

OUR DAILY BREAD

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2014

New Things



SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

Prayer

Lord God, you have called your
servants
to ventures of which we cannot see the
ending,
by paths as yet untrod,
through perils unknown.
Give us faith to go out with courage,
not knowing where we go,
but only that your hand is leading us
and your love supporting us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.
~ *Lutheran Book of Worship*

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*Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth,
do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.
- Isaiah 43:19*

Dear Reader,

The new year brings change—if nothing else, the challenge of remembering to write “2014” instead of “2013.”

Life *is* change, threaded through with constancy. The Lord himself tells us he “makes all things new” (Rev. 21:5) and that he is “doing a new thing” (Isa. 43:19). He is carving out a path in chaos, bringing life and abundance where death and scarcity once reigned. Our job is to notice, and to hop on the metaphorical bus.

The thing about change, about “new things,” is that their appearance means leaving behind what used to be. As a result, new things hurt at the same time that they rejuvenate. In this issue, we focus on new paths, new ideas, and new circumstances, and the loveliness and hardship they bring.

We pray for you, in this freshly born year, the gushing springs of God’s creative mercy. We pray that they will carry you, preferably breathlessly, toward something gorgeous. God will pilot your ship. May you find joy, and opportunities to give of yourself, in the journey.

Many blessings, Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

In This Issue

- A New Beginning*4
Rev. F. Robert Tafel
- Prosper the Work of Our Hands*7
Rev. Sage Currie Cole
- Ask and Ye Shall Receive*10
Rev. Eric Hoffman
- A Newer Church*13
Rev. Dr. George Dole
- Leaving Our Comfort Zone*17
Rev. Dr. David Fekete
- Putty Training Our Children*20
Rev. Julian Duckworth
- Rough Going*24
Rev. Leah G. Goodwin
- Change We Can Believe in*28
Rev. Sarah Buteux

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Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light day, and the darkness he called night. So the evening and the morning were the first day.

Mark 1:9-11

It came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And immediately, coming up from the water, he saw the heavens parting and the spirit descending upon him like a dove. Then a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."

Sermon

The creation of the world, the baptism of Jesus, our baptism. A new world, a new name, a new beginning. Baptism represents the application of truth to daily living. As such, it pictures our being born anew and becoming children of light.

Our Scripture lessons combine the story of the baptism of Jesus (in which he also instituted baptism as a sacrament of spiritual cleansing) with the story of God's creation and giving of light. Baptism also represents for the Christian a new beginning. As Swedenborgian Christians, we do not see the spiritual washing as cleansing from original sin, but as representing, for the child and the adult, an intention to walk in the light from the Lord as he gives it to us to see it. It is a sacrament for us because we believe we are actually joined spiritually with the forces of the angelic heavens.

Whether we talk about our new life in the Lord or any other new project, we shall find that this is true: in any new beginning, there will be darkness, emptiness, confusion.

This age-old truth comes to us vividly in the words of the author of Genesis: "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God was hovering over the face of waters."

Each of us has experienced the confusion, the feeling of bewilderment, the unnerving state of not knowing where to take the next step when launching a new enterprise—whether the first day of school, the first day on a new job, a first date, writing a paper, or repairing a faulty piece of equipment. There is an initial period of orientation, of discovering a starting place. All of this is known to us through our past experience.

We find in the theological heritage of Emanuel Swedenborg and some of the early Swedenborgian theologians a significant spiritual perspective on the book of Genesis. In his opening paragraph of commentary on Genesis, Swedenborg writes:

"From the mere letter of the Word of the Old Testament no one would ever discern the fact that this part of the word contains deep secrets of heaven, and that everything within it, both in general and in particular, bears reference to the Lord—to his heaven, to the church, to religious belief, and to all things connected therewith." (*Arcana Coelestia* #1)

Too many Christians are bound by the literal meanings in Genesis. They use them to argue against even the most sophisticated and spiritual concepts of evolution, arguing strenuously that this planet is the only one containing life, that God created this planet 4,000 years ago in the precise manner outlined in Genesis.

But Swedenborg discovered through a process of revelation that deeper symbolic meanings are contained within the literal story. The story of creation is the story of our life, our rebirth. It is the story of every human life, in its development. Because our spiritual life unfolds in steps and stages in a creative process, the story of creation helps us understand why it is that in every beginning there is darkness, emptiness, and confusion.

The earth without form and void, with darkness upon the face of the deep, is a pictorial image of our spiritual state prior to being reborn. The phrase "being in the dark" is a universal symbol of lacking knowledge or information. We are all in the dark before the Lord enlightens us. We are all in the dark when we are beginning a new project and have to

absorb information and gain knowledge about its details.

Fortunately, we are not left alone in our darkness. The spirit of God moves over the waters of our spirit and commands that there be light. We are invited to approach that light-giving spirit in Jesus, who declares: "I am the light of world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life." As further testimony of the Lord's desire for us to have light that we may see, we find the many instances of Jesus healing the blind. Each instance is symbolic, yet based in fact.

In order for such healings to take place in our spiritual development, it is only necessary at the beginning that we acknowledge the darkness in which we find ourselves, ask the Lord's guidance, and follow the light we are given. Moreover, if we acknowledge our tendency to love ourselves more than others and to ask for the Lord's help in changing the direction of this love, we will find that the Lord's love and wisdom can then flow in. In his book *Divine Providence*, Emanuel Swedenborg presents a picture of how this happens:

"On the removal of self-love: The Lord enters with the affections of neighborly love, opening the overhead window and then the side windows, thus enabling the person to see that there is a heaven, a life after death, and eternal happiness. By the spiritual light and at the same time the spiritual love which then flow in, the Lord causes the person to acknowledge that God governs all things by his divine providence" (#207).

It is the Lord's constant desire that we turn to him to be delivered from the destructive love of ourselves above everyone else; then we may find the light that leads to our eternal happiness.

Certainly each of us has made much progress, through the Lord's divine providence, in our personal journey from darkness to light. Yet, while in this world, we shall never find ourselves completely enlightened. Rather, we hope we are engaged in a process of gradual enlightenment. As long as we are being regenerated, we shall find ourselves periodically in states of darkness, void, formlessness, and confusion. Each affection of our will that is not in harmony with the divine goodness and truth needs to be redirected. Spiritual enlightenment is ever the first step in such redirection. We can be sure of the Lord's love leading and guiding us and perfecting us to eternity—and we can also be sure that there will be constantly recurring states of darkness and light.

I find great hope and encouragement in the story of creation. I find comfort in the sure knowledge that darkness is to be expected as part of life. I find the greatest hope of all in the Lord's providence, which moves as a spiritual force over the face of the deep; that is, over our spiritual rebirthing.

Let us turn to the Lord, that he may open our eyes. May we find ourselves in the happy condition of the man who was blind from birth and given sight by the Lord. May we declare as he did: "This one thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see." Amen.

Prayers

Lord Jesus Christ, my God, you have said, "Apart from me You can do nothing." In faith I embrace Your words, Lord, and I entreat your goodness. Help me to carry out the work I am about to begin, and to bring it to completion. To you I give glory. Amen.

My Lord and Savior, you became man and labored with your hands until the time of your ministry. Bless me as I begin my work, and help me to bring it to completion. Enlighten my mind and strengthen my body, that I may accomplish my task according to your will. Guide me to bring about works of goodness to your service and glory. Amen.

- *Transfiguration Greek Orthodox Church*

This is the day of light:
Let there be light to-day;
O Dayspring, rise upon our night,
And chase its gloom away.

This is the day of rest:
Our failing strength renew;
On weary brain and troubled breast
Shed Thou Thy freshening dew.

This is the day of peace:
Thy peace our spirit's fill;
Bid Thou the blasts of discord cease,
The waves of strife be still.

This is the day of prayer:
Let earth to heaven draw near;
Lift up our hearts to seek Thee there,
Come down to meet us here.

This is the first of days:
Send forth Thy quickening breath,
And wake dead souls to love and praise,
O Vanquisher of death!

- *John Ellerton*

Daily Meditations

Monday, January 6

After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, "My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites." *Joshua 1:1-2*

Heaven is made up of people who are involved in a love for what is good and a consequent discernment of what is true, and hell of people who are involved in a love for what is evil and a discernment of what is false. *Divine Providence §27*

Tuesday, January 7

"Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory." *Joshua 1:3-4*

I mention this to show how the Lord's union with angels and their apparent mutual union with the Lord take place. All the angels turn their faces toward the Lord. *Divine Providence §29*

Wednesday, January 8

"No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you." *Joshua 1:5*

The Lord opens these levels within us depending on the way we live. This is really happening in this world, but not so that we can sense or feel it until after we leave this world. *Divine Providence §32*

Thursday, January 9

"Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it." *Joshua 1:7-8*

As the levels are then opened and perfected, we are more and more closely united to the Lord. This union can intensify to eternity as we grow closer; for angels it actually does keep intensifying to eternity. *Ibid.*

Friday, January 10

"I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." *Joshua 1:9*

Our life is our love, and there are many kinds of love. Broadly, there is love for what is evil and love for what is good. *Divine Providence §33*

Saturday, January 11

To the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh Joshua said, "Remember the word that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, saying, 'The Lord your God is providing you a place of rest, and will give you this land.'" They answered Joshua: "All that you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go." *Joshua 1:12-13, 16*

There are as many derivative motivations or desires of this love as there are evil deeds in which it takes specific form; and there are as many perceptions and thoughts of this love as there are distortions that nurture and justify these evil deeds. *Ibid.*

PROSPER THE WORK OF OUR HANDS

Rev. Sage Currie Cole

Matthew 25:12-30

But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Psalm 90

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from

everlasting to everlasting you are God.

You turn us back to dust, and say,
"Turn back, you mortals."

For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.

You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.

For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed.

You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance.

For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh.

The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.

Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.

So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants!

Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil.

Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children.

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands— O prosper the work of our hands!

Sermon

It's been getting colder. As a girl from Maine, cold for me is definitely relative, but my senses have begun to adjust to the subtleties of the San Francisco seasons, and I do sense that winter is coming on. The usual markers of rows of red and yellow, browning, dying leaves aren't here to hearken the winter as they did back in Maine, but the rain is starting to move in, and the night comes early. The sun sets before I get home from work. I prepare dinner in darkness.

As winter sets in, we are reminded of the reality of death. In the Psalm for this morning, we are reminded again of our deaths. We are reminded of our mortality in the face of God's constancy.

"Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

12 JAN

You turn us back to dust ,
and say, "Turn back you mortals."
For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday
when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.
You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass renewed in the morning;
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers." (Psalm 90: 2-6)

"You sweep us away, like a dream." This is the one Psalm in scripture attributed to Moses—Moses, the man who saw God in the burning bush and led the Israelites out of Egypt, the man who never made it into the Promised Land, the man who lives on in our understanding through the retelling of his story in scripture, though he lived and died long ago, his life a blip in the human continuum.

"From dust we are born, and to dust we will return." And in our own lifespan, in this blip of the human continuum in which we all find ourselves together this morning, in the face of death, a death that is so sure and so final—how is it that we live?

What does prosperity look like when it is measured in the face of death?

I believe this is the key to interpreting the New Testament scripture that I read to you this morning. This parable is one of three that Jesus tells about his second coming, or the coming of the kingdom of God. The master in the story is the Lord God; the servants are you and me. We are each entrusted with a measure of talents, and we are given no specific instructions on how to use these talents, but we understand that we will be expected to show our master when they return that we have prospered with them in some way. There is someone holding us accountable, someone by whom we measure our worth.

I want to look at this parable from the perspective of the servant who is least prosperous. It is from this vantage point that I find the story beginning to come alive for me. Imagine: you have just received one talent. Now, a talent is a large sum of money—not just a coin or two but an entire fifteen years' wages. This is a sum of money that has real possibilities!

And perhaps you could see these possibilities if you had not just received this one talent while watching two of your peers, friends, or possibly even siblings receiving twice and five times the amount that you have received. Among different company you might have felt abundantly enriched, but in comparison to the company that you keep, you feel as if you have very little.

You watch as those who have more than you immediately go out and trade their wealth, investing it in the community and earning from it. You become jealous. You feel small and unworthy in comparison to others. You begin to see yourself as having very little, and you begin to believe that your one talent cannot prosper in the world. You curse your master, angry that he has deemed you less able or less worthy than the others.

After experiencing this anger, you begin to feel fear. You wonder how you can succeed with so little. You fear that you have so little, that you are so worthless, that you might lose everything. And you fear that, when your master returns, you will have less than a little to show him: you will have nothing. You are already beginning to fear that you *do* have nothing. And so you bury your one talent in the ground so you won't risk losing it.

Have you done this? Have you compared yourself with others to the point that it has debilitated your belief in yourself? Have you looked at yourself as less worthy and from this feeling of lack given up on trying altogether?

Consider your life and all that you do. Think of how you measure up in different aspects of your life.

Perhaps you are a very good public speaker and are rewarded for this talent, using it to help you succeed at your work. In public speaking, you are similar to the servant who received five talents and quickly went out and prospered using this gift. In this part of your life, you have an abundance. Maybe you can name lots of areas in your life where this is true.

But where in your life might you measure yourself as having received a lesser number, only one talent? Are there secret single talents that you have buried away out of fear of failure?

Maybe you're a great public speaker, but you're not the best communicator with your wife or your husband; you have trouble articulating your feelings, and so, instead of trying and risking failure, you give up.

Failure is a kind of death, you know. In burying these talents away, these talents that we deem less worthy or at which we are less able, we trap ourselves in the status quo. We hide from growth and change. In not risking the death of possible failure, we end up refusing life.

The least servant in this parable is not killed by the master. Worse, the servant is cast out into the outer

Daily Meditations

regions, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The servant is cast into hell.

What is hell for you?

When I really think about it, when I think about the worst times in my life, they really are during those times when I am vainly and desperately holding onto the status quo—when I see myself as so lacking that I believe I cannot possibly succeed, and I give up. This is hell for me. This is stagnation: a closed heart, desperate self-preservation, fear.

This is a hell that we actually do choose. The status quo is easier; it is known. Using our obvious talents, we risk little, because we can anticipate the outcome: we know that we will succeed, we have an observable track record. Using and exercising the talents we do not know will pan out for us is where the real work—the most important and difficult work—lies.

You can see this on the macro and micro scales. Currently, the debate over traditional family values and marriage equality is heavily influenced by this fear of the unknown, this fear of abandoning the status quo. History is marked by this cultural battle of resisting change. Change always wins. And it wins often through the voices of those in the margins, who have been deemed less worthy to stand up and use and claim their voices, their talents, their rights.

I think of the inventors that have changed the world, how they have followed their dreams, which to those around them likely seemed ridiculous and wild. They ventured into the unknown, they risked failure, and in doing so they transformed us.

I challenge you to consider where you feel small, unworthy, strange, or incapable in your life. I challenge you to find where you believe you have less than other people, perhaps where you are afraid of persecution or have a secret talent you have buried away. I challenge you to consider what might happen if you could bring this small buried talent into the world. I challenge you to consider that this talent is in fact not small: that it only feels small, and that as you use it and manifest it in the world, it can only become more abundant. We are only dust, and to dust we will return. Who are we not to risk dying?

In risking death, we live. In coming to know death, we are able to be born anew. It is in this experience of risking death that our true greatness can emerge, our gifts for the world, our gifts for God, for our families, our divine talents. We must actively choose heaven, and this does require work, work and faith. Slowly, inch by inch, that choice draw the Holy City closer to our world.

Monday, January 13

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. *John 13:1*

Now since the Lord flows into everyone's life and flows through our life's desires into our perceptions and thoughts (and not the reverse) it follows that the closeness of our union with the Lord depends on the extent to which our love for evil and its desires—its compulsions—is dismissed. *Divine Providence §33*

Tuesday, January 14

And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. *John 13:3-5*

Further, since these compulsions have their home in the level of our being that deals with this world, and since anything we do that is rooted in that level feels as though it belongs to us, we need to dismiss the evils of this love with what seems to be our own strength. To the extent that we do this, the Lord draws near and unites us to himself. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, January 15

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

John 13:6-9

We can see from this that the closeness of our union with the Lord depends on the extent to which we abstain from evils as coming from the devil and as blocking the Lord's entry. *Ibid.*

Thursday, January 16

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." *John 13:12-15*

The Lord seems to be closer in proportion to the union occasioned by love and wisdom. By the same token, he seems more distant as we spurn love and wisdom. *Ibid.*

Friday, January 17

[Jesus said,] "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. . . . I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." *John 13:33a, 34-35*

No one, though, should believe that we have wisdom if we know a lot, grasp what we know fairly clearly, and can talk about things intelligently. We are wise only if these abilities are united to love.

Divine Providence §35

Saturday, January 18

Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward." *John 13:36*

The higher we climb, the more clearly we realize that no one is wise on her or his own, but only from the Lord. We also realize that relative to what we do not know, what we do know is like a droplet compared to a vast lake. *Divine Providence §36*

Psalm 40

I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry.

He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.

He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord.

Happy are those who make the Lord their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods.

You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted.

Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required.

Then I said, "Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me.

I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."

But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, "Great is the Lord!"

As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God.

Matthew 7:7-11

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Sermon

I've been watching people for a long time now, and one of the most curious and widespread behaviors I've witnessed is a person's refusal to ask questions when faced with an unknown.

I have seen this behavior at work when a person is asked for information and then supplies an answer to a question as any expert in the field would, even when he or she knows absolutely nothing about the subject. I suppose this tendency is motivated by a basic fear of being seen as one who doesn't have the answers, as one who is uneducated. Answering the question anyway is a means of preserving personal dignity.

I was at a zoo up in Maine, standing at the rail and looking into a pen containing large South American rodents called capybaras, when I overheard a child ask his father what those animals were. The father answered, "That there is a warthog, son. Go ahead, you can pet it—it won't hurt you." I suspect that Dad didn't want to look dumb in front of his son. I don't understand this behavior completely, but it does seem to be the case that many times we are reluctant to admit it when we don't know something.

Where I see this tendency doing us the most damage is in our religious life—our spirituality. There are so many different denominations in this world, and most of them claim to have some understanding of truth that no one else has. Quite a few were founded in response to someone who experienced a divine revelation, and who could serve as some sort of informational conduit between this world and the spiritual world. People who are attracted to churches such as these and become active members are likely to have answers to the spiritual questions they are asked. I suspect that few would feel comfortable with saying, "I don't know."

English playwright Arnold Wesker has a line that expresses this phenomenon rather well. "Education isn't only books and music," he writes. "It's asking questions all the time. There are millions of us, all over the country, and no one, not one of us, is asking questions; we're all taking the easiest way out." The "easiest way" he speaks of is finding some answer that sounds good to us and insisting that it's the truth, and acting defensively toward anyone who suggests that we're mistaken. All this because it's so difficult to admit that we do not know, because we feel more empowered when we give information rather than ask questions.

For our own spiritual well-being, we need to learn how to come to terms with the fact that there is much

we do not yet know, and we need to learn how to feel comfortable with asking questions—with being a student in the face of this spiritual world instead of an expert. We are all familiar with the passage from the Gospels, "Ask and ye shall receive," but let me offer you a new twist on our reading of it for you to consider: we cannot receive until we are able to ask.

"Ask and ye shall receive." Receive what? We often interpret this verse as receiving what we have asked for—something that we want or need, something that we wish to see happen. But we know that we are receiving all the time—receiving love and life and insight. If we are able to ask questions when we need to, putting aside all of the fears and pride and sense of dignity that prevent us from asking, then that which we receive will be more meaningful to us. It will be more meaningful because we are being true to our station with respect to the divine. We are all students in this life. It is our obligation to ask questions. That is our job. If we can ask, then we shall receive.

Who among you, if a child should ask for the truth, shall give them a fabrication designed more to save face than to satisfy curiosity? "Who among you, if his son asks for bread will give him a stone? Or if he asks for fish, will give him a serpent?" There is no shame in saying "I don't know." In fact, nothing strengthens a relationship or a community more than when someone who normally has all the information owns that "this is something I have yet to learn, because I am a student too. Perhaps this is something that we can learn together."

To ask a question is a beautiful thing; it is a clear expression of our questing spirits. And it is still the simplest and most effective way of finding things out. Amen.

Prayer

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. and I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. – *Thomas Merton*

Daily Meditations

Monday, January 20

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” *John 14:1-2*

The more closely we are united to the Lord, the happier we become. ... times of happiness, bliss, and sheer delight intensify as the higher levels of our minds are opened within us, the levels we call spiritual and heavenly. *Divine Providence §37*

Tuesday, January 21

“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” *John 14:3-4*

No one who is caught up in the pleasures of cravings for evil can know anything about the pleasures of desires for what is good, the delight that fills the angelic heaven. This is because these two kinds of pleasure are absolute opposites inwardly and therefore just under the surface, even though they differ very little on the surface itself. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, January 22

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” *John 14:5-7*

Every love has its own pleasures. A love for what is evil gives us pleasure when we are caught up in its compulsions. ...The wellspring of these pleasures is a love for being in control prompted by a love for ourselves. *Ibid.*

Thursday, January 23

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?” *John 14:8-9*

The joys proper to desires for what is good and true have their source in the Lord, so they come from the center of our being. From there they spread into our lower reaches, all the way to the lowest. *Ibid.*

Friday, January 24

“Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.” *John 14:12-14*

There is no comparison between the pleasures of cravings for evil and the pleasures of desires for what is good, because within the pleasures of cravings for evil lies the devil and within the pleasures of desires for what is good dwells the Lord.

Divine Providence §40

Saturday, January 25

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.”

John 14:15-18

We may conclude from this that the more closely we are united to the Lord, the happier we become. This happiness is rarely evident in the world, though, because in this world we are in an earthly state, and things on the earthly level do not communicate directly with things on the spiritual level; they communicate only by correspondence. *Divine Providence §41*

Isaiah 42:5-12

Thus says God, the Lord,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
I am the Lord, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.
See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.
Sing to the Lord a new song,
his praise from the end of the earth!
Let the sea roar and all that fills it,
the coastlands and their inhabitants.
Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice,
the villages that Kedar inhabits;
let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy,
let them shout from the tops of the mountains.
Let them give glory to the Lord,
and declare his praise in the coastlands.

Revelation 21:9-27

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. It has a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites; on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. The angel who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare,

its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal. He also measured its wall, one hundred forty-four cubits by human measurement, which the angel was using. The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass. I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Revelation Unveiled 879

"And I, John, saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven" means a new church to be established by the Lord at the close of the former one, a church that will be allied with the new heaven in divine truths in regard to its theology and in regard to its life.

The reason John names himself here by saying, "I, John," is that he as an apostle means the good that love for the Lord does and therefore the good that we live. That is why he was more beloved than the other apostles and lay on the Lord's breast at the Supper (see John 13:23; 21:20). This holds true also for the church that is being described here.

Sermon

And he carried me away in the spirit to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God; and its light was like a most precious stone, like jasper, clear as crystal. Revelation 21:10-11

Almost two and a quarter centuries ago—in April 1789, to be exact—a group of devoted readers of Swedenborg gathered in London "to consider the most

effectual means of promoting the establishment of the New Church, distinct from the Old." The invitation to this gathering listed forty-six theological propositions to be discussed as the basis of this action; and it was addressed to "all the readers of the theological works of EMANUEL SWEDENBORG, who are desirous of rejecting, and separating themselves from, the Old Church, or the present Established Churches, . . . and of fully embracing the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church . . ."¹

According to *Secrets of Heaven* 8152, "When life makes the church, and not doctrine separated from life, the church is one; but when doctrine makes the church, there are many." With the hindsight of a couple of centuries, it is not hard to see that the intent to separate effectively blotted out any dream of the church being or becoming one; and the phrase "desirous of rejecting" stands out with painful clarity. What we have in common, apparently, is what we don't believe.

In fact, there were equally devoted readers who protested against this "separatist" action, a principal one being none other than John Clowes, whose devotion led him to translate the entire *Arcana Coelestia* into English. Ever since that time, a thorough study of the impact of Swedenborgian theology needs to follow two streams—that of "card-carrying Swedenborgians," members of our institutional churches, and that of such "non-card-carrying" readers as Blake, Dostoevsky, Balzac, Goethe, Jung, and Emerson, among many others.

We must wonder what that organizational meeting might have brought forth if it had been focused on uniting kindred spirits rather than on setting them apart. In the same spirit, and again with a couple of centuries of hindsight, we must also wonder at the fact that this effort to found "the New Church" paid virtually no attention to the only description of the new church that there is in the "heavenly doctrines" themselves—the presentation of the deeper meaning of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, in *The Book of Revelation Unveiled*.

There is a reason for this. Understandably, the initial steps toward establishing an institutional body focused on matters of order and organization, and the description of the new church in *Revelation Unveiled* is no help whatever in this regard. The image comes to mind of trying to design an automobile and

being given a very insightful description of the basic principles of good driving. This is obviously relevant to the design of the automobile, but it does leave a lot to the engineers.

To pursue that image a little further, the earliest automobiles were basically carriages, with engines taking the place of horses; and the order and organization of the New Jerusalem church looked very much like the order and organization of the "Old Church," with churches that looked like churches, services on Sundays, clergy and laity, committees for this and that—we were certainly open to the charge that we were putting new wine into old bottles.

This worked fairly well for about a century, but at least in the industrialized countries, things then started to slow down. In the nineteen thirties, this church here in Bath nearly went out of existence; but it turned out that there was some life left in the new wine after all, and it revived.

We find ourselves in a transition phase here and now. Tennyson said it well: "The old order changeth, yielding place to new." He added, "And God fulfils himself in many ways, Lest one good custom should corrupt the world."² "Good customs," customs that fit their times, can outlive their usefulness; and when they do, it is clearly time to focus on their usefulness.

This is a somewhat roundabout way of calling us to take a fresh look at the ideal of "a new church" as presented in *Revelation Unveiled*, and to do this initially in the spirit of basic research rather than of product development, so to speak. The obvious first step in this process is to take a fresh look at the introduction to the vision of the holy city, hence this morning's text: "And he carried me away in the spirit to a great, high mountain and shows me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God; and its light was like a most precious stone, like jasper, clear as crystal."

John's being taken to a great, high mountain, *Revelation Unveiled* says, means that he was taken to the highest heaven (§896). This is the heaven permeated by a love of oneness; and the closest we can come to this is to recall times when we were overcome with the inexpressible dearness of some individual, some individuals, our country, our church, our world. I hear astronaut Edgar Mitchell saying, "On the return trip home, gazing through 240,000 miles of space toward the stars and the planet from which I had come, I suddenly experienced the universe as intelligent, loving, harmonious."

1. Bellin, Harvey F. and Ruhl, Darrell, eds. *Blake and Swedenborg: Opposition is True Friendship* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1985), p. 122.

2. From *The Passing of Arthur*, line 408.

What John saw, then, was unearthly, and the Christian church has long recognized that his vision cannot be taken as a prophecy of something that will happen in this material world. One classic evangelical commentary puts it very simply: “The idea of a city literally descending from heaven, and being set upon the earth with such proportions—three hundred and seventy miles high, made of gold, and with single pearls for gates, and single gems for the foundations—is absurd.”³ When we turn then to *Revelation Unveiled*, we find the following:

The “great city, the holy Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” means the Lord’s new church. . . . The reason it was seen in the form of a city is that a city means a theological system; and a church is a church because of its theology and because of a life in accord with its theology. It was also seen as a city so that its whole nature could be described, and it is described by reference to its wall, gates, foundations, and different dimensions.

To translate this into somewhat simpler terms, the image of a city is an image of a way of living together. There are a great many different ways of living together—different cultures, different forms of government, associations for different purposes—there seems to be no “one size that fits all.” Think for a moment of the eight members of the crew of a racing shell. They need to act as subjects of an absolute tyrant, the coxswain, if they are to have any chance of success. This is all very well when the task is as simple as propelling a boat, but when it comes to a group like a family, that kind of organization is a recipe for disaster.

No, a city needs to include all the functions of living together, and for it to function harmoniously, there needs to be a willing agreement as to fundamental values, as to principles. In the view from the mountain top of the highest heaven, the supreme value is described as a “love of the Lord,” a phrase which does not really define itself.

For clarity in this regard, we may turn to *Heaven and Hell* (§399):

“We may gather the magnitude of heaven’s pleasure simply from the fact that for everyone there it is delightful to share their pleasure and bliss with someone else; and since everyone in the heavens is like this, we can see how immense heaven’s pleasure is. . . .

“This kind of sharing flows from the two loves of heaven . . . love for the Lord and love for our neighbor.

These loves by nature want to share their pleasures. The reason love for the Lord is like this is that the Lord’s own love is a love of sharing everything it has with everyone—it intends the happiness of everyone. Much the same love exists in individuals who love him, because the Lord is in them.”

In the new church, then, I am treasured in a way that awakens the best within me. It feels wonderful, and I cannot help but want to share that feeling. It overflows. It overflows, and it is contagious. We are all capable of it, because it is the quality of the life that is constantly flowing into us from the Lord. It has quite an obstacle course to run before its effects reach the level of our everyday consciousness, but we get glimmers of it from time to time. We are familiar enough with it to have a sense of how real and how beautiful it can be, how near it is and yet often how far.

We do not seem to be able to summon it at will, but we can perhaps invite it, or at least recognize and reject some of the obstacles that impede it—our desires to have others recognize how important we are, to hear only what we want to hear, to enlarge ourselves by demeaning others.

We can also look for signs of it in others by giving them the fullest and most empathetic attention we can muster. We can recognize that we cannot answer the question “What would Jesus do?” until we have answered the question “What would Jesus see?” What would happen if we made a habit of imagining that loving presence standing next to us as we engage in conversation? After all, as our third reading reminds us, the apostle John, who saw the holy city descending, stands for “the good that love for the Lord does and therefore the good that we live.”

All this may stand as a very sketchy introduction to “a fresh look at the ideal of a ‘new church’ as presented in *Revelation Unveiled*.” Sketchy as it is, though, we could do worse than let that phrase, “the good that love for the Lord does and therefore the good that we live” find a place in our minds to take root and bear fruit. Amen.

Prayer

Lord, you are the vine; I am a branch. Help me to bear fruit worthy of your beauty, that I may nourish the world through the love you give constantly to me. Amen.

3. Albert Barnes et al., *Barnes’ Notes on the Old and New Testaments* (26 vols.). 4 publishers, 1847–1885.

Daily Meditations

Monday, January 27

“In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” *John 14:19-20*

The more closely we are united to the Lord, the more clearly we seem to have our own identity, and yet the more obvious it is to us that we belong to the Lord.” *Divine Providence §42*

Tuesday, January 28

“They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” *John 14:21*

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

Wednesday, January 29

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” *John 14:25-26*

There is hellish freedom, and there is heavenly freedom. Our ability to think and intend what is evil, and to say and do it to the extent that civil and moral laws do not restrain us, comes from hellish freedom. “Our ability to think and intend what is good, and to say and do it when circumstances permit, comes from heavenly freedom. *Divine Providence §43*

Thursday, January 30

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” *John 14:27*

Whatever we think, intend, say, and do freely we feel is truly ours because all the freedom we have comes from our love. This means that if we are caught up in loving what is evil, we cannot help feeling that hellish freedom is freedom itself; while if we are caught up in loving what is good, we feel that heavenly freedom is freedom itself. As a result, each freedom regards the other as slavery. *Ibid.*

Friday, January 31

“You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.” *John 14:28-29*

The reason our identity seems clearer is that divine love by its very nature wants to give what it has to others, which means to us on earth and to angels. All spiritual love is like this; divine love most of all. *Ibid.*

Saturday, February 1

“I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way.” *John 14:30-31*

The Lord never forces anyone, because anything we are forced to do does not seem to be ours and anything that does not seem to be ours cannot become part of our love and so be accepted as our own. This is why the Lord is always leading us in freedom, and reforming and regenerating us in freedom. *Ibid.*

LEAVING OUR COMFORT ZONE

Rev. Dr. David Fekete

Numbers 21:4-9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3:14-21

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

Sermon

Today's Bible passages are all about leaving your comfort zone and living a higher life. God is infinite goodness, infinite love, and infinite wisdom. We are always finite in our goodness, love, and wisdom—and the ratio of any finite number to infinity is

infinity. That means that there is no end to our growth potential! We can grow better in goodness, deeper in love, and more profound in our wisdom forever. Our spiritual life is one of moving constantly from evening to morning; that is, from a state less holy to one more holy, from less love and wisdom into greater love and wisdom, and this to eternity.

2 FEB

Anyone who has undergone some spiritual growth or change in his or her life knows that change is not easy. Moving from a state of less goodness into one of more goodness means leaving our comfort zone. It means letting go of behaviors and emotions that we were accustomed to, and taking on new, unfamiliar, and maybe uncomfortable ways of life. The temptation is always there to revert to old, accustomed ways. The temptation is there to backslide from the new life we have been led into, and to return to our former life.

This is what we find in both our Old Testament story and our New Testament passage. In our story from Numbers, the Israelites grumble against God. They are sick of eating the same food. They look back with longing on the food in Egypt, which was richer and of greater variety. "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!" (Numbers 11:4-6)

The Israelites seem to have forgotten that in Egypt they were slaves, and that the food they now ate was manna that came down from heaven itself. All this rebellion and wistful recollection of Egypt was brought on by food—just food!

The Bible tells us that God sent the Israelites venomous snakes to punish them. Here we are dealing with what Swedenborg calls an "appearance of truth." Appearances are not wholly true. They are how a person interprets things. They are how a person imagines things to be. Actual truth, truth that is really true, is beyond any person's mind. We cannot know absolute truth. We can only know what is true for us. But we believe that there is an Absolute Truth, and we believe further that we can approach this Absolute Truth more and more closely—in other words, our appearances become truer and truer.

When the Bible says that God sent snakes to punish the Israelites, this is not Absolute Truth. This is how the Israelites interpreted the sudden appearance of venomous snakes. The idea that God punishes is an appearance of truth, and the Bible in its literal sense has many appearances in it. The literal reading of the

Bible is called by Swedenborg “the sense of the letter.” The real truth is, God does not punish. God can only do what is good, and inflicting harm on anyone is contrary to God’s nature.

In the Word it is frequently said that God is angry, takes vengeance, hates, damns, punishes, casts into hell, and tempts, all of which pertain to evil, and therefore are evils. But . . . the sense of the letter of the Word is composed of such things as are called appearances and correspondences . . . when such things are read these very appearances of truth, while they are passing from a person to heaven, are changed into genuine truths, which are, that the Lord is never angry, never takes vengeance, never hates, damns, punishes, casts into hell, or tempts, consequently does evil to a person (*True Christian Religion* 650).

Swedenborg even waxes zealous in a tirade against persons who preach a damning, punishing God:

As He wills only what is good, he can do nothing but what is good. . . . From these few statements it can be seen how deluded those are who think, and still more those who believe, and still more those who teach, that God can damn anyone, curse anyone, send anyone to hell, predestine any soul to eternal death, avenge wrongs, be angry, or punish. He cannot even turn Himself away from humanity, nor look upon anyone with a stern countenance (TCR 56).

The case is similar with a line in the Lord’s Prayer. In it, we are dealing with an appearance of truth. When we recite it, we say, “Lead us not into temptation.” This line would seem to be saying that God leads us into temptation. But God never brings on temptations. It is we who bring them on ourselves. Why? This is for the same reason that we find the Israelites longing to return to Egypt.

The sad truth is, we are accustomed to doing things the way we were brought up. We begin our adult life by learning how to succeed in the world. In itself, this is not wrong or bad. In fact, it is necessary. But what kind of mindset do we need to succeed in the world? I have heard it said that a person can’t become rich without stepping on someone’s toes. Does this mean stepping on someone’s head? Does this mean beating down all opposition? Does this mean thinking only about what benefits us? Maybe for some. But for all of us, we have to begin life thinking about worldly ambition. I suggest that we, in fact, love worldly activities and ambitions. We orient our lives to these

aims. Perhaps we *must* orient our lives to these aims in order to succeed.

We learn from spirituality that we need to consider other people. We learn to act in harmony with others. We learn to care for others. We learn to love others as much as we love ourselves and our worldly ambitions.

This shift requires a change in our perspective. We change from a “me first” attitude to an “I-Thou” attitude. All the things we started out loving from a me-first attitude need to be shrugged off like a snake’s old skin. But those loves were a part of our life. Those loves formed who we were. And they continue to reside in our memory. Thus there is always the temptation to fall back into those old loves, into those old ways of doing things.

New spiritual life is almost always contrary to worldly life. It may feel very uncomfortable at first. Living gently instead of aggressively may be hard for a businessman driven to succeed and profit. Living contentedly may be difficult in a society that plasters images of wealth and sensuality everywhere we look—television, billboards, radio, social media. It is as if the world is continually telling us that we don’t have enough. It is as if the world is telling us to forget the lilies of the field and birds of the air.

So the temptation is always there to slip back from new spiritual life into our old, ego-driven, world-oriented pleasures and ambitions. This is like the Israelites wanting to return to Egyptian slavery even after tasting the freedom of their wilderness life. This is what John means in the passage we heard this morning from chapter 3: “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil” (3:19).

In our spiritual development, there is always the lower self threatening to drag us down and back into old ways of living. But once we have tasted the nectar from the gods, once we have lived on manna that came down from heaven, we will find that living our old lives feels uncomfortable. We will feel pain in the distractions of ego and the world. And when we are hurting too much, we will turn to God. We will turn from the world toward heaven. When the serpents bite us, we will see where we have fallen short, where we have fallen, and we will turn, we will return.

Then John’s statement will resound in our hearts: “But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done

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Daily Meditations

has been done through God" (3:21). "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." God will deliver us from evil when we call upon Him to do so. When the people of Israel lifted up their eyes to God, they saw the bronze serpent Moses had made, and they were healed.

Such is our journey in this world. We are ever moving from evening into morning. We are ever moving from less light into more light. We are ever moving from the world to heaven.

Blake says this well in his poem "The Little Black Boy": "And we are put on earth a little space,/ That we may learn to bear the beams of love."

May the Lord bless our going out and our coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore. Amen.

Prayer

Lord, we give you thanks for lifting us up out of the mire of worldly concern. Everywhere we turn in this world, we see images of wealth, power, and sensuality. And yet you have shown us that all these glimmering images are but vanity, and empty. Help us to turn from these vain seductions. Help us to see where true life resides. Help us to find contentment in the disposition of your divine providence. Help us to seek for riches the last into eternity. May we find your pearl of great price, and trade all the vain offerings of this world for that one great gift. May we find you, and may we find peace in your heavenly world of everlasting joys.

Lord, we ask for your peace to descend upon this troubled world. Where there is conflict and war, let there be understanding and peace. Where there is famine and thirst, may good-hearted aid come and satisfy the needs of those who are in want. Where there are natural disasters, may help come from good neighbors and from compassionate governments. Where there is hardship and unemployment, lend your patience and hope.

Lord, send your healing love to all those suffering in body and soul. We ask you to give the gift of health to all in need. Amen.

Monday, February 3

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you." *John 15:1-2*

Because we are all redeemed, we are all capable of being regenerated, each of us in a way that suits the state we are in. To clarify [this] statement, I need first to say something about redemption. The Lord came into the world for two main reasons: to move hell away from both angels and people; and to glorify his own human nature. *True Christianity §579*

Tuesday, February 4

"Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." *John 15:4-5*

Before the Lord's Coming, hell had grown so much that it was assaulting the angels of heaven. By placing itself between heaven and the world, hell had also become able to intercept the communication between the Lord and human beings on earth; as a result, no divine truth or goodness from the Lord was able to get through to human beings. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, February 5

"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." *John 15:9-11*

In order to move hell out of the way and to remove the impending threat of total damnation, the Lord came into the world, relocated hell, brought it under control, and made heaven accessible again, so that he would be able to be present among people on earth and regenerate and save those who were living according to his commandments. All who are regenerated are saved. *Ibid.*

Thursday, February 6

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

John 15:12-14

People with different interests are regenerated in different ways. People who are in different lines of work are regenerated in different ways. People who study the outer meanings of the Word are regenerated in a different way than those who study its inner meanings. *True Christianity* §480

Friday, February 7

“I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.”

John 15:15

The reason why all are capable of being regenerated and saved is that the Lord is present with, and brings his divine goodness and truth to, every human being. This is the source of everyone’s life and everyone’s faculty of understanding and will and also everyone’s free choice in spiritual matters. *Ibid.*

Saturday, February 8

“You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

John 15:16-17

Everyone has also been given means that teach commandments concerning good and evil and the idea that there is a God. Christians find these teachings in the Word; non-Christians find them in whichever religion they are in. *Ibid.*

PUTTY TRAINING OUR CHILDREN

9 FEB

Rev. Julian Duckworth

Deuteronomy 6:1-12

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children’s children, may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Proverbs 22:6

Train children in the right way,
and when old, they will not stray.

Arcana Coelestia 5135.2, 3

As children, we take in all kinds of ideas about life, and we take them on trust. They go into our memory, but they get lodged more on the sidelines, because this first type of learning is more conditioned and hardly understood. As we grow older, though, and we start to think for ourselves and not just the way we’ve been conditioned to, we bring back to mind and, as it were, chew over these things that we took on trust, and

then we endorse them, doubt them, or refuse to accept them. If we endorse them, it's some indication that somewhere something good is beginning to lead us.

The kind of ideas that we may take in during our first few years are that there is a God who made everything, who rewards those who do good and punishes those who do wrong, that life goes on for ever, that it is good to pray, that it is right to keep God's commands and honour our parents and not kill or steal or lie, and many other ideas as well. They're taken on trust, but later on, when we start to think about them and begin to lead our own life, we think them through. If we go with them and add further ideas of our own to them and then live the kind of life they suggest, it augurs well. If we go against them, it suggests we're being led very much by ourself.

Sermon

I'm taking it you know the story *Sleeping Beauty*—and of course boys as well as girls can be sleeping beauties. In fact, they can be just as beautiful, even when they're wide awake. What happens in *Sleeping Beauty* is that the king and queen have a child, and at the christening ten good fairies come along and give their various blessings, and then the eleventh fairy (who hadn't been invited) turns up—and because she hadn't been invited, she spitefully curses the child to eventually prick her finger and die.

And then, thank goodness, the twelfth fairy, who was late, came in, heard the curse, and said, "No, she shall not die, she shall sleep for a hundred years." The rest of the story, which you know, is all about the fulfillment of the curse and *Sleeping Beauty's* final redemption when she's kissed.

Obviously it's a parable in its own right—we are the story—and we could spend ages interpreting it and thinking about things like pricking our fingers and sleeping for a hundred years and handsome princes, but that could become boring. What concerns me about the story is that after such a great start, all the attention gets focused on the intrusive bad fairy (who, note, wasn't invited), on her curse, and on its outcome, and the rest of the story deals with coping with and sorting out the damage she has inflicted. It's a bit of an indictment on human nature, perhaps—on how much we prick up our ears when there's some scandal or gossip going around. Why on earth don't we ever do that with the good stuff, the achievements, the loveliness?

But of course, because this is a parable, the storyline has to be like it is, because we are all incomplete

people who need to be reconfigured over a lifetime (that's the story length) from being people who are self-centered to being people of God—or, as someone said to me, being people of God and yet, if we're honest, still being rather self-centered as well.

What intrigues *me* is what those ten good fairies bestowed on the royal baby at the christening. I think the Brothers Grimm story says that one by one they came forward and said, "You shall be pretty," "You shall be healthy," "You shall be happy," "You shall be clever," and then it peters out and you have to fill in the blessings for yourself. But there are ten fairies! That's six things left.

What would *you* wish for a baby? What would you wish for Joshua today, at his christening? Well, of course we would wish for all the best possible things: security and safety and a caring family to grow up in; for friends, of course; for that crucial self-esteem and self-worth (that's a huge one, isn't it?); and how about one day having a really loving relationship? Excellent.

But the twelfth fairy (the late one after the curse) has the best line. "You shall *not* die, but you shall *sleep* for a hundred years." How would we possibly interpret that?

"Mate, you have got off to a good start in life. But in time you will go through various ordeals. Your first girlfriend will drop you, and you will think the world has ended. It hasn't, but you won't know that at the time. It's actually an ideal opportunity to learn a lot about girls. And other things will come along, some hard things which will knock you down, but also some really alluring things which will take you over and make you think they can make you finally happy. And so you will go to sleep, like it's a hundred years, chasing butterflies. And then one day, there'll be a wake-up call which may feel cataclysmic, but actually it is a kiss. And then, for the first time, you'll begin to understand."

In the Bible, where there are exactly the same realities as in all fairy stories, the same idea is given.

The Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve. The serpent (that's the bad fairy). They eat, and "then their eyes were opened, and they knew they were naked"—they feel they've woken up, but really they've gone to sleep!

Or what about the story of the Wise Men, with their gold, frankincense, and myrrh—all blessings, of course, but then Herod methodically seeks to kill this new king by killing all children under two, so they flee, and, so to speak, fall asleep. And later, Jesus talks about this very sequence: The kingdom of heaven is

like a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares—weeds—among the wheat and went his way.

Well, it is not as easy as *Sleeping Beauty*, but it is virtually the same idea: ten fairies giving blessings which are going to equip that young child to come through the curse of falling asleep and out on the other side of it; good seed sown before the enemy comes and sows tares. We should not race on into stories and their problems too quickly but appreciate what has been given first, without which no one will ever live happily ever after, in the real sense.

Parents of children stand, as it were, in the place of God. They don't replace God, of course, but they are vital to the process. They are fairies giving blessings, agents sowing good seed in the field of a child's mind. They are instrumental. God never hands everything over to parents, thank goodness; he never lets our soul level, our deepest level, out of his grasp, which is powerfully illustrated in the *Sleeping Beauty* story. The whole story, from beginning to end, takes place right there inside the castle. *Sleeping Beauty* never leaves. That's God's handling of our eternal souls.

But parents provide. They nurture our nature, shaping us, a bit like putty. And if I can be terribly idealistic (because every parent is only human), everything you ever do as a parent should in some way keep an eye on the future, should anticipate this child—your child—God's child—growing up and going it on their own.

That is a hard task. We have our knee-jerk reactions, we show our frustration and irritability and exhaustion, and children cop it and absorb the shock, and while we say they are amazingly resilient, we don't get what it must be doing to them. I have learned a lot through being a parent. I've learned that breakfast cereal adverts on TV are total fantasy. No families are that good looking or that nice to each other at seven in the morning. I've learned that in the way children are made, one cross word can be like a sledgehammer. I've learned that a lot of parents seem to let their children do what they want because they are scared their own children won't love them!

Last week, one busy parent said to me, "Julian, you're coming out on the far side of it all. What's it like?"

So I said, "Well, the house rattles, and you look at each other like it's really strange. Don't go there yet. It's not your time."

And he said, "But, is there a reward?"

And I said, "Yes, it's like getting emotional superannuation." But I should have said, "Yes, just having done it is the reward. You do it, they get it, and then they do it. Who could ask for anything more?"

There's a verse in Proverbs which says, "Train a child in the way he is to be, and even when he is old he won't depart from it." That virtually says it, I guess, so long as the training is based on the child and not the parent, and so long as the training is done from love and the right kind of freedom. One day, think through why we use the same word for bringing up children and for engines pulling carriages behind them, and you might get something helpful.

I want to give you my own version of what those ten good fairies wished for *Sleeping Beauty*.

If I were a fairy, I would wish for you, little one, to feel right in the world and very connected with it—the plants, the soil, the butterflies, the blue sky—and feel the wonder.

I would wish you lots of playtime.

I would wish you mystery, so that when you read *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, you know exactly what it's about before you spoil it trying to explain it.

I would wish you such a fantastic memory that when you're older, every time you see a rusty bucket, it takes you right back to the one at the bottom of the garden.

I would wish you to be so tender that when you see someone sad or suffering you feel for them, but strong enough to do something for them when you can.

I would wish you never to take anything or anyone for granted.

I would wish you never to take anything too personally.

I would wish you good manners.

I would wish you the courage to get back up and keep going.

And I would wish you the feeling of God. If you become religious, that's fine, but the real thing is even better. You start knowing where you come from, why you're here, and where you're going. It's the kiss that wakes you up after a hundred years of chasing after happiness, and suddenly you realize that you are here at home, inside the palace. Same place—different feel. Amen.

Monday, February 10

"I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me." *John 16:1-3*

An outward change without an inward change is like a field full of stalks and canes that have no grain. It is like a vine that has branches and leaves but no grapes. *True Christianity §676*

Tuesday, February 11

"But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them. I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts." *John 16:4-6*

Our outer self is not human. It only looks human. (Our inner self, which is our capacity for wisdom from God, is what makes us human.) This, then, is also the nature of people who have been circumcised or baptized but have not circumcised or washed their heart. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, February 12

"Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment." *John 16:7-8*

Babies are not the only ones to be baptized; all who are converted to Christianity are also baptized, no matter how young or old they are. And they are baptized even before they receive instruction, based on nothing more than their declaring that they want to embrace Christianity. *True Christianity §677*

Thursday, February 13

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you." *John 16:12-14*

The third function of baptism, and its ultimate purpose, is to lead us to be regenerated. This function is the ultimate reason why baptism exists; this is its goal. *True Christianity §684*

Friday, February 14

"A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me. . . . Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy." *John 16:16, 20*

It is important therefore for Christians to know that people who do not believe in the Lord cannot be regenerated, even if they have been baptized. Being baptized but having no faith in the Lord does absolutely nothing for us. *True Christianity §685*

Saturday, February 15

"When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." *John 16:21-22*

In the Word we read that the Lord God our Redeemer baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This means the Lord regenerates us with divine truth that is related to faith and divine goodness that is related to love and goodwill. *True Christianity §686*

F E B 16 ROUGH GOING

Rev. Leah G. Goodwin

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of all of these people the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

Luke 12:49-56

“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother,

mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

Sermon

It’s probably way too early in my career to admit this, but I loathe writing sermons.

I know. That’s a terrible thing to admit to your congregation. But there it is. I hate writing sermons. I hate, I dread, writing sermons so much that I feel distracted, worried, sometimes even sick, until the blessed thing is done.

And the reason I hate writing sermons is because they matter so much, because I care about them so much, because I love God’s word with such ferocity that I want to break it open for all of you and share the shining contents inside. So writing a sermon always feels like a death match, like Jacob and the angel wrestling at the river Jabbok—and, like Jacob, I always seem to come out of the match limping. If I’m lucky, like Jacob, I find that I, too, have seen a glimpse of God’s face and found my life preserved (Genesis 32:22-32). And then I can show the little glimpse I’ve had to you. But yeah, writing sermons can be rough going.

Well, this week’s passages not only made for rough going, they are all about it. These are hard words for hard times. In our gospel reading from Luke, Jesus—the “prince of peace,” the “dawn from on high” meant to “guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 2:78, 79b), the one who sent his own disciples out with no bag, and only a blessing of peace, the one whose very breath brought the peace of the Holy Spirit to his anxious disciples (John 20:21-22)—that same Jesus is fixing for a fight. “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”

The writer of Hebrews isn’t playing around, either. He or she is reminding one early Christian community—reminding us too—that following Jesus Christ comes at a cost. “Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging,

and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented . . . They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised." This is not rhetorical exaggeration for effect. This stuff really happened. Life and death in the first-century Roman Empire, for a Christian, could be hellish.

Fire on the earth, the baptism of crucifixion, household strife, division. Martyrdom, torture, homelessness—and no answered promise to show for it. Rough going indeed. Sorry, folks, no good news here. Better luck next week!

Except that it's at least a little comforting when someone tells it like it is. And that is what we're getting today. That's the starting point, at least. Because in neither of these passages is the story over yet. Jesus' words, the writer of Hebrews' words, capture the tension, the pull, between the way things are and the way they should be. These passages press us forward—and also draw us forward—on the journey toward the kingdom of God. They mince no words in describing the rock-littered road toward redemption. They push us deeper into the baptismal waters, deeper to the point of drowning, ready to pull us up spluttering and reborn into the brilliant daylight of the Son of God.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus has set his face for Jerusalem. He knows what is coming. "I have a baptism with which to be baptized," he says, "and what stress I am under until it is completed!" He knows, too, that the goal toward which he presses is, by human standards, impossibly far away. He knows all too well that the "race he is running," to use the image from Hebrews, will take more perseverance than any mortal can muster. Jesus knows that he must be "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith," the source and the end, the Alpha and Omega, "who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame."

And he knows that the race will be rough going, not just for him, but for all those who follow him. "Do you think I came to give peace to the earth? No, I tell you, I came to divide it!"

Christ is not calling us to political or social holy war here. He's not calling us to create social and political strife or to do violence in his name—and anyway, we humans don't need excuses as lofty as God to make war among ourselves. No, Jesus is talking about spiritual holy war, the war that takes place within

our own hearts and souls and that causes strife even in the closest relationships, even among family members. He is telling us what his message of love, his interpretation of the divine law, will do when it rams up against our selfish natures. The human race cannot be transformed hey-presto into the Body of Christ. The devil, the idols we worship in the form of money, power, status, self-righteousness—they will not "go gently into that good night." This is the division Jesus is talking about. Rough going, for sure.

But if Jesus, God's Word incarnate, brings division instead of peace, what then? Is there no respite, no hope? Is life under God's reign just one giant battle?

No. Jesus means, in this passage, not to say that strife is the way the world should be, but that strife is too often our first response to love. Finger pointing, defensiveness, turf protection, a well-timed sarcastic snort—too often these are our default answers to the promise of something better than conflict, more inspiring than zero-summanship and the winner-takes-all mentality. Jesus means to lead us to a deeper, higher kind of peace. Because you know as well as I do that there is more than one kind of peace.

There is surface peace, tense peace, in the sense of "keeping the peace." This kind of peace, to mangle a quote from Henry Kissinger, is not really peace at all but merely a state of preparation for war. This is the peace of things swept under the rug. This is the peace some of us try to maintain at the Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner table, or maybe even the nightly dinner table—the peace of public composure maintained, of sibling rivalries seething, of old resentments festering, the peace of all these things kept well in hand so that for a time, at least, we can eat our turkey and mashed potatoes without lobbing them—or an insult—across the table at each other. This is a thin, brittle peace we keep so that maybe, just maybe, the window might open to deeper peace, to real forgiveness and solid relationships. The problem is, this surface peace can become an end in itself, an idol we worship because we fear the conflict that will come with the truth, a distraction from the fact that our sour grapes, whatever they may be, are turning to more and more potent vinegar.

That is the sort of peace that Jesus is speaking about in this passage. The Jewish people, by the early first century, had figured out how to worship and function under the Roman government. They had rebuilt the temple, they observed the law, and developed leadership, all under the thumb of a brutal government. Just as they were beginning to negotiate with the Romans how they might practice their religion without being punished, Jesus showed

up on the scene and began making a mess of things. He healed on the Sabbath (Luke 13:10-17). He blessed and healed a woman who was ritually unclean (Luke 8:43-48). He claimed he could rebuild the temple in just three days (Mark 14:58). He overturned the money changers' tables in the temple (Luke 19:45-48). Jesus walked onto the scene and chipped away at that brittle peace between Rome and the people of Israel. Jesus wasn't interested in false peace, in appeasing his or his peoples' oppressors, whoever they were. He was running the race. His eyes were on the prize—the fulfillment of the reign of God.

And there is another kind of peace. This is a deep peace, not a skim coat over the surface of conflict. This kind of peace takes work. This kind of peace often makes trouble before, and because, it resolves trouble. This kind of peace sometimes requires division, struggle, a big huge mess, in order to lay an indestructible foundation.

Here's an illustration close to home: When the construction workers were digging around underneath the sanctuary and courtyard to shore up our sanctuary, there was one spot in which they had a devil of a time finding soil that would compact enough to make really firm footing for the building. The dirt had been stirred up, dug up for oil tanks years before, and no matter how they smashed it together, that mixed-up soil would not hold up under the pressure. The workers had to dig down six feet or more there, then bring in new soil, just to create solid enough ground to work with, ground that would hold up our building.

Sometimes we have to do the same thing. Sometimes we have to dig deep, churn ourselves up, encounter division within ourselves and even with others, in order to delve down deep enough to find the real peace that is from Christ. Sometimes that churning up takes place within ourselves. Sometimes it takes the form of conflict in our relationships. Always it is rough going.

But it is always worth it. Because there is a deeper peace, a firmer foundation, in and through and beyond tears and shouting and struggle, a peace deeper and more lasting and fiercer and stronger and more supple than finger-pointing and disagreement and killing. "Many waters cannot quench love; neither can the floods drown it," says the Song of Songs. This is the peace of Christ, a peace born from love so vast and deep that we cannot find any way around it or under it or through it; we can, if we're trying to avoid it, only stick our fingers in our ears and hum loudly to ourselves and pretend it does not exist.

This is the peace of Christ, which comes from remembering that others have traveled this rough road before, that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. This is the peace that allows us to "lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and . . . run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, [Jesus Christ,] who has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

And this, too, is the deep peace that is ours in Christ, the peace that emboldens us to keep treading the rough road, telling the old, old story of Jesus and his love. Because the race isn't finished yet. "All these," the writer of Hebrews tells us, "though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect."

Which is to say that it's up to us. God moves and works through us. We are part of the great cloud of witnesses, you and I.

Following Jesus, accepting Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior, is no guarantee that life will go well. It is no guarantee that one's prayers will be answered in the way we want. It is also no guarantee of peace and harmony. In fact, following Christ guarantees rough going, because following Christ requires that we honor the beauty in one another, that we help one another out, that we stand up for what is good and holy and merciful, that we speak for love, against fear. That's a recipe for hardship. For that reason, we are counseled in Hebrews to "consider Christ, who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that [we] may not grow weary or lose heart."

As the old saying goes, "It will all be OK—better than OK—in the end. And if it's not OK, it's not the end." Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayer

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

"Fear not, I am with thee; O be not dismayed,
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid.
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,

Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand."

- *John Rippon*, Selection of Hymns, 1787

Monday, February 17

“On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.” *John 16:23-24*

In the world, the process of being regenerated is represented by various things; for example, by the flowering of all things on earth in springtime and the ensuing stages of growth to the point of bearing fruit. Likewise, by the stages of development that every type of tree, bush, and flower goes through from the first to the last warm month. *True Christianity §687*

Tuesday, February 18

“I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father. On that day you will ask in my name.” *John 16:25-26*

Now, the baptism of John represented a cleansing of the outer self, but the baptism that is practiced among Christians today represents a cleansing of the inner self, that is, our undergoing regeneration. This is why we read that John baptized with water but the Lord baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

True Christianity §690

Wednesday, February 19

“The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me. I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!” *John 16:32-33*

Understanding is just a matter of variations of light from the sun, with the help of heat, as it passes through the ether. Therefore it is just an activity of our inner nature. It is capable of being raised up to the point where it becomes manifest as wisdom.

True Christianity §692

Thursday, February 20

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.” *John 17:1-2*

Without instruction people are not human, but they are not animals either. They are forms that have the capacity to receive and take in that which makes us human. Therefore we are not born human; we become human. The form in which we are born is that of an organism for receiving life from God, for the purpose of being an entity into which God can bring all that is good and, through union with him, make that entity blissfully happy forever. *Ibid.*

Friday, February 21

“And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.” *John 17:3-5*

“All people within Christianity who are at all involved in their religion should know, and if they do not know, should find out, that in addition to physical nourishment, there is such a thing as spiritual nourishment.” *True Christianity §709*

Saturday, February 22

“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word . . . All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.” *John 17:6-7, 10*

“The Lord is love itself and wisdom itself; therefore we are endowed with an endless capacity for uniting ourselves to the Lord and the Lord to ourselves.”

True Christianity §718

FEB 23 CHANGE WE CAN BELIEVE IN

Rev. Sarah Buteux

Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

Sermon

*And everyone says, "This love will change you."
Well I ask: "Isn't that what love's supposed to do?"
- "Same Changes," The Weepies*

How far would you go to save someone you love?

Sounds like the tag line for an upcoming movie—one of those domestic thrillers where an ordinary man rises up, discovers his inner munitions expert, and saves his soul: "For love of family, for love of country, Russell Crowe is *Dad in the Line of Fire*."

But seriously, how far would you go? What would you risk to save someone you love? Would you risk your dignity? Your job? Your life? Would you say things you might regret later? Might you exaggerate, flatter, cajole, maybe even threaten the one you love in order to shake some sense into them and help them see?

Jesus would. In fact, Jesus did. He did so on the cross; that almost goes without saying . . . almost.

But even before that, in his teachings, especially some of his darker parables, you can sometimes hear the desperation creep in—a desperation born of love, but desperation all the same. There is a reckless quality to some of his words, a go-for-broke urgency that I don't think we can or should ignore, no matter how uncomfortable his words make us feel.

And this parable does make you uncomfortable, right? It certainly makes me uncomfortable. In fact, I'm ready to get off the bus before the end of line two. The kingdom of heaven is like a king who sent out his slaves to invite all the right people to his son's wedding banquet? Ewww. I don't want the kingdom of God to have anything to do with anything resembling slavery. That just puts me off right from the get-go. And the king in this parable doesn't help any. I mean who does this guy think he is, telling people what to do, where to go, and—perhaps most damning of all—what to wear. Dude, back off!

And if the king is really only a thinly veiled stand-in for God, what's God doing leveling cities in anger one minute and then totally relaxing his standards the next by inviting the good and the bad alike to his feast, only to turn around again and cast a man into hell for something as petty as violating the dress code? What is going on here? This king comes across, to my twenty-first-century ears at least, as pompous, capricious, and vindictive. He is a tyrant, and if there is one thing we have little to no tolerance for in America, it's tyrants. If this king is supposed to be God, well, let's just say this is a picture of God very different from the one of love and mercy I hold dear.

I don't think the chief priests and the scribes and Pharisees, to whom this parable was originally directed, would have liked it any more than I do. Although curiously, the parts that offend me—and, I assume, you—would probably not have offended them quite so much, whereas the one part I like and I hope you like too—that part where everyone gets invited to the party—well, that would have put them right over the edge.

But in a way, that's beside the point. The point here is that Jesus is pushing hard, pushing our buttons as surely as he was pushing theirs, risking any number of theological misunderstandings in order to get our attention and make us all an offer we can't refuse.

So try to hear the good news embedded deep down in this story. Don't let the details bog you down (that is, don't treat the messenger—in this case, the parable—as poorly as those first guests treated the king's slaves), but try instead to hear the invitation

being held out to us all, and take it seriously. Forget everything you've been taught to think about absolute rulers, as an American citizen, and try to understand that back then, in the first century, to be invited to the table of the king would have been a great honor, an honor you would have been crazy to refuse.

Take a moment and let that sink in. Know that whatever Jesus is asking of us this morning, no matter how uncomfortable it may make us feel initially, know that on some level we are being honored with a tremendous gift. For to be invited to the feast of a king would have been an amazing opportunity, as great an event as winning the lottery, and the very idea that you might refuse it because you had better things to do—as the first guests did—would have been ludicrous. There was nothing better to do. (There was no *American Idol* or Friday-night football back then, nothing). To ignore the honor of this invitation would not have made any sense at all.

But to abuse that honor and throw it back in the face of the king by killing his messengers—forget ludicrous, that would have been suicidal. It would have been as grave an insult as one could commit, an outward declaration of war against the king if ever there was one.

And yet, that's pretty much what had happened in the context of God's relationship with his people Israel. Jesus' meaning here would not have been lost on his initial audience. Jesus was asking the leaders of his faith to take a step back and acknowledge how God, the king, the supreme power in the universe, had been trying to break through to his people for centuries through his messengers the prophets: men like Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Micah.

He had told them over and over again that what he truly desired was not a life of flawless ritual observance but a life of kindness, justice, and mercy, not perfect temple attendance but rather attendance to the needs of the weak and vulnerable in their midst. In plain English, God doesn't care if you are very religious. What God really cares about is how you treat others.

And yet his invitation to do justice, love kindness, and walk with humility, his commands to defend the widow and the orphan, feed the hungry and uphold the oppressed, had fallen on deaf ears. God's prophets had been spurned, some even beaten and killed. And those people who had set themselves up against God and ignored his invitation had indeed suffered. Those first guests mentioned in the parable, whose city was destroyed by the king, are a thinly veiled reference to

the Israelites who lost Jerusalem back in 600 BCE and were killed or carried off into exile.

So Jesus, in today's parable, is warning the keepers of the faith back then—and by extension us right now—not to make the same mistake as our common ancestors, even as he is letting us know the good news that, in spite of all we have done to spurn God's love and turn a blind eye to injustice, God has not given up on humanity. Indeed, God has thrown open the doors, laid a feast, and is willing to welcome all: the good, the bad, and the ugly; the chief priests and the tax collectors; the scribes and the lepers; Jews and Gentiles; Pharisees and prostitutes—to welcome any and all who are willing to come and help bring his kingdom to earth. God's gracious invitation is open to everyone. We are all invited to show up and live lives of compassion, justice, and mercy.

The men Jesus was speaking to that day might not have liked this news very much. In fact, I'm pretty sure they hated the idea, but at least they would have heard the message that it is never too late to change our ways—as all the guests in the parable would have changed their clothes for the wedding—and enter into the kingdom.

All the guests, that is, except for one. Right?

What are we to make of that poor fellow, the clueless wonder who wanders in at the end of the parable and gets thrown into hell? If God's kingdom is open to all, truly open to all, the good and the bad, why does it matter what he's wearing? If the feast is truly laid for everyone, why can't he stay?

The answer is remarkably subtle, so subtle I almost missed it. Initially I thought it all boiled down to the idea that the invitation to heaven (God's kingdom, salvation, the feast, whatever you want to call it) is free and open to all as long as you are willing to change. The unfortunate guest wasn't willing to change, so he had to go.

I figured that unless you repent, clothe yourself in Christ, and resolve to act with love and justice and mercy, as the prophets directed, then you cannot come into the kingdom of God. I was all set to paraphrase Bonhoeffer and say that although grace is free, it is not cheap, and that somehow you must alter your behavior in order to merit it—that great love comes with great expectation. In fact, that is pretty much what I said the last time I preached on this, and that may well be the point.

But there is something about that interpretation that sticks in my craw. Somewhere, buried deep down

in that way of thinking, is a quid pro quo that, in my mind at least, has no place in the kingdom of God. Somehow I think, even as good as that sounds, that the gospel, the good news, is even better than that.

So here is what I think Jesus is really trying to say to us all. I think he's saying that the feast is ready now. I think he is desperately trying to show us that every moment matters, that every single decision you make in this life has the power to either lead you deeper into heaven or throw you farther out into hell, not some time in the future, but right here, right now.

This invitation Jesus is holding out to us is not a free ticket to heaven someday, on the condition that we eventually change. No, I think the invitation is to change now and in doing so experience heaven right now. That is why his message is so urgent. It's not the one leading to the other. The change itself is heaven. The kingdom isn't somewhere else. The kingdom of God is within you.

I don't know if that makes any sense, so let me give you a few examples:

How many of you have had the pleasure of working with Take and Eat? Well, the hope you feel for humanity as a whole when The Next Barn Over donates all the produce, the tingle of delight you experience when you secure an incredibly good deal on the meat, that feeling inside of you when you work together to prep the meal, or that love that wells up inside you when you place it, still warm, in the hands of one of our recipients, that connection you feel in that moment, seeing and being seen by someone who might otherwise be forgotten, that's heaven...now.

When you find the grace to forgive, reconcile, and restore relationships, that is heaven.

The joy you feel when you give of yourself to help someone else...

The exhilaration you experience when you give voice to the voiceless and speak truth to power...

The freedom you feel when you confess...

The fullness you experience when you fast so another can eat...

The courage you find within as you reach out to hold someone in her grief...

The peace you feel when you live your life with intentionality...

The awe you feel in the face of love...

The sense of accomplishment you feel when you raise a wall on a Habitat house...

That is heaven, so why wait? My friends, you are invited to enter into it right now. Sure, there is also a place you'll get to go to when you die, and I have no doubt we'll all eventually find our way there, but understand that what Jesus was offering them in that very moment—and, by extension, what Jesus is offering you and I in this one—is the knowledge that every moment holds within it the opportunity to change into heaven right now. The shabbily dressed man hadn't done it. He was present in body, but not in spirit. And that is not just what Jesus wants of us, that is what Jesus wants for us. This is not a threat, but an invitation, an honor, an opportunity, a gift. You do not have to live the way you have been living a moment longer, if that living is what's keeping you outside the kingdom of God.

So don't leave today thinking that God's gonna get you if you don't change. Don't walk away from this parable shaking your head and wondering where God gets off placing all these conditions on his unconditional love. If there is any small part of you left asking who this king thinks he is, telling you what to do, then take a moment and turn it around.

Consider, if you will, who this King would be if he didn't.

Try to hear the urgency born of love that beats within the heart of this parable and receive his invitation as the gift that it truly is. Embrace the truth that the opportunity to change, the opportunity to become less self-centered and more generous, kind, and loving; the opportunity to forgive and seek forgiveness; to live for justice and practice kindness; is the greatest invitation you could ever be offered. It is the supreme privilege of your humanity, and it is yours for the taking, right now, by nothing less than the grace of God.

People of God, the feast has been laid. All is ready. Let us seize the invitation and rise to the occasion.

Prayer

O Lord, you hold your invitation out to us, but the temptation to delay, the temptation to busy ourselves with other things, the temptation to deny your call, is ever present. Help us, Lord, to come into your light right now. Give us the courage in this very moment to be born anew in your love. Grant us grace, that we might claim our place at your table this day and forevermore. Amen.

Monday, February 24

“And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” *John 17:11*

The reason why the Lord is present with both the worthy and the unworthy is that he is omnipresent in heaven and in hell and also in the world; therefore he is equally present with the evil and the good.

True Christian Religion §719

Tuesday, February 25

“I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.” *John 17:15-16*

With the good (the regenerated), though, he is present both generally and personally. The Lord is in them and they are in the Lord; and where the Lord is, there heaven is as well. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, February 26

“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.” *John 17:17-19*

(Since we are born for heaven and are therefore born to be spiritual, we are not like animals, which are merely earthly.) We also enjoy the capacity to will and do the things that our intellect is able to know, understand, and articulate in a rational way. If our will refuses to go along with the truly rational insights in our intellect, which are also intrinsically spiritual, we become an external person. *Ibid.*

Thursday, February 27

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” *John 17:20-21*

It is important that we not believe the Lord closes heaven to those who approach the Holy Supper unworthily. The Lord does not do this to any people, even to the final hour of their lives in this world.

True Christian Religion §720

Friday, February 28

“The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

John 17:22-23

We ourselves close heaven to ourselves [while we are in this world], by rejecting faith and living an evil life. But even if we do this, we are still constantly kept in a state that leaves open the possibility of repentance and turning our lives around. *Ibid.*

Saturday, March 1

“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” *John 17:25-26*

The Lord is always present and exerting pressure on us to accept him. As he says, “I am standing at the door and knocking. If any hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and will dine with them and they with me. *Ibid.*”

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

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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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