at all. I hated going. I begged my parents to homeschool me or at least let me homeschool myself. I faked being sick as often as possible.

I rarely did my homework. I cut class with such alarming regularity that people just assumed I wasn't supposed to be there. And even when I was there, I wasn't exactly all there, if you know what I mean.

And yet, in spite of my bad attitude and lax participation, my teachers, to their credit, occasionally still managed to teach me some pretty amazing things.

In fact, every now and again there would be one of those magical moments when I didn't just learn something, I learned something really important—a moment in which a teacher would speak and not just present us with another fact to memorize, but with a Truth—a Truth with a capital T.

(That sort of thing still existed back in my school days.)

They would offer up a Truth that would hit me as if for the first time and truly reshape my way of understanding the world.

One such moment I can still recall occurred in English class during sophomore year. We were reading *The Last of the Wine* by Mary Renault, a novel about ancient Greece.

Mrs. Gleason—perhaps because she was having trouble getting through to us—put the novel down, crossed her arms, looked out at us all, and said, "Look. When someone says 'I love you,' there is only one response they are hoping to hear in return."

Now, I was not just a bad student, I was also a slightly obnoxious one, so as soon as she said this, my mind began to race.

Whenever people utter ultimatums, I still automatically resist them, but back when I was a teenager I resisted them with all the force I could muster, so I attempted instantly to compile a list of

responses one might consider suitable to a declaration of love—responses like “Wow,” “Gee, thanks,” and “I really like you too”—at which point I realized that she was absolutely right.

In fact, I felt as though she was staring straight into me when she said, “The only acceptable answer, the only response any of us want to hear when we offer up the words ‘I love you’ to another, is ‘I love you too.’”

I love you too.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus asks Peter repeatedly, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” And Peter says to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

On the surface, it appears that this exchange would meet with my English teacher’s approval.

It sounds as if Jesus and Peter are both saying exactly the same thing, which is why it might seem odd that they would go through this exercise three times: “Do you love me? Yes, I love you.” “Do you love me? Yes, I love you.” “Do you love me? You know that I love you.”

But in Greek, the language in which this story was originally written, when Jesus asks, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” he is using the word *agape* for “love.” “Simon son of John, do you *agape* me?”

Agape love is a self-sacrificing love.

When Jesus says, “Greater love hath no man than this, that he would lay down his life for his friend,” he is using the word *agape*. Jesus is really asking Peter, “Do you love me enough to die for me?”

Peter, though, unlike Jesus, responds all three times with the Greek word *philiros*, and basically says, “Lord, I have great affection for you. You know that I really, really like you.”

Anyone who has ever been in love knows how scary it can be, especially in the beginning of a new relationship, to pick the right moment to say “I love you” for the first time.

And anyone who has ever gone out on that limb and uttered those three words, only to hear something like “Wow. Gee, thanks. I really like you too” knows the truth of which my English teacher spoke.

And possibly that person knows something of the disappointment Jesus must have felt when Peter responded the way he did.

In many ways, this is actually a really sad scene, as Jesus asks over and over again, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” only to hear Peter respond, “Lord, you know that I like you.” But if you place this story in the larger context of Easter, then you realize an *agape* from

Peter would most likely have rung hollow at this point in their story—and Peter, more than anyone else, would have known this.

The irony here is that I do not doubt that Peter did love Jesus. Peter is at times an impulsive and crazy character, prone to lopping off ears or, as in this story, rushing to put all his clothes back on before he jumps into the water.

There is obviously more than tremendous affection here—there is an undeniable and headstrong passion, in fact—but Peter is also the one who denied Jesus not once, but three times, the night before his execution. It was a denial neither one of them could, would, should ever forget.

That denial hangs in the air between them.

They both know all too well the limits of Peter’s love; if Peter has proven anything, it is that he does not yet love Jesus enough to die for him. So when Peter cries out in response, “Lord, you know I have affection for you,” it is as much a confession as a declaration.

To say more, with all that has transpired so recently, would be disingenuous, hypocritical, dishonest, insincere. And so Peter gives Jesus exactly what he has to give, no more and no less. He offers him his *philiros*, his friendship.

At which point something extraordinary happens. Jesus asks him a third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” But this time Jesus is the one who changes the words. He says, “Simon son of John, do you have *philiros* for me—affection for me?”

Do you like me?

Are we still friends?

The Bible tells us that “Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time: ‘Do you love me?’”

“Lord, you know everything,” says Peter; “you know the affection I bear for you.”

You know that I like you. You know we are still friends.

Jesus brings the question down to Peter’s level. He lowers the standard of love from *agape* to *philiros*, a standard Peter can finally live up to.

So why is Peter hurt?

I used to think it was because he thought Jesus kept asking him the same question over and over again, as if he didn’t believe him—until I realized that Peter was probably hurt more by the realization that Jesus *did* believe him. Jesus believed and understood Peter more than Peter understood himself. By which I mean that

Jesus knew exactly how much Peter loved him, and they both knew that Jesus deserved better. They both knew that Jesus loved Peter enough to die for him and loved him enough to die for him even still—whereas Peter, well, Peter still had a long way to go.

The only acceptable answer, the only response any of us want to hear when we offer up the words “I love you” to another is “I love you too.”

Peter couldn't say those words just yet, at least not with same fervor that Jesus could, but there is good news here in this story all the same, for Peter and for us, because Jesus was willing to take Peter's philios for all it was worth.

He didn't demand something Peter couldn't give, but he accepted Peter's love for exactly what it was and upon this peculiar rock built his church, just as he said he would.

Jesus did not compel Peter to love him more. He did not reject him for failing to live up to a higher standard. He simply acknowledged Peter's level of commitment and sent him out to work for the kingdom—“to feed his sheep”—just as he was.

And the good news for you and for me is that Jesus is willing to do the same for us, as well. The Lord does not compel us anymore than he compelled Peter. We are not forced to love God any more than we want to or any more than we are ready to.

But the beauty is that each little bit of ourselves we *do* give over to the Lord is received by him and transformed by his love into something greater. I mean, think about it: if he can build the whole Christian church out of one man's limited and self-conscious friendship, imagine what he can do with us, even now! If we, like Peter, can give him our affection, he can take our philios and, with time, transform it into agape. We have only to open the door and let him in.

I'm not saying that the Lord is an exception to my English teacher's claim. I'm sure he would love to hear us respond to his love with all the love we can give, but he is extraordinary in his response to all of us. God does not stop loving us, even if we have only the slightest bit of love to give him in return.

What God *does* do is take the love we are willing to offer for all it is worth, and then do all he can to lead us into an ever-deepening relationship with him, in hopes of transforming not just us but all the world.

We are called to go forth, just as Peter did, to feed his lambs and tend his sheep by offering that same love to one another—a love that accepts the other just

as they are with every hope of helping them become something more.

That is the good news of today's gospel passage, but it is not the only news I want to leave you with this morning. Before I close, I would like to say a few words about the love we offer one another.

Our reading today teaches us that God is patient and generous in his love, for which we should be deeply grateful. But I can't help thinking that God is so patient, at least in part, because God can afford to be. After all, he has all eternity to wait for us to finally get it.

Unfortunately, we don't always have that same luxury with regard to one another.

Although I dearly wish it were not so, more and more I think we all know that those we love can be taken from us at any time.

Not only that, for all that we love our friends and our family, our parents and our children, our partners, our brothers and our sisters with that first love Jesus asked for, that deep and abiding agape love, the truth is that in our day-to-day interactions, we don't always treat one another as if that were the case.

In fact, if we are honest with ourselves, we are often hardest on those we love the most. We withhold our love and approval from one another, not because it isn't there, but because in the midst of our own hurt or frustration or immaturity, we just aren't always ready or able to express it.

And so I would encourage you all this morning to come right out and say “I love you” when you feel it. Say “I love you” to your family, your friends, and even your fellow members here. I'm not saying that you shouldn't be real or that you should never get angry or fight. By all means, express your aggravation and your disappointment.

Argue, get fed up, even yell if you need to, but try as best as you can never to hang up the phone or leave a meeting or let a conversation end without making the effort to express that for all your frustration with one another, you still regard each other as absolutely precious.

God can and will wait for us to come to a point of perfect love for as long as need be, but we don't always get that opportunity with one another.

So please, in your day-to-day interactions, dare to keep saying “I love you.” Don't be afraid. And when you are blessed to hear those three words from another, if it is true, please don't ever pass up the opportunity to say, “You know what? I love you too.”

Monday, July 1

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;
sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious
praise. *Psalm 66:1-2*

There are three things in the Lord that are the Lord:
a divine element of love, a divine element of wisdom,
and a divine element of service. These three things are
made visible outside the sun of the spiritual world--the
divine element of love through its warmth, the divine
element of wisdom through its light, and the divine
element of service through the atmospheres that
enclose it. *Divine Love and Wisdom #296*

Tuesday, July 2

Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds! Because
of your great power, your enemies cringe before
you.

All the earth worships you; they sing praises to you,
sing praises to your name." *Psalm 66:3-4*

Anyone who thinks with some enlightenment can
see that love has service as its goal, that love tends
toward service, and that love brings about service
through wisdom. In fact, love cannot accomplish
anything useful by itself, only by means of wisdom.
After all, what is love unless there is something that is
loved? That "something" is service.

Divine Love and Wisdom #297

Wednesday, July 3

Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in
his deeds among mortals.
He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through
the river on foot. There we rejoiced in him,
who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep
watch on the nations— let the rebellious not exalt
themselves. *Psalm 66:5-7*

If you look at both the inner and the outer aspects
of humans, we are a form suited to all kinds of service,
and that all the useful functions in the created universe
have their equivalents in these kinds of service

Divine Love and Wisdom #298

Thursday, July 4

Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise
be heard,
who has kept us among the living, and has not let our
feet slip.

For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as
silver is tried.

You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our
backs; *Psalm 66:8-11*

We can tell what a useful function is from the goal
of the creation of the universe. The goal of the creation
of the universe is to bring about an angelic heaven;
and since an angelic heaven is the goal, so is humanity
or the human race, since that is where heaven comes
from. *Divine Love and Wisdom #329*

Friday, July 5

I will come into your house with burnt offerings; I
will pay you my vows,
those that my lips uttered and my mouth promised
when I was in trouble.

I will offer to you burnt offerings of fatlings, with
the smoke of the sacrifice of rams; I will make an
offering of bulls and goats. *Psalm 66:13-15*

Everything that has been created is an intermediate
goal, and that the functions are useful in the sequence,
on the level, and in the specific way that they relate to
humanity, and through humanity to the Lord. *Ibid.*

Saturday, July 6

Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell
what he has done for me.

I cried aloud to him, and he was extolled with my
tongue.

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord
would not have listened.

But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the
words of my prayer. *Psalm 66:16-21*

Since the goal of creation is a heaven from the
human race (and therefore the human race itself), the
intermediate goals are everything else that has been
created. Because these do relate to us, they focus on
these three aspects of us: our bodies, our rational
functioning, and, for the sake of our union with the
Lord, our spiritual functioning.

Divine Love and Wisdom #220

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

Our Beliefs in Brief:

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

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

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

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

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