

SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

OUR DAILY BREAD



TALKING
WITH
GOD



OCT/NOV 2010

Prayer

Lord, we do not know what we ought
to ask of you;
you alone know what we need;
you love us better
than we know how to love ourselves.
O Father, give to us, your children,
that which we know not how to ask.
We desire only to accomplish your will.
Teach us to pray.
Pray in us,
for Christ's sake.

- Francois Fenelon (1651-1715)

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"Hands of the Apostle" (1508), Albrecht Durer (1471-1528)

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Dear Readers,

As people of faith, we are constantly trying to gain a clearer and better understanding of what the Lord has created us to do. One of the primary ways we seek answers to our questions is through talking with God—in other words, praying. Prayer is a natural response to belief in a loving God.

As Rev. Kathy Speas points out, praying comes in an infinitude of forms. Sometimes our conversations with the Divine involve a lot of input on our end, whether in the form of carefully crafted words, familiar biblical verses, shouts of joy, tears of grief, or grumblings of frustration. God may or may not have a chance to get a word in edgewise, at least at that moment! On the other hand, sometimes our talks with God have more to do with silence than with speech, both on our part and on God's part. Rev. Jonathan Mitchell tells us why and how finding our own stillness is important to a rich spiritual life.

Whatever forms our conversations with God may take, prayer changes us. It also changes the world. Rev. Sarah Buteux speaks of the radical message of the Lord's Prayer, reminding us that these most familiar words are laden with transformative power. They also lay tremendous responsibility on those who speak them. We should not take our conversations with God lightly! Nor should we doubt their worthiness, however awkward or halting or even absent our words might be. "We do not know how to pray as we ought," said Paul, "but the Holy Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." The Lord knows our hearts. He gets the message.

Nevertheless, talking with God matters very much. Things have a way of emerging suddenly during prayer—emotions we didn't know we had, sorrows we've been too afraid to share, joys we've forgotten to celebrate, truths we never knew we realized. Talking with (or listening to) God helps the pieces fall into place. Maybe the picture on the puzzle that is life won't make sense to our eyes today or tomorrow or even ten years from now, but it will eventually, and to God our lives are already precious, already beautiful, already worthy, just by virtue of our being his children. We may see piles of rubble when we look at our lives, but the Lord sees mansions. He sees with the divinely wise love of providence. Sometimes prayer can give us a glimpse of that view, too. If nothing else, prayer keeps us talking with God. And nothing could delight him more. He loves us. He can think of no better conversation partner than you or I.

Many blessings,

Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

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Deuteronomy 32:1-9

Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; let the earth hear the words of my mouth. May my teaching drop like the rain, my speech condense like the dew; like gentle rain on grass, like showers on new growth. For I will proclaim the name of the Lord; ascribe greatness to our God! The Rock, his work is perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he; yet his degenerate children have dealt falsely with him, a perverse and crooked generation. Do you thus repay the Lord, O foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?

Remember the days of old, consider the years long past; ask your father, and he will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you. When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods; the Lord's own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share.

Revelation 2:1-7

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands: "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God."

Secrets of Heaven 4044

What is presented to our senses are nothing but images of spiritual things in earthly ones, and when they are presented faithfully, they are correspondences.

However, if we do not know what "spiritual things" are but only what earthly things are, we may think that these representations and consequent correspondences cannot be real, saying to ourselves, "How can something spiritual act into matter?" If we are willing to think seriously about what is happening moment after moment in ourselves, though, we can get some idea of how this happens. We can see, for example, how our intentions can activate the muscles of our bodies and manifest substantive actions, how our thinking can activate the organs of speech moving our lungs, trachea, throat, tongue, and lips and manifesting speech, as well as how our feelings can activate our faces and show forth their likeness there even to the point that others know what we are thinking and intending. These phenomena can give us some picture of "representations" and "correspondences."

Further, since we are presented with these phenomena in ourselves, and since nothing can exist that can derive its reality from itself but needs something else, which needs something else again, if we enjoy some real breadth of judgment we can conclude that there is a correspondential relationship between us and heaven, and beyond that between heaven and the Lord, who is the First.

But I have this against you—that you have left your first love. Revelation 2:4

This admonition is from the first of the letters to the seven churches at the beginning of the Book of Revelation, the letter to the church in Ephesus. It is preceded by some obviously warm appreciation: "I know your works, your toil and patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers. You have tested some who claim to be apostles and have found them to be false. I also know that you are bearing up for the sake of my name and that you have not grown weary" (Revelation 2:2-3).

If we put this together with the admonition, we get a picture of a church that is really not doing anything wrong but that has lost the joy, the fire even, of discovery. Our closing hymn comes to us from the redoubtable British Swedenborgian, Joseph Proud. He was born in 1745, some twenty-seven years before Swedenborg died, when the news was so new it was still coming out, and in the hymn we can hear his overflowing joy at the dawning of the light. "Thou hast Thy love revealed beyond what prophets knew; Thy Holy Book of truth unseal'd to our astonished view. We wander now no more where darkening

errors lead, but truth by light divine explore and wonder while we read.”

It is, sadly, possible to sing this hymn today in a very different spirit, a spirit of claiming that we alone have the light and that everyone else is wandering in darkness. There is evidence of this spirit in the first call to found a separate church, with its heavy emphasis on the disastrous errors of the “Old Church.” Yes, we do believe that those errors were very real, but Joseph Proud’s wonder was not at how wrong everyone else was. It was wonder at the coming of light into his own mind and the beauty of the vision that light disclosed. That was his “first love,” and that is the love that should inform every singing of the hymn.

Essentially, that beauty is the beauty of the true New Church, the holy city seen by John on Patmos. There is an immense gap between that city and any city on earth at the present day. If we are honest about it, we must confess that there is a significant gap between that city and even the best of our institutional churches. Our opening hymn called on us to recognize this and to respond to it constructively: “What though the kingdom long delay and still with haughty foes must cope? It gives us that for which to pray—a field for toil and faith and hope.” All too often, the delay, the gap, discourages us instead. Perhaps we should rewrite the first line of the hymn to read, “Creation’s Lord, we give thee thanks that this, thy church, is incomplete” and see it as a needed call to “toil and faith and hope.”

As an institution, we ourselves may be liable to the Ephesus complex. Certainly we are well beyond that “first love,” well into the “long delay.” At the close of the nineteenth century, our church in this country was still small, but it was growing and prosperous, permeated by an optimism that in fact was felt throughout much of the Christian church. One of the most widely read periodicals of mainstream Christianity in this country is called *The Christian Century*, and the title has become so familiar that readers rarely think of its original intent. As the twentieth century dawned, with the miracle of electricity promising to transform everyday life, everything was booming and there was a widely shared vision of “the world for Christ in this century.”

The First World War put paid to utopian dreams, and as is often the case when great projects fail,

there was a felt need to “go back to square one.” The instinctive reaction is the conviction that something basic must have been overlooked, and the effort is to identify that “something.”

That, though, can be where problems arise. There is a natural tendency to look back to some earlier time of prosperity and in effect to turn the clock back to that time. In the mainline church of the 1920s, the result was a kind of neo-orthodoxy, but there is a vivid example of this even closer at hand. Muslims even today are conscious that at one point in their history, theirs was the most advanced and brilliant culture in the world. In the ninth and tenth centuries, they far outstripped the Christians of “the Dark Ages” in secular fields—in mathematics (even the word “algebra” comes to us from Arabic), philosophy, medicine, astronomy, cartography, and chemistry, for example. They had every reason to believe that while Jesus had been a great prophet, Muhammad was the last and greatest, and that Islam was destined to be the religion of the world. Now, though, many Muslim countries see themselves as relegated to the sidelines on the world scene; and one of the reactions, a quite predictable one, is the call to go back, back to fundamentals.

Going all the way back to the real square one means going to the Lord. It involves trying to discern what the Lord’s will is.

But what are the “fundamentals”? We may indeed need to go back to square one, but where is square one? Fundamentalists tend to identify it with particular rules, specific things that need to be done, specific ways of doing those things, and specific things that are not to be done. It is rather like that school of psychology known as “behaviorism,” which focused as exclusively as possible on observable actions and largely discarded introspection. It never lived up to its promises, and it may be significant that its best-known product was probably B. F. Skinner’s novel, *Walden Two*, a work of fiction.

The immense mistake of fundamentalist behaviorism, in the light of our theology, is its failure to recognize that attitudes are more fundamental than actions. As our third reading reminds us, our words and deeds are the results of our intentions. The brilliance of medieval Islam was not caused so much by specific deeds as it was by the love of discovery, the openness of minds, most obviously in secular fields. According to Will Durant, their astronomers “accepted nothing as true which was not confirmed

by experience or experiment.” As soon as discoveries become dogmas, though, that spirit dies. God has spoken once and for all, so the task is to stop listening and simply focus on what God said back then. Essentially, the mind is closed.

Obviously, though, if we go back to the dogma we have not gone back to square one. Before the dogma there was the revelation, the discovery, the opening of the mind, the flood of new light, the wonder, the “astonished view.” In fact, if we go back no further than the dogma, we go back to the time when the mind was beginning to close, when people stopped listening. We go back to the time when growth slowed down, and cast our lot with what was slowing it. We do not go back to the first love itself.

To get to square one, we need to go back through the dogma to the discovery, back to the love of learning. Bear in mind that there may be nothing wrong with what the dogma is telling us. Again, remember the virtues of the church at Ephesus, the “toil and patient endurance,” the bearing up and not growing weary. The problem with dogma is that no matter how true it is, it can never be the whole truth. It has been framed by fallible human minds. As *Secrets of Heaven* (§3207.3) insists, the truths that we can grasp are never “pure.” They are always approximations. “Only the Lord has pure truths, because they are divine.” There is and always will be something more, and that is what makes life worth living.

In other words, the Lord and the Lord alone is the ultimate “square one.” That, when you get right down to it, is what the closing sentence of our third reading is telling us: “Further, since we are presented with these phenomena in ourselves, and since nothing can exist that can derive its reality from itself but needs something else, which needs something else again, if we enjoy some real breadth of judgment we can conclude that there is a correspondential relationship between us and heaven, and beyond that between heaven and the Lord, who is the First.”

Going all the way back to square one, then, all the way back to the real square one, is going to the Lord, so it behooves us to spend a little time clarifying what that phrase means. Perhaps what first comes to mind is simply prayer, but that itself needs definition. It does say in Matthew that “everyone who asks will receive” (Matthew 7:8), but that is qualified by the statement in John that “if you abide in me and my words abide in you, you shall ask what you will and

it will be done for you” (John 15:7). In effect, the only prayers that are granted are prayers that the Lord’s will be done, and it is hard to see how it could be otherwise.

This in turn means that going back to the real square one involves trying to discern what the Lord’s will is. This is much easier to define in general terms than it is to apply to specific situations. Obviously, the Lord’s will is that we obey the two great commandments of love for the Lord and for the neighbor, but that does not tell us which neighbor to help. We would do well, then, to remember the teaching that the first “law of divine providence” is that we should act in freedom and according to reason” (*Divine Providence* 72). The Lord does not want to make up our minds for us. He wants us to make up our own minds.

So we find our focus shifted back to our own attitudes. In order to act according to reason, our minds have to be as free as possible from egotism, resentment, anger, envy, pride, greed, lust, self-pity, and the like. This may sound hard, but the fact is that the hardest part is simply recognizing that this is how we are feeling. As soon as that happens, we have begun to separate ourselves from the evils themselves and have the beginnings of a freedom to turn our backs to them—in more familiar doctrinal terms, to shun them as sins against God. This is getting the beam out of our own eye so that we can see the mote in the neighbor’s (Matthew 7:3-5, Luke 6:41-42).

It does not mean that the ideal solution to a problem will be granted us. It does mean that we will be able to be fair-minded in our effort to evaluate alternatives, that we will be willing to recognize the limits of our knowledge and strength, to ask for help if we need it—to do the best we can and to learn from what happens as a result. After all, if the Lord is indeed the First, the real “square one,” our true “first love,” is never very far away. Amen.

Prayer

In the rush and noise of life, help us to wait upon you, O Lord.

Within ourselves may we be still and know you to be our God.

Day by day let us rejoice in the light of your presence; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

- William Penn (1644-1718)

Monday, October 4

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord:

"I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

Exodus 15:1

He who knows not the interior things of the Word may believe that the Lord desires and loves glory like a man in the world; and also for the reason that it is due to Him in preference to all in the universe; but the Lord does not desire glory for the sake of Himself, but for the sake of the man who glorifies Him.

Arcana Coelestia n. 8263

Tuesday, October 5

"The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him. *Exodus 15: 2*

That "my strength" signifies that everything of power is from Him, is evident from the signification of "strength," as being force and power; and because it is said "my strength" when treating of Jehovah or the Lord, it denotes that everything of power is from Him.

Arcana Coelestia n. 8266

Wednesday, October 6

"Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendour, doing wonders? *Exodus 15: 11*

Truths from good proceed from the Lord. This can be seen from the fact that the Lord is good itself, because He is love itself; from this proceeds truth, like light from the flame of the sun; and this truth is like the light in the time of spring and summer, which has heat in its bosom, and causes all things of the earth as it were to receive life; whereas the truth which is not from good is like the light in the time of winter, when all things of the earth die. *Arcana Coelestia n. 8301.2*

Thursday, October 7

"In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

Exodus 15:13

That to be led by steadfast love signifies the Divine influx with those who had abstained from evils, and so had received good, is evident from the signification of "to lead in mercy," as being to receive the Divine; and because those receive the Divine who abstain from evils, the Divine influx with them is signified.

Arcana Coelestia n. 8307

Friday, October 8

"You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, The place, O Lord, that you made your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established. *Exodus 15:17*

"Sanctuary" denotes in the supreme sense the truth of faith which is from the Lord, and consequently in the representative sense it denotes the Lord's spiritual kingdom, also the spiritual church, and from this a regenerated man who is a church, and thus in a sense abstracted from these it denotes the truth of faith, thus faith itself. *Arcana Coelestia n. 8330.3*

Saturday, October 9

"Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

Exodus 15:21

For joys of the heart, or interior joys, burst forth in the body into various acts, as into songs, and also into dances. And as in ancient times the gladnesses which excelled all others were spiritual gladnesses, that is, were from the affections of spiritual loves, which were those of good and truth, therefore also it was then allowed to add dances to the songs and musical harmonies, and in these ways also to testify joy.

Arcana Coelestia n. 8339

Once upon a time an elderly gentleman, passing his granddaughter's room one night, overheard her repeating the alphabet in an oddly reverential way. "What on earth are you up to?" he asked.

"I'm saying my prayers," explained the little girl. "But I can't think of exactly the right words tonight, so I'm just saying all the letters. God will put them together for me because He knows what I'm thinking."

Speaking in another context to some Pharisees, Jesus once said, "God knoweth your hearts," a statement which some see as a reference to Psalm 7, verse 9. Moffatt translates that verse, "The God of justice reads the inmost heart."

This common Christian conviction, which we conveniently forget most of the time lest we severely limit the range of our thoughts, is a significant hindrance to prayer for some people. For if God always knows what we are thinking and what we want, what is the point of prayer? We certainly can't be supplying Him with any new information. And why should verbalizing our wishes make a loving God any more anxious to satisfy them?

There are those Christians who have taken the position that all desire is prayer, sometimes warning us of the danger inherent in desiring the wrong things. A poem by James Montgomery begins, "Prayers are the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed." Ralph Waldo Emerson's first sermon was on I Thessalonians 5:17, "Pray without ceasing." In summing up his first point he writes, "Since, then, we are thus, by the inevitable law of our being, surrendered unreservedly to the unsleeping observation of the Divinity, we cannot shut our eyes to the conclusion that every desire of the human mind is a prayer uttered to God and registered in heaven."

For Emerson at least the matter does not end with desire, however. "For is it not clear," he writes, "that what we strongly and earnestly desire we shall make every effort to obtain... Unceasing endeavors always attend true prayers, and, by the law of the universe, unceasing endeavors do not fail of their end." As an

old Russian proverb says, "Pray to God but row to the shore."

It may be that desire is a form of prayer. It may even be that rightly directed effort is a form of prayer. But that is certainly not all there is to prayer. There can be forms of prayer that result in changes in us. There may even be forms of prayer that can change God's actions towards us or on our behalf, which in no way means that we can manipulate the Deity. But more about that in a moment.

Prayer can change us, though I deny that prayer has only subjective value. Prayer can change us in at least two ways.

In his psychological study of the young Martin Luther, Erik Erikson makes the point that Luther often did not know what he thought or felt about something until he spoke or preached. It was as if what was inside him was projected outside by verbalization, providing him an opportunity to look at it. In a similar way prayer can be a kind of soul searching and self-revelation, often leading to clarification. Or perhaps another way to look at it is that the presence of others can be a stimulation, helping us to thoughts we might otherwise not come to. We all know the value of talking something over with another person. Centuries ago Clement of Alexandria said that prayer was conversation with God. In an age nearer our own Swedenborg said that prayer is talking with God. How often is the outcome of prayer a new insight, a new determination, a new start? In the words of the psalmist, "...with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light."

The Swedenborgian believes that God is personal, that in some sense we can actually interact with Him, and that prayer is a form of such interaction. And God has input into that interaction.

Prayer can help us to change in another way. Gerald Heard has written that "prayer is not asking for things—not even the best things; it is going where they are." In true prayer we go from whatever natural state we are in to a higher level of reality, to the level where love and truth are all-important. We change our spiritual environment, so to speak. So much of our willing and thinking and doing are from an exclusively this-world point of view. In prayer we seek to "go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths," as we read

in the second chapter of Isaiah. Certainly it is true that we cannot live all of our life on the mountaintop, but it is perilous to live all of our life on the plains or in the valleys. God's establishment of the Sabbath symbolizes our real need for times of connection with the source—whether we find the keeping of the Sabbath the best way to accomplish that or not.

Earlier I mentioned that prayer may have more than subjective value; prayer may even change God. Well, I don't quite believe that. At least I'm certain that God's goodwill towards us cannot be increased by our prayers or diminished by the absence of them. We certainly cannot play on God's emotions. But prayer can change the situation with which and in which God is working. I think we would all agree that God can do for a repentant sinner what he can't do for an unrepentant one. I think the principle involved here works in other areas. If through prayer I come to a better knowledge of myself and my motivations, God does not have to work with the same person I was before I prayed. If through prayer I come to new insights about relationships, God has a different person to work with.

This same principle might also apply when there are many praying for the same thing. New insights may come. New energy may be generated. A new situation may be created. But there is a danger involved. Let me tell you the story about a wagonload of prayers.

It seems that a poor man who lived in the country had an accident and broke his leg. His family was large, he could not work, and he had no savings. Someone thought it would be a good idea to hold a prayer meeting at the church to pray for the family. When the prayer meeting came, one after another the people asked God to help the family, to send them food and otherwise care for their needs. Suddenly there was a loud knock on the door. When it was opened, all could see a young farm boy standing there. He said, "My dad couldn't attend tonight, so he just sent his prayers in a wagon." And there was the wagon, loaded with canned goods and the products of the farm.

Prayer is never a substitute for action, when the form of action required is clear. I doubt that God is going to do for us that which we should and could do for ourselves. But both individual and group prayer may be a means by which we come to understand what we can and should do.

I will not pretend that I have done more than scratch the surface of the subject of prayer this morning. But I hope I have enhanced your feeling that prayer is important. This is not to say that I believe all prayer is important. Prayer that is mere words is not important. Prayer that substitutes for action is not important. But prayer that brings us into communication with God at some depth has saving potential. Amen.

Prayer

Gracious God, I put everything into your hands;
I lay everything on your altar;
I take nothing back
and I yield all things to your glory;
now and forever.

- Mary Slessor (1848-1918)

Meditative Poem

Across the years she comes to me -
I see her standing by my knee.
She lives within my memory,
The little girl who used to be.

She wandered far away from me,
Her way was dark, she could not see.
Lord, bring her back to me, to Thee.

~ At last she comes,

Oh, glory be!

- Alice Sloneker Clemens, "Little Girl Lost,"

in From the Heart

Daily Meditations

Monday, October 11

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

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

Tuesday, October 12

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

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

Wednesday, October 13

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

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

Arcana Coelestia n. 8179.3

Thursday, October 14

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

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

Arcana Coelestia n. 8179.3

Friday, October 15

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

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

Saturday, October 16

"But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!" Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land. *Jonah 2:9-10*

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

The Courage to Ask

Leah Grace Goodwin

Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

I grew up in what is sometimes referred to as a "high" Baptist church—its architecture owed more to the Gothic tradition of England's great cathedrals than to the austere white steeples of New England village greens. My childhood church boasted a sanctuary that seated two thousand, magnificent stained-glass windows, intricate woodwork, and an organ whose lowest notes vibrated in your marrow and shook your sternum as much as the high notes threatened to sing that lovely stained glass right out of its leaded Moorings. It is the only place from my childhood that, at a visit years later, actually seemed larger, more astounding, and more beautiful than it had in my memories.

But, for all its grandeur, this sanctuary was still heir to the Puritan ascetic spirit. You could tell because the wooden pews had no cushions. "The people," as a matriarch of the church once said, "bring their own built-in cushions."

And despite its high-church style, in this church people sat in the pews to pray. There were no built-in fold-out kneelers, no cushions upholstered or embroidered by the women of the church. When one prayed in this sanctuary, one prayed with head bowed, hands folded quietly in the lap, sitting bolt upright in those beautiful, unyielding, bare wooden pews. Along with those bare pews, sitting with head bowed to pray was a product of our Anabaptist and Puritan roots, a reaction against what were by some considered to be the vain complexities of the Latin Mass and the Anglican Holy Supper. We sat to pray largely because it was considered simpler, and therefore more holy, than kneeling.

The point of this reflection on my well-beloved Baptist heritage is not to privilege one posture of prayer over another—especially since I am now used to kneeling in church on occasion!

There are at least five postures that people have traditionally used to pray in the Christian church over the last thousand years, and each one of them has its own unique meaning and purpose, its own particular beauty. In whatever posture a person chooses to pray, deep desire is being expressed, the desire to come before and connect with God. A person's choice of prayer posture may say something about their vision of the divine nature and their sense of relationship with the Lord—but present in every one of these postures is the sense that the person using it comes, seeking intimate communion, before the great mystery of God.

In this morning's gospel reading, Jesus puts before us two individuals whose approach to prayer is about as different as their respective stations in life.

There is, first of all, the Pharisee. He is the one whom, on first glance, we might term "the uppity one." This particular Pharisee is the annoying character whose prayer consists in extolling his own virtues and asserting his superiority over—and his separation from—many of the people with whom he shares the temple. His prayer is an accounting of his virtues—not a prayer, even, so much as a progress report to God. This parable is meant to address its hearers' failings in three areas: spiritual pride, idolatry (trusting in oneself rather than God for righteousness), and contempt for fellow humans. The Pharisee seems to be a champion example of all three.

Then, of course, there is the tax collector. He is the one who apparently gets it right. He displays the appropriate humility before God; he asks for God's help in re-forming his soul and does not depend on himself for his own righteousness. And he prays only in relation to himself—he prays from the perspective of his own brokenness and not at the expense of others.

All right: so the Pharisee, like all Pharisees, is an arrogant jerk and the tax collector is the one who knows how to pray as he ought, right? And meanwhile, we should all be humble like the tax collector, that great princely soul. And so we have the neat and tidy interpretation of this parable—that we ought not to be so sure of our own righteousness before God, and we most certainly shouldn't waste our prayer time extolling our own virtues at the expense of others. End of story.

Not quite.

17 OCT

First of all, the hero and the villain of this parable are not quite as clear-cut as it would seem. Let's put to rest right now any stereotypes about who exactly the Pharisees were. The Pharisees were not awful people, not superficial neighbor-hating hyper-pious legalistic zealots who typified everything wrong with Judaism in Jesus' time. To the contrary, the Pharisees were actually in many ways the enlightened liberals of their day. They did not read scripture literally; they believed in critical engagement with and modernization of ancient religious laws; they were deeply involved in justice issues. The Pharisees, as Sarah Dylan points out, "longed for what Christians long for: God's will done on earth as it is in heaven." Put in Swedenborgian terms, the Pharisees were profoundly interested in the creation of "a heaven from the human race." Pharisees were neither perfect nor always tolerant, but then of course, I'm sure you'll agree that very few people today are perfect or always tolerant, either.

The tax collector, meanwhile, would have been the pariah of his community. Tax collectors were usually Israelites who worked for the Roman government. They worked on commission, which basically meant that they were required to collect a certain amount of tax income from their fellow Israelites—and any profit they wanted to make had to be added onto these taxes as cream to be skimmed off the top before handing over the money to the government. Tax collectors were considered the worst kind of traitors because they made their livelihood at the expense of their own oppressed people.

So, the plot thickens. The Pharisee is not the stock villain—in fact, he far more aptly represents a well-liked, upstanding citizen—and the tax collector is no angel. What else is at stake here, if not simply the virtue of humility before God?

Courage. Trust.

If the way someone stands, sits, lies, or kneels in prayer says something about how they think of God, then the words with which a person chooses to pray say a lot about what they think of God. Nowhere is this more starkly put than in this parable.

You might have noticed that this particular upstanding citizen, this Pharisee, is both a taker of pot shots and a fast talker. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector," he says. But beneath his arrogance, behind the list of virtues and the supercilious snobbery, is defensiveness; he is building a stone wall out of righteous works and social superiority. And beneath his defensiveness, I think, is fear. The downside to "trusting in oneself" to be righteous is that, while it allows a person to claim

credit for his or her own goodness, it also carries an awfully heavy load of responsibility for one's sin. And so the Pharisee's prayer is not only a laundry list of virtues, but a bulwark—a fortress that protects him from the very God to whom he prays, a God who, from the Pharisee's view, is more scorekeeper than lover. If his prayer is any indication, there is no mercy or love to be had from this man's God—and so he does not even ask.

Frederick Buechner has this to say about the paradox of God's fierce love:

"Romantic love is blind to everything except what is loveable and lovely, but God's love, Christ's love, sees us with terrible clarity and sees us whole. Christ's love so wishes our joy that it is ruthless against everything in us that diminishes our joy... The justice and mercy of [God] are ultimately one."

The tax collector, considered neither lovable nor lovely in his society, is brave enough, or maybe just broken enough, to bank on this possibility. Being at the bottom rung of the social and religious ladder, he does not have the option of pride, as the Pharisee does. The tax collector has only his hope that God will indeed "see him with terrible clarity," "see him whole," and respond with love. He asks for mercy, a mercy totally beyond his or anyone else's understanding or accounting, and through the very act of asking he is able to receive it. He asks for mercy, and he goes home "justified"—which means, at its heart, that he goes home at peace with God, with the depths of his soul opened to the Lord, with what Swedenborg terms "a revelation as to hope, consolation, or a certain inward joy." Brendan Byrne puts it thus bluntly: "Two people came up to God's house to pray. Only one really found the hospitality that was there all along."

We can pray any which way—we can sit, stand, kneel, lie face-down on the floor or belly-up to watch the stars spin through the sky at night, we can pray as we brush our teeth or wash the dishes—but however and whenever we choose to lift ourselves up to the Lord, let us have the trust in him to ask for mercy, that he might make us anew. Let us have courage born of God's love for us, the love so evident in the very fact of our existence, to ask God for his gifts and his aid, to find the hospitality that he waits so eagerly, always eagerly, to offer to us.

Prayer

Lord, we know you love us, we know your hospitality is always waiting—but please keep reminding us. Make us yours, Lord. Give us the courage to ask, and the patience to listen. Amen.

Monday, October 18

"Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, we have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances.

Daniel 9:4-5

From this it can be seen that nothing is lacking that man may be reformed if he wishes to be; for all the means of reformation have been bequeathed to man in his freedom; but it should be well known that this freedom is from the Lord, as was said above, and that the Lord effects reformation thereby, provided man, from the freedom that is given to everyone, receives.

Apocalypse Explained n. 248.3

Tuesday, October 19

"We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land.

Daniel 9:6

Man's freedom is that he has the means and faculty to think well about the Lord and the neighbor; for everyone is able to think well or ill about the Lord and the neighbor; if he thinks well the door is opened, if ill it is shut. To think well about the Lord and the neighbor is not from man himself and from what is his own [*ejus proprio*], but from the Lord, who is perpetually present and by His perpetual presence gives man that means and faculty; but to think ill about the Lord and the neighbor is from man himself and from what is his own. *Apocalypse Explained n. 248.2*

Wednesday, October 20

"Righteousness is on your side, O Lord, but open shame, as at this day, falls on us, the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you. *Daniel 9:7*

It has been granted to man by the Lord to know the evils of the thought and will, as also the truths by which evils are to be dispersed; for the Word is given wherein these things are disclosed. *Ibid.*

Thursday, October 21

"Open shame, O Lord, falls on us, our kings, our officials, and our ancestors, because we have sinned against you. *Daniel 9:8*

It does not matter if man, because he does not perceive the inflowing, does not know in the beginning that this is from the Lord, provided he afterwards believes from the Word that all the good of love and the truth of faith are from the Lord, for the Lord effects these things, although man does not know it, and this by His perpetual presence, which is signified by "I stand at the door and knock."

Apocalypse Explained n. 248.3

Friday, October 22

"To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him, and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God by following his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets.

Daniel 9:9-10

In short, it is the Lord's wish that man of himself should abstain from evil things and do good, if he only believes that the ability to do so is not from man, but from the Lord; for it is the Lord's will that there be reception on man's part, and reception is possible only as man acts as of himself, though it is from the Lord.

Ibid.

Saturday, October 23

"All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice. So the curse and the oath written in the law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against you." *Daniel 9:11*

They also err who believe that they can make themselves receptive of influx by prayers, adorations, and the externals of worship; these things are of no effect unless man abstains from thinking and doing evils, and by truths from the Word leads himself, as of himself, to things good in respect to life; when man does this he makes himself receptive, and then his prayers, adorations, and externals of worship avail before the Lord. *Ibid.*

OCT 24 Be Quiet!

The Rev. Jonathan Mitchell

1 Kings 19:9b-13a

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

Mark 1:21-28

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

Several years ago my parents moved into a new house set back in the woods, in front of a vernal pool. You might imagine that this would be a quiet setting, but on a spring evening, the calls of spring peepers and tree frogs can be almost deafening. I read in a nature book that these frogs can be startled into silence

by sudden loud noises. And in fact, if you scream at them to shut up, they will. (I tried it—it's fun.) But soon one calls out again, then another answers, and before long all are peeping and chirping again.

The racket of the frog chorus is a good correspondence for the inner chatter that preoccupies so much of our moment-by-moment conscious lives. For instance, those who have done self-esteem work will be familiar with the inner critic. This is an anxious, fault-finding inner voice which finds everything we do or say to be somehow inadequate. Closely related to this is the voice of the inner worrier, ever alert to anything, however remotely possible, which might go wrong. And there many other forms of inner chatter as well: the stewing over irritations and resentments, the reliving of old conversations, fantasies of revenge . . .

For our personal growth, for our own happiness, and for the sake of our ability to be truly present with others, it is important to learn how to quiet these voices. In the early stages, it may even be necessary to yell at them to "shut up."

Swedenborg, as well, was familiar with these voices. He says they come from hell. And truly, at their worst, when they become obsessive and take on a life of their own, we are right to call them "demonic." This is reflected in everyday conversation when we refer to what we call our "inner demons." The Gospel promises us, however, that when we turn to the Lord in prayer, Jesus comes and says to our inner demons, "Be quiet! Come out of him!"

Perhaps "demons" sounds like a strong word. But I ask you to consider. Do you not, during most of your waking moments, find yourself involved in an inner monologue, at least? And very often an inner dialog, an inner debate, an inner Babel . . . How many times has being wrapped up with the inner chatter caused you to forget what you came into a room looking for or to drive past a turn you had meant to take? We call this absent-mindedness, but effectiveness in the task at hand always requires present-mindedness, and present-mindedness requires inner quiet.

This inner quiet is the theme of our reading from 1 Kings. Elijah found God, not in the drama of wind, earthquake, and fire, but in silence. There are interestingly different translations of the key phrase. In the version we read this morning, the fire is followed by "the sound of sheer silence," while the

King James Version offers the translation which has become proverbial in English, namely, "a still, small voice."

"A still, small voice," "the sound of silence," are both evocative expressions. The Hebrew phrase here is quite ambiguous and allows of either translation. I wonder: can the two interpretations be taken together? Could it be that the voice of God is not so much a voice heard within the silence, but rather IS the silence itself?

You know, we are always in the presence of silence, if we choose to direct our conscious attention to it. Light is visible only because it shines in what otherwise would be dark and empty space. So too we hear a sound only within a silence that embraces and contains it. You cannot hear a normal human conversation over the sound of a jackhammer. And that jackhammer itself would be inaudible against an even more ear-splitting racket. Any sound is audible only against a backdrop that is relatively quiet.

Whenever we hear a sound, we are also in the presence of that implied silence. Indeed, the silence we encounter in the deep woods is often oddly intensified by the call of a bird or the snapping of a twig. In that situation we quite spontaneously "hear" the silence that contains the sound.

Being ever in the presence of silence, we are also always able, if we choose, to hear the voice of God. Listen!

I must confess that I personally live day to day with an ongoing level of inner chatter. I do have and savor moments of relative quiet, and I pray you do too. Still it is always a relative quiet. Inner quiet, I've noticed, is easier to achieve in a setting of outer silence and serenity. This is why hikes in the mountains and walks along the beach can be so restorative. But these are not necessary. The true test of serenity is whether you rest in inner silence even in the midst of noise and confusion. We can learn little by little to still the inner chatter in all situations.

How, then, to quiet the inner voices? I find I can yell at the worst of my "inner demons" to shut up. This often works, but it has a major drawback. Like the spring peepers, they start up again after a brief pause. Alternately, I can reason with some of the inner voices. For instance, by taking an objective view of what might go wrong in a given situation, and by

taking reasonable precautions for the most likely contingencies, I can reassure my "inner worrier."

There is, however, an even gentler way to still much of the inner chatter. I can choose to listen to the implied silence in which the voice of God is always present. I find that when I can remain attentive to the ever-present Divine Silence, the chatter subsides on its own. This attentiveness is a form of prayer, and within that prayer it is as though Jesus bids our inner demons to be still, sternly if need be, but ever more gently, I believe, as we gradually outgrow our obsessions.

May the inner chatter cease! And may we all become ever more richly alive to the Divine Silence. Amen.

Prayer

The noise
that prevents us hearing
the voice of God
is not,
is truly not,
the clamor of man,
the racket of cities,
still less
the stirring of the wind
or the whispering of water.

The noise
that completely smothers
the voice of God
is the inner uproar
of outraged self-esteem,
of awakening suspicion,
of unsleeping ambition.

- Dom Helder Camara,
A Thousand Reasons for Living

Daily Meditations

Monday, October 25

"O Lord, in view of all your righteous acts, let your anger and wrath, we pray, turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy mountain. *Daniel 9:16a*

For the Lord alone is righteous, since He alone is Righteousness; and therefore in the measure that a person receives good from the Lord, that is, in the measure that what composes the Lord's essential nature resides with him, he is righteous and has been justified. *Arcana Coelestia n. 9263.2*

Tuesday, October 26

"Because of our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors, Jerusalem and your people have become a disgrace among all our neighbors. *Daniel 9:16b*

Evil is of the love of self and of the love of the world. The evil of the love of self disjoins the man not only from the Lord, but also from heaven; for he loves no one but himself, others only so far as he regards them in himself, or so far as they make one with him.

Arcana Coelestia n. 4997.2

Wednesday, October 27

"Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his supplication, and for your own sake, Lord, let your face shine upon your desolated sanctuary. *Daniel 9:17*

Supplication need not be made to the Lord for forgiveness of sins, for the following reasons: First, because sins are not abolished, but removed; and they are removed so far as man continues to refrain from them and enters upon a new life; for there are innumerable lusts inherent, coiled up as it were, in every evil, and they cannot be put away instantly, but only gradually, as man permits himself to be reformed and regenerated. *True Christian Religion n. 539*

Thursday, October 28

"Incline your ear, O my God, and hear. Open your eyes and look at our desolation and the city that bears your name. *Daniel 9:18a*

According to God's laws, he can forgive us our sins only to the extent that we follow our laws and stop doing them. God cannot regenerate us spiritually beyond the point to which we, following our laws, have regenerated ourselves in an earthly way. God makes an unceasing effort to regenerate us and save us, but he cannot do it unless we prepare ourselves as a vessel, leveling a pathway for God. *True Christian Religion n.73*

Friday, October 29

"We do not present our supplication before you on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of your great mercies. *Daniel 9:b*

Divine mercy is a pure mercy toward the whole human race with the intent of saving it, and it is constant toward every individual, never withdrawing from anyone. *Heaven and Hell n. 522*

Saturday, October 30

"O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, listen and act and do not delay! For your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people bear your name!"

Daniel 9:19

Some believe that when sins have been remitted they are removed. Those are in this error who believe that sins are remitted to them by the sacrament of the Supper, although they have not removed them from themselves by repentance. They believe in mercy apart from means and in instant salvation. Yet when this is reversed it becomes a truth, namely, that when sins have been removed they have also been remitted; for repentance precedes remission, and without repentance there is no remission.

Divine Providence n. 280

A Pathway for Our Steps

The Rev. Kathy Speas

Psalm 85:8-13

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.
Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.
Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.
The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.
Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.

Luke 11:1-13

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. "So I say to you, 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 a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Oh, great. A biblical text that is actually comprehensible, and it's Jesus singing "When You

Wish Upon A Star." Telling them just to visualize the reality they want, and it will manifest.

31 OCT

Have you received all you've asked for? Found all you've ever sought? Gotten to open doors number one, two, and three just by knocking?

But can any of us say that after trying to know God, trying to pray and meditate, trying to connect with sacredness, that absolutely nothing in our inner or outer lives has changed at all?

It's not news that we seek one thing, but God all too often gives us something else, often something that doesn't seem like the Good News at all. One country music number (and country music songs are really just modern-day psalms) points out that "God's Greatest Gifts Are Unanswered Prayers." Thank God I'm not stuck with a reality I visualized when I was twenty.

Prayer doesn't necessarily work the way we'd like it to, but it sure is powerful. This story from Luke comes when Jesus has healed physical and mental illness, brought a couple of dead people back to life, and stopped a big storm with His command. But what do the disciples want? "Teach us to pray," they beg. Not "teach us how to heal, how to raise the dead," but "teach us to pray." And we look eagerly to this passage for just that direction. Teach us to pray, Lord. Teach us to participate meaningfully and deliberately in the mystery. Teach us to dance in your dream.

Jesus says God will give us what we ask for, but our lives tell us that we don't get what we want. We don't want what we need. And God only knows what we're going to get. Books and tapes and seminars and workshops and classes about prayer proliferate as modern life gets scarier and scarier and feels more and more out of control—certainly out of our own control, and seemingly out of the control of a benevolent, healing, merciful God of peace. Love and hard work don't seem to be doing it anymore. Prayer seems more urgent than ever.

Well, I'm up here in a pulpit, so I guess you're all looking to me to tell you how to pray—or to pray with some enlightened, now-fully-ordained power that you don't have. Or to at least offer up some wisdom that will make the snakes and scorpions OK.

Well, forget it. I got ordained, but I didn't get any special prayer mojo. I could explain all I learned in seminary about different theories of prayer, and

maybe bore you into a prayerful state. I don't have a special prayer technique. I just have this calling to persist at prayer like the guy bugging his friend for bread. I'm a hospice chaplain. I bug God like a pesky kid. I may not pray well, but I sure pray often—and in many, many different ways.

So I'm not going to explain prayer, because that would take away its mystery. And if I could tell everyone how to pray so that Jesus' promise did ring true in our lives and it was OK when it didn't, that would take the power of God's dream out of the whole equation. Let me just share some of my experiences—some of the things I see.

1. Prayer appears in infinitely different forms. One of my most profound prayer times was reading Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* with a man in his 80s who had loved those poems as a child. A day or two before his death, we read the poem in which the child who sails his boats in the river that "flows along forever with trees on either hand" realizes that "other little children will bring my boats ashore." We remembered the simple joy of going up in a swing, up in the air so blue. There's a poem, "My Bed is a Boat," in which the child narrator says, "At night I go on board and say/good night to all my friends in shore;/I shut my eyes and sail away,/and see and hear no more." As we sat, musing together about when he might die—Today? Tomorrow? Before the solstice? After the solstice?—we saw a leaf fall off a tree, the first falling leaf of the year. The silence we shared, that was a profound prayer that I almost didn't recognize. It was a moment of openness, of surrender.

2. God is present at the depths of our despair. I visit with the husband of a patient who is debilitated with Alzheimer's. Nice Methodist fellow from Texas. He lives upstairs in the nursing home, she lives downstairs on the locked dementia unit, and he visits her at night to tuck her in and say their prayers together. We had talked about God, we had prayed, but one day I happened to visit him just after he had fallen and begun to decline, and he was unable to go downstairs and check on his wife. And he was really scared—and sad beyond words. And he took my hands, and poured forth a prayer that God would make the weekend staff take better care of his wife, and that God would make him strong enough to get downstairs again, and he thanked God for their life and for her, and I thanked God for the both of them,

and he asked God to give her comfort, and I asked God to bless them and be fully present, and we both emptied it all out. And he got some comfort, praise be to God! And he felt some peace, praise the Lord! I realized, you can rationalize in your mind, you can make your body act any way you want, but you can't fool your heart. You can't fool your heart, and this is where prayer starts.

3. Prayer is relational. I think prayer is such a comfort because it reminds us that we are not alone. Jesus gives us these beautiful relational images of a Father and child, friends, people we spend time with even when we aren't asking for anything. Swedenborg notes that the Lord's Prayer unites Heaven and Earth, line by line – The Hallowed Name, Thy Kingdom Come, give us this day our daily bread, let go of sins, keep us from evil – heaven to hell in five lines. Steadfast love and faithfulness. Righteousness and peace. The Lord's gift and the yield of our literal and spiritual ground. A path for our steps.

So there are some images of how we pray, what we pray, when we pray, who prays and who listens. But why do we pray? Someone told me a story, secondhand (the best kind of story, really), of a couple whose four- or five-year-old desperately wanted to go into the room of their newborn and talk with the baby. They could not imagine what for, but let the kid go into the baby's room. The baby monitor was on. They heard the kid say to the baby, "You gotta tell me what God looks like. I forgot."

We're trying to remember the face of God. So, let us...

Sing our prayers
Dance our prayers
Dream our prayers
Work our prayers
Cry out our prayers
Recite our prayers
Whisper our prayers
Imagine our prayers
Paint our prayers
Moan and groan our prayers
Hope our prayers
Believe our prayers
Live our prayers

May each one of us remember what God looks like. And as we remember, may we share the beauty of God's face with the world. Amen.

Monday, November 1

Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." *Exodus 3: 3-4*

When the Lord was in the world, and united the human essence to the Divine essence, He received the fire of this love in His Human, and united it to the truth there when He made Himself the law Divine.

Arcana Coelestia n. 6834

Tuesday, November 2

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings. *Exodus 3:7*

When they who are in good are immersed in falsities, they come into anguish and anxieties, and are tormented; for they love truths and abhor falsities, and constantly think about salvation, and about their unhappiness if falsities should rule with them.

Arcana Coelestia (Potts) n. 6853

Wednesday, November 3

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

Exodus 3:11

Moreover, memory-knowledges are full of the fallacies of the senses, which cannot be dispelled by those who are in mere knowledges from doctrine, and not in the perception of truth from good; mainly because the light of the world predominates with them.

Arcana Coelestia n. 6865.2

Thursday, November 4

He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." *Exodus 3:12*

They who are in the light of heaven are in enlightenment from the Lord; and before confirmations, by looking into the memory-knowledges which are beneath and are there arranged in order, they discern whether it is a truth that may be confirmed or not.

Arcana Coelestia n. 6865.3

Friday, November 5

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" *Exodus 3:13*

At this day if Jehovah were to appear in the church as a man, men would take offence, and would think that He could not possibly be the Creator and Lord of the universe, because he was seen as a man; and moreover they would not have any other idea of Him than as of a common man. *Arcana Coelestia n. 6876.3*

Saturday, November 6

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

Exodus 3:14-15

It appears to man as if the Divine truth were not such that anything can come forth by means of it; for it is believed that it is like a voice, which being uttered with the lips, is dissipated. But it is altogether otherwise; the Divine truth proceeding from the Lord is the veriest reality, and such a reality that all things have come forth from it, and all things subsist from it; for whatever proceeds from the Lord is the veriest reality in the universe. *Arcana Coelestia n. 6880*

NOV 7 Thank-You Notes

The Rev. Dr. George Dole

Psalm 107

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.
Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble
and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.
Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town;
hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress;
he led them by a straight way, until they reached an inhabited town.
Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.
For he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things.
Some sat in darkness and in gloom, prisoners in misery and in irons,
for they had rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the counsel of the Most High.
Their hearts were bowed down with hard labor; they fell down, with no one to help.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress;
he brought them out of darkness and gloom, and broke their bonds asunder.
Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.
For he shatters the doors of bronze, and cuts in two the bars of iron.

Luke 6:32-36

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Secrets of Heaven 5957

You see, everything that flows from the Lord through our inner being into our outer or earthly being . . . is given to us freely. Yes, the Lord calls for humility, worship, gratitude and more from us, and these seem to be repayments, which would mean that the gifts are not free. The Lord is not calling for these things for his own sake, however, because the divine One gets no glory from our humility, worship, and thanksgiving. It is inconceivable that there should be any self-centeredness in the divine One that would cause anything like this for selfish reasons. No, this is for our sakes. That is, when we are feeling humble we are open to what is good from the Lord because we are then detached from the self-centeredness and its evils that stand in the way. So the Lord wants us to feel humble for our own sakes, because when we are in this state the Lord can flow in with what is truly heavenly. The same holds true for worship and thanksgiving.

But love your enemies, do good, and lend expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is gracious to the ungrateful and the wicked. (Luke 6:35)

The last couple of sermons have dealt with the problems of the reward-punishment mentality both here and in the hereafter, and this verse from Luke obviously touches on the same issue. At first sight, it seems obvious that a score-keeping mentality has ruinous effects on truly human relationships. If we do nothing for others without calculating what we have a right to expect in return, if all we can think of when we are with a friend—or a spouse—is how much each owes the other, what we have to do to balance the books, what claims we have on each other, there is little room for spontaneous affection, for warmth, good humor, and contentment. In the terms of our third reading, there are formidable obstacles blocking the inflow of any truly heavenly affections and thoughts.

That is not the whole story, though, not at all. Genuine gratitude is a heavenly affection. It comes from a warm heart and wants to warm the heart that receives it. One of the recurrent themes in advice columns is the hurt occasioned by what appears to be ingratitude. "I've sent them presents year after year

and have never received a thank-you note." And on the other hand, "I have a terrible time writing thank-you notes." These would seem to be two sides of the same coin—but what is the coin?

The coin, I would suggest, is the difficulty we have in understanding and describing our feelings. On the receiving side, why does someone's silence bother me? Does it make me feel ignored? Do I feel that I am being deprived of something I am owed? If I could have been there and had seen the recipient's face light up, would I still have needed some verbal expression of gratitude? Basically, how freely was the gift given?

On the other side of the coin, faced with a blank piece of paper, it can be genuinely hard to sort through the subtleties of our feelings and find words to convey them. We should probably start with seeing the tag on the gift, calling to mind more or less vividly the person of the giver and, necessarily, our feelings about that individual. Then there is the discovery of the gift itself and our impressions of its appropriateness and usefulness. Most gifts show an understanding of our needs and taste, and every once in a while we receive something that says loud and clear, "This person really understands me." How do we put this on paper? The English language actually has a rich vocabulary for the identification and expression of feelings, but most of us are not all that good at using it.

All of this leaves a tremendous amount of room for reading between the lines. Two maxims may serve to highlight this. One says that "Spiteful words can hurt your feelings but silence breaks your heart." The other says, "Do not speak unless you can improve the silence." Both, in a way, are saying the same thing, namely that silence is a form of communication. Both words and silence can be appropriate or inappropriate, understood or misunderstood. Both the sender and the receiver bear responsibilities for mutual understanding.

All this is on the horizontal level, so to speak—about our dealings with each other. How does this relate to the vertical dimension, to our dealings with the Lord? Here there may be a surprise in store from *Heaven and Hell* (§9). After noting that angels fully believe that everything good and true comes from the Lord, it says,

Silence is a form of communication. Both words and silence can be appropriate or inappropriate, understood or misunderstood.

"Because angels believe this, they decline any thanks offered them for the good they do. In fact, they feel hurt and withdraw if anyone gives them credit for anything good. It bewilders them to discover that people can believe they are wise on their own or do good on their own."

This may seem impossibly remote from ordinary human experience, but actually it is not. It is the same spirit that prompts us to say, "I'm glad I could"—meaning glad to have been in the right place at the right time, to have had the necessary resources, to have been shown the opportunity—glad for all the "circumstances beyond our control" that made the gift possible.

There is a traditional prayer of thanksgiving that says it very well. It addresses the Lord with thanks

"... for all the blessings of this life, for the influence of thy Holy Spirit, for the ministry of thy Word, and for all the dispensations of thy Providence whereby we are called to repentance, obedience, and the life eternal."

We are participants in a scene immensely greater than our individual selves, in a physical world, in a civic world, in a mental world, in a cultural and aesthetic world, and above all in a spiritual world apart from which we make no sense whatever, apart from which we have no meaning. The image comes to mind of an astronaut, self-sufficient in a space suit, adrift in space, with a befogged facemask and a dead microphone. Nothing that individual does or says makes the slightest difference. Nothing matters.

No, the meaning of what we do and say depends entirely on our embeddedness in that larger scene, the whole arena of the dispensations of the Lord's providence. One of the recent best sellers is a book entitled *The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins. He asks how anyone can believe in a God who is actually in control of every atom in the universe, and at first sight this is a staggering concept. Yet as a scientist, he presumably believes that every one of those atoms is subject to one set of laws, the laws of physics. This should surely raise the question, "Are those laws somehow self-enforcing?" The "laws" of physics are commonly thought to be our descriptions of the way matter behaves, and as we learn more, we keep

revising them. How do they make things happen? Does a description exist before the thing it describes does?

I presume we would agree that the description does not cause the event, and that the image is of “real laws” that are independent of our descriptions. This still does not answer the critical question, “How do those ‘real laws’ work?” What energy do they have? What force do they exert?

The blunt answer that everything is caused by God does not respond very well to Dawkins’ challenge for the simple reason that there are so many inadequate concepts of God. We delude ourselves if we think we are talking about a God who infinitely exceeds our capacity for understanding. All we can honestly speak of is the need for an understanding of God that is adequate to our understanding of the universe. That was the central point of a book that was popular in my seminary days and that is still in print, J. B. Phillips’ *Your God Is Too Small*. In the words of one review, “In a world where our experience of life has grown in myriad directions, and our mental horizons have been expanded to the point of bewilderment by world events and scientific discoveries, our ideas of God have remained largely static.”

Let us take a minute, then, to start from Dawkins’ end, with the laws that “govern” all the most minute details of the universe, and face the fact that there can be no governing without a governor. Let us acknowledge the fact that when we conceive of this governor as human, we can scarcely avoid making God in our own image. But then let us take seriously the biblical statement that we are created “in the image and likeness of God,” that flawed as we may be, this is still the best image we may be able to come up with. And finally, let us take seriously the extraordinary statement in *Divine Providence* 192 that “By his divine providence the Lord gathers the affections of the whole human race into a single form, which is a human form.”

This gives us a glimpse of a God who is present in the least details of our own being, in every detail of everything we feel and think and do. It yields a picture of us as individual mitochondria, so to speak, in a humanity that is living its own immense individual life. Each of us is a kind of microsyllable in

an ongoing, developing definition of what it is to be human. Something like this is necessary if our image of our relationship to God is to match what we know to be the relationship of our physical bodies to the universe. Our God has tended to be too small because we want to be too big.

So there is a compelling logic to the trio of qualities called for in our third reading—humility, worship, and gratitude. As for humility, we have vastly more reason than the Psalmist to feel insignificant in comparison to the heavens (Psalm 8:3-4); and the other side of humility is awe, worship. Yet minute as we are, we have minds that can to some extent appreciate that vastness and recognize our relative insignificance, and this is indeed wonderful. Again we may turn to the Psalmist: “I will praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14); and the spirit of that praise is the spirit of gratitude—“It is good to give thanks to the Lord” (Psalm 92:1).

A closing word may be in order concerning the role of the church in all this. Dawkins’ book abounds with stories of the harm done by religious bodies. They are in a way irrelevant to his main argument, since they are precisely the kind of “anecdotal evidence” that science regularly dismisses as undisciplined and unreliable. All the same, there is no denying the fact that the brutalities of the Taliban, for example, are taken to discredit Islam and that the Christian church has at times claimed that appalling brutality was “the will of God.”

In so doing, though, the church has stopped far short of that first requirement, humility. The more it claims for itself, the less it grants to its God. Do we indeed believe that we have been granted a revelation of divine truth? Then surely that truth is far, far bigger than we are. It must dwarf our little minds, must astonish us, must inspire the awe that is the true hallmark of humility—and must press us to lead our lives in the spirit of thanksgiving, with every glimpse of deeper truth, every good deed done, helpful word spoken, accompanied by the silent thought, “Thank you, Lord. I’m glad I could.” Amen.

Divine truth is far, far bigger than we are. It must dwarf our little minds, must astonish us, must inspire awe.

Monday, November 8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. *Isaiah 6:1-2*

In order that the Lord might be continuously present with me He has unfolded to me the spiritual sense of His Word, wherein is Divine truth in its very light, and it is in this light that He is continually present. For His presence in the Word is by means of the spiritual sense and in so other way; through the light of this sense He passes into the obscurity of the literal sense, which is like what takes place when the light of the sun in daytime is passing through an interposing cloud. *True Christian Religion n. 780*

Tuesday, November 9

And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." *Isaiah 6:3*

That the sense of the letter of the Word is like a cloud, and the spiritual sense is the glory, the Lord Himself being the sun from which the light comes, and that thus the Lord is the Word, has been shown above. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, November 10

And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" *Isaiah 6:5*

"Armies" (or hosts) . . . signify truths from good fighting against the falsities from evil, and in the contrary sense falsities from evil fighting against truths from good. Such is the signification of "armies" in the Word, because "wars" in the Word, both in the histories and prophecies, signify, in the internal sense spiritual wars, . . . and such wars have relation to truths and goods opposing falsities and evils.

Apocalypse Explained n. 573.2

Thursday, November 11

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." *Isaiah 6:6-7*

"Touching" denotes communication, transfer, and reception because the interior things of man put themselves forth by means of external things, especially by the touch, and in this way communicate and transfer themselves to another, and insofar as the will of the other is in agreement and makes a one, they are received. *Arcana Coelestia n. 10130*

Friday, November 12

Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed. *Isaiah 6:10*

People do not comprehend this, however, because they love the natural world and are therefore unwilling to raise the thoughts of their intellect above it into spiritual light. And if they are unwilling to do this, they cannot help but think in terms of space, even concerning God, and to think of God in terms of space is to think of an expanse of nature.

Divine Love and Wisdom n. 9

Saturday, November 13

Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate."

Isaiah 6:11

These things are not said of the laying waste of the land, that there should be no more any cities or houses therein, and that these should be without inhabitant, and without man; but they are said of the laying waste of good and truth in the church. By cities are there signified the truths of doctrine; by inhabitant is signified the good of doctrine; by houses are signified the interior things of man's mind; and by man the spiritual affection of truth and thence wisdom.

Apocalypse Explained n. 280

NOV 14 Getting Good Reception

The Rev. Jonathan Mitchell

Psalm 19:7-14

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;

the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.

Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Matthew 10:19-20

When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

As many of you already know, The Wayfarers Chapel is a ministry of a Protestant Christian denomination known as The Swedenborgian Church, and serves as the national memorial to the eighteenth-century mystic theologian, Emanuel Swedenborg.

Swedenborg's early-nineteenth-century followers often used an odd-sounding phrase to describe themselves; they called themselves "receivers of the new doctrines." Receivers? Why would they call themselves that? I think it was because they saw their relationship to Swedenborg's teachings as something deeper, something more intimate than merely believing them to be true. They felt that in the process of taking Swedenborg's insights in, they were being transformed by them.

Swedenborg's reinterpretations of Christian teaching must have come as a great relief to thinking Europeans and Americans of that period. One of the early slogans of Swedenborg's followers reads (in Latin): "Nunc licet intrare intelligenter in arcana fidei." The usual English translation is "Now it is permitted to enter with understanding into the mysteries of faith." At a time when modern science was making so many of its early advances, Swedenborg was giving thinking people permission to seek out religious teachings that made sense to them personally. It must have been freeing as well, after so much fire and brimstone, to be told that God is never angry with anyone and never punishes anyone. And at a time when global horizons were rapidly expanding, Swedenborg offered a message that had a prophetic force which is, if anything, even more needed today: all are welcomed into heaven who have lived according to the best of what their own religion tradition taught them.

The word "receiver" comes from Swedenborg's writings themselves, where he insists over and over again that we are not life, but receptacles of life. In recent sermons I have talked about claiming our own freedom, and I have emphasized our ability to change for the better, given enough commitment and persistence on our part. I stand by that, of course. But it is not the whole story, and today I am focusing on the other side of that coin. For whatever else we are, we are receivers. Most of what is truly valuable in life we have received. Life itself came to us as a gift. All the love that comes our way is a gift. God's grace, when it comes, is always a free gift. The question before us today is this: How can we get good reception?

In today's world of wireless communication, we have a metaphor for good reception which didn't exist in Swedenborg's time. We don't usually think about it, but every moment of every day signals from radio stations, TV stations, cell phone transmissions, and indeed wireless transmissions of many kinds, are passing through our bodies. The dial on a radio is designed (ideally) to tune in just one radio signal to the exclusion of all the other stations available. It allows you to choose what to tune into.

Swedenborg would say that something analogous to this is true at the spiritual level. We typically think of ourselves as separate and independent individuals, but Swedenborg and many other mystical teachers would insist that this is largely an illusion, brought on by the nature of our bodies. At the bodily level of our existence, it is natural for us to think of ourselves as ending at our skins. That makes for a very simple way to distinguish self from non-self at the physical level. But then we try to extend this thinking to the

spiritual level. We tend to think of our thoughts and feelings as occurring “in our heads”; we think they are exclusively our own. In fact, Swedenborg would say, every thought and every feeling puts us into communion with all those spirits who are thinking the same thought and feeling the same feeling. Thoughts and feelings are always shared. It is as if the spiritual world, with all its heavens and hells, were made up of so many radio stations broadcasting all at once. Their signals are passing through us all the time. But at any one moment we are tuned into one (or maybe a few) of these heaven or hell signals, according to what thoughts and feelings we are currently opening ourselves up to receive.

It strikes me that if this is so, I want to try to tune out the stations called “anxiety,” “anger,” “resentment,” “discouragement,” etc. and tune into the stations called “peace,” “trust,” “joy,” “compassion,” and “hope.” We are not life, we are not any of these spiritual states, but rather receivers of them. Let us try to get good reception of the good stations.

If we are receptacles of life, if ultimately it is the Divine Life which flows into us and keeps us alive, where and how does that inflow happen? I don’t see how that could happen anywhere other than in the now moment.

What is the mindset that helps me to enter more deeply into the now-moment? As I have worked on this sermon, it has become clear to me that what I am talking about today could also be called “prayerfulness.”

One of the simplest ways to define prayer is “having a conversation with God.” And one of the more common forms of this conversation is for us to ask a question and to listen for the answer. There have been two particular times during my life where I experienced this kind of prayer in a particularly fruitful way.

The seminary I attended, the former Swedenborg School of Religion in Newton, Massachusetts, was located in an old brick mansion with two sun rooms; one was our classroom and the other was our chapel. That chapel was a beautiful, peaceful, and, for me, spiritually powerful place. Towards the end of my time at SSR I got into the habit of praying in the chapel whenever I needed to choose a topic for a paper, a presentation, or a worship experience. I would sit down, relax my body, mentally follow several long, deep breaths, and clear my mind for a moment. Then I would hold up to consciousness possible topics, considering one and then another and then another, going back and forth among them all for as long as it took. That, so to speak, was asking the question. As I held up the various possibilities to

the light of consciousness, I would allow myself to feel the attraction that each one had for me. It could take a longer or a shorter time, but eventually, I would “know” which one I was being called to pursue. That, so to speak, was the answer.

Sometimes it is helpful to pray in that intentional kind of way, to set aside all other activities and to sit alone in prayer. But prayerfulness is not limited to that form. It can also enter into your ongoing interactions with others.

At another, earlier point in my life, I was teaching Freshman Composition. That course was set up so that students wrote a paper every two weeks. The first week they would write the first draft and come in for an individual conference to review it. I think what my students typically did was choose a topic, write whatever came into their minds until they had the requisite number of words, and then stop.

The task at hand at the conference was to organize this material into a coherent, effective essay. I was always keenly aware that it would not be truly helpful for me to share how I would write that essay—better that I spur them on to seeing for themselves how to organize and express their thoughts. I often felt overwhelmed and out of my depth as I asked myself, “What on earth can I possibly say that would be helpful?” In that situation I would give up trying to figure anything out and just let my mind go blank. When I had done this often enough, I came to trust that the helpful thing to say (or ask) would come of itself. Similar moments often arose when it came time to make written comments on the final papers. I learned to let my mind go blank and wait patiently.

Prayerfulness of this sort is an illustration of the “good reception” that we are talking about today. In it, we pose a question, clear the mind, and wait for what comes in. I commend this practice of prayerfulness to all of you. This first kind I mentioned, where you set aside a quiet time, can be helpful when there is an important decision to be made. But I particularly commend to you the second kind, where even in the midst of interpersonal interaction you take a moment or two to clear the mind and wait until you “receive” the useful thing to say. If it would seem awkward to have a moment of unexplained silence, simply tell those around you that you need a moment to think. Or if you are brave, tell them you need a moment to pray!

I believe we are at our best when we remember that we are not life, but receivers of life—when we acknowledge that we are not in charge, and humbly open ourselves up to the guidance of a much greater and wiser being. I pray for all of us in the week to come that we may get good reception.

Daily Meditations

Monday, November 15

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." *Jeremiah 1:4-5*

Man is born for heaven; although he does not enter heaven unless he becomes spiritual, and he can become spiritual only by means of regeneration.

True Christian Religion n. 574

Tuesday, November 16

Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you." *Jeremiah 1:6&7*

[Prayer offered by the Lord] was nothing else than internal speech with the Divine, and at the same time revelation. *Arcana Coelestia 2535*

Wednesday, November 17

"Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth." *Jeremiah 1:8*

Divine spiritual goods are those which are of love and charity; but Divine spiritual truths are those which are of the faith thence. One who teaches the former, teaches also the latter; for the latter are from the former and concerning them. That in the internal sense "to be sent" is to proceed and to teach.

Arcana Coelestia n. 4710

Thursday, November 18

"See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." *Jeremiah 1:10*

The reason why "destroying" means removing is that those governed by goodness and truth never destroy those ruled by evil and falsity, but merely move them away. This they do because good, not evil, governs their actions, and good comes from the Lord, who never destroys anyone. *Arcana Coelestia n. 9320*

Friday, November 19

The word of the Lord came to me a second time, saying, "What do you see?" And I said, "I see a boiling pot, tilted away from the north." Then the Lord said to me: "Out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land." *Jeremiah 1:13-14*

This treats of the destruction of the church; the "north" signifies falsity from which is evil; "to come and set every man his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem" is to destroy truths introductory to the church by means of falsities; "and against all the walls" means to destroy all protecting truths.

Apocalypse Explained n. 208.9

Saturday, November 20

And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you. *Jeremiah 1:18-19*

A city signifies doctrine, because "land," and in particular "the land of Canaan," signifies the church in the aggregate, and thence by the inheritances into which the land of Canaan was divided, are signified the various things of the church, and, by the cities in them, doctrinals. *Apocalypse Revealed n. 194.2*

Praying into the Presence of God

The Rev. Sarah Buteux

Luke 11:1-13

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. "So I say to you, 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 a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, my Rock and my Redeemer.

That prayer I just said, about my words and our meditations being acceptable to God, may sound like a mere formality since I use it almost every Sunday, but I want you to know that I don't pray that prayer lightly.

In fact, I cling to that prayer when I'm up here, because I know that getting the two to line up—that is, getting the words coming from my mouth and the meditations going on in all of our hearts focused on the same thing at the same time in a way that is pleasing to God—isn't easy. It isn't something that happens automatically.

It takes a great deal of effort—effort on your part to really listen to what I'm saying, effort on my part to say something worth listening to, and effort on the part of the Spirit to help us all weave something of worth from the words spoken in this place. **21** NOV

I mean, I could be saying some really good stuff from the pulpit, but if you're composing a list of the things you need to pick up at Trader Joe's on the way home, my words aren't going to do you all that much good.

Likewise, if I'm up here preaching about forgiveness, knowing full well that it will be a cold day in hell before I even consider making up with someone who did me wrong, my hypocrisy is going to taint everything I'm trying to say. And ultimately, if God's Spirit isn't pleased by what happens here, then this is all pointless anyway. All we're really doing then is going through the motions, and that's just sad.

But if we're all in this together—if the words are connecting and your hearts are warming and the Spirit is moving—I think you know as well as I do just how amazing that is. It doesn't happen every Sunday for every person, but when it does happen, it's like there is this electric current running through all of us, connecting us as one body to God... and it's awesome.

Well, Jesus was able to create this level of connection, he was able to generate that current, and he was able to do it on a regular basis. People paid attention when Jesus spoke to them, they were healed when he touched them, and they were moved when he prayed for them, because when they were with him they felt—truly, viscerally felt—the presence of a loving God. And having seen this, the disciples wanted in on it.

"Teach us to pray," they asked, and not because they never had—as devout Galileans, they would have prayed all the time—but because they saw something in Jesus when he prayed that moved them and made them want more. "Teach us to pray the way you do so that we can feel and connect and lose ourselves in God the way you do."

So Jesus did. He gave his disciples a prayer with the potential to help them connect to God and one another in the most powerful way imaginable, and his disciples paid attention—so much so that they took that prayer word for word and passed it down and passed it on and made it so important that, ironically, there is perhaps no other prayer in our lexicon that is at once so readily familiar and so easy to recite without any attention at all.

Honestly, I've seen people recite their telephone numbers with more conscious awareness and genuine emotion than most of us muster when we say the Lord's Prayer. In fact, all too often, if we're paying any attention at all, it's because we're unsure whether the rest of the folk around us will be asking forgiveness for their "debts" or for their "trespasses," and nobody wants to be the one who messes that up. Am I right?

But let me tell you, if you stop long enough to really think about the words as you're saying them, it's truly amazing how they open up and begin to mean more than you ever thought possible. In fact, this prayer is so incredibly radical that if the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts ever were to fully line up when we said it, the world truly would be changed. God's kingdom would come. God's will would be done, here on earth as it is in heaven.

And you may think that's what you want, but wait till I tell you what I think Jesus really meant when he uttered that familiar phrase, because once you see what his vision of heaven on earth entails you might not be so sure. We'll get to that. But first, let us begin at the beginning, with the very first word.

"Father"—"Our Father," if you're reading this prayer in Matthew rather than Luke. Either way, notice that Jesus does not tell us to address God as Creator, King, or Lord in this prayer, but rather invites us to approach God as a loving parent.

In fact, even the word "Father" is somewhat misleading because it sounds so formal. The word "Abba" really should be read as "Daddy" or "Papa." "Abba" was the word a very small child would use to address her father.

Now before I go any further, just sit with that idea for a moment. Understand that God, the creator of the universe, the most powerful being in all existence, loves you the way a good father loves his littlest child and likewise desires that you would love him back with all the innocence and trust of a little child.

Jesus wants you to think of God as a good father who is there to protect you, hold you, comfort you—and if the idea of a good father is too foreign for you, then let the father image go and find one that makes sense. Imagine a person you did feel safe with as a child, the person you were most likely to run to when you fell down and got hurt or woke up scared in the middle of the night.

God wants to be there for you in that same way, to hold you and comfort your spirit. God wants to be the presence in your life that reassures you, in spite of all your hurts and fears, your worries and your wounds,

that it's all going to be okay because you are safe and precious and loved beyond measure.

You are God's own child. God loves you the way a new mother loves her new baby—and let me tell you, that is one intense kind of love.

So do you get it? Can you feel it? Good, because there is something else you need to know. You may be God's precious child, but you are not an only child.

God loves me that way too. In fact, God loves us all. Think about it. If Jesus is giving us all this same prayer to pray, then that means that we are all little children in the eyes of God and therefore all little brothers and little sisters of one another, with all the love and vulnerability and responsibility that the term "little brother" or "little sister" implies.

So when we pray and acknowledge our Papa's name as holy and then pray for his kingdom to come, what we are really praying for is a world where we will all treat one another as family.

We're praying for a world without boundaries, want, or war; a world where people look across borders of race, class, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and country, and see siblings rather than foreigners, little brothers rather than refugees, little sisters rather than enemies or immigrants, aliens, or outsiders.

When we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray with attention, we come to realize not just a connection to God our Father but how desperately God our Father wants us to feel connected to one another. God wants us to love and care for one another the way a good parent wants his or her children to love and care for each other. And it pains God when we do not, just as it pains a mother when her children fight.

God wants us to know that we're all kin, that we're all in this together, which is why we pray for "our daily bread" rather than "my daily bread." "Our," not "my." And friends, there's a big difference between those two little words.

I used to think, and I know I've said this often in sermons, that God designed the world in such a way that there is always enough bread to go around as long as you're willing to share your bread with those in need. But the more I think about it, the more I realize that this concept of "our daily bread" is even more radical. What Jesus is talking about here goes far beyond the concept of sharing.

See if you can follow me, because this is pretty wild. I think what Jesus is saying is that in God's kingdom there is no "my daily bread"—no bread for the haves to share with the have nots—because the

bread in God's kingdom already belongs to everyone already.

It's just like when you buy a loaf of bread and bring it home to your family. You don't think of yourself as sharing that bread with your children every time they go into the kitchen to make a sandwich. Once it enters your kitchen, it's just the family's bread.

Well, it's the same in the kingdom of God. In God's kingdom there is no "my" or "mine" when it comes to anything. There is only ever "ours." So this vision of a new world Jesus is laying out here is not one dependent on our generosity.

Rather, what Jesus is asking us to adopt is a whole new concept of reality, one in which everything I once thought of as mine is yours and everything you once thought of as yours is ours. And if you think that sounds crazy or even communist, hold on to your hats, because bread is only the beginning. Jesus goes on to pray: "Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." Matthew uses the word "trespasses" here but Luke prefers the economic term "indebted," and I think he means for us to take that literally as well as figuratively. In other words, I think what Jesus is actually talking about is money.

So let's read that again. "Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." We do? Since when?

I know we ask God to forgive us our wrongs as we forgive those who have wronged us (and I always thought that was hard enough), but I think what Jesus is saying in Luke's gospel is that we are also to forgive debts in the financial sense as well, because in the kingdom of God, where everything belongs to everyone, the concept of debt doesn't make any sense at all.

How does this play out in practical terms? Well, truth be told, it's not practical at all, but let's say you come up to me and ask if you can borrow a hundred dollars. My response as a Christian—as one who has prayed this prayer for as long as I can remember—should be "No."

No, you can't borrow a hundred dollars from me, because if I have a hundred dollars to spare then it's already yours. Take it and use it for whatever you need. There is no borrowing in the kingdom of God because there is never any debt to be repaid. In God's kingdom, my money is your money, *mi casa es su casa*, all bread is our bread.

Pretty crazy, huh? And yet I think that's what we're really praying for when we ask that God's will be done here on earth as it is in heaven. I mean, have you ever thought for a second that you'd need money once

you got up there? Of course not. There's never been an ATM outside the pearly gates, and there never will be, because there's no need. If we're praying that God's will would be done here on earth as it is in heaven, then we're praying for a world where we won't need money down here either, a world without ownership—which sounds scary until you realize it would also be a world without poverty, and that, at least to my ears, sounds lovely.

Now I know this must all seem crazy, and truth be told, I'd be the first to dismiss it all as ridiculous, only I know for a fact that it's happened before. If you don't believe me, just look in the book of Acts, chapter 2.

When the first Christians got together the Bible tells us that "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ... All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.... And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Friends, this is how the first Christians lived, and if they could do it, I'm afraid we can too. Actually, most of us already have. I'm sure you've all given money to a family member at some point, knowing full well that you'll never get that money back. Maybe it was paying your child's college tuition, helping to fix your brother's car, or forking over your allowance so Mom could buy fresh corn at the roadside stand. You knew it was as good as gone when you gave it, but you gave it anyway out of love for your family.

Well, here's the deal, the good news and the challenge we are faced with today: Thanks to the Lord's Prayer, our family just got a whole lot bigger. And if you find that hard to fathom, if you can't begin to imagine how you'll live into that reality or ever pray this prayer with integrity again, take heart.

For, dear ones, there are people praying for you, all over the world, every day. There are people reciting this prayer over and over, never for themselves alone but always for us all, in the hopes that someday we'll all get it.

So let us pray as well, in the hope that someday God's kingdom will come and all that I've just said won't sound crazy or communist at all. It will just be the way things are because heaven has finally come to earth, because our words and the meditations of our hearts have finally come together to shape our lives and our world in a way that is truly pleasing in God's sight: our Rock and our Redeemer, my Papa and yours, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Daily Meditations

Monday, November 22

But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." *Genesis 3:9-10*

It is a great truth that man is governed by the Lord by means of spirits and angels. When evil spirits begin to rule, the angels labor to avert evils and falsities, and hence arises a combat. It is this combat of which the man is rendered sensible by perception, dictate, and conscience. *Arcana Coelestia n. 227*

Tuesday, November 23

He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." *Genesis 3:11-12*

[Adam and Eve] perceived themselves to be deluded by the senses, and yet, in consequence of self-love, were desirous of ascertaining the truth of what they had heard concerning the Lord, and concerning faith in Him, before they believed it. *Arcana Coelestia n. 229*

Wednesday, November 24

Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." *Genesis 3:13*

Those who consult sensuous things and memory-knowledges [sensualia et scientifica] in matters of belief, plunge themselves not only into doubt, but also into denial, that is, into thick darkness, and consequently into all cupidities. For as they believe what is false, they also do what is false. And as they believe that what is spiritual and celestial has no existence, so they believe that there is nothing else but what is of the body and the world. *Arcana Coelestia n. 233.3*

Thursday, November 25

The Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life." *Genesis 3:14*

But after [Adam and Eve] had begun to love themselves, they set the things of sense before the internal man, and therefore those things were separated, became corporeal, and so were condemned. *Arcana Coelestia n. 243*

Friday, November 26

And to the man he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life." *Genesis 3:17*

The presence of the Lord is first possible with a man when he loves the neighbor. The Lord is in love; and so far as a man is in love, so far the Lord is present; and so far as the Lord is present, so far He speaks with the man. Man knows no otherwise than that he thinks from himself, whereas he has not a single idea, nor even the least bit of an idea, from himself. *Arcana Coelestia n. 904.3*

Saturday, November 27

Then the Lord God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever." *Genesis 3:22*

When men have become inverted orders of life, and are unwilling to live, or to become wise, except from themselves and from their Own, they reason about everything they hear respecting faith, as to whether it is so, or not; and as they do this from themselves and from their own things of sense and of memory-knowledge, it must needs lead to denial, and consequently to blasphemy and profanation, so that at length they do not scruple to mix up profane things with holy. *Arcana Coelestia n. 301*

Greater Works than These

Leah Grace Goodwin

John 14:6-14

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.”

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’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

“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. “

Four hundred years ago, Shakespeare asked, “What’s in a name?”

As it turns out, a lot.

When he asked the question, Romeo was trying to convince himself that names don’t matter—that Juliet was Juliet, no matter what family she belonged to. But in the end, even though the two “star-cross’d lovers” stayed true, even though their love survived, the two young lovers from warring families did not.

Why? Because of their names—Montague and Capulet. Because their family ties tangled them up in a web of hatred so dense that they could not, in the end, escape the bitter violence that was part of their families’ legacies.

Because, like it or not, their names were part of who they were.

Names matter, because they’re not just convenient labels. Names are supposed to tell us what’s inside the package. They express the essence of the things they’re attached to. We agonize over baby names. Media publicists sweat over book and movie titles. Ministers lie awake at night trying to come up with catchy sermon titles. Why? Because names matter.

Names matter in the Bible, too. In the creation story, one of Adam’s first tasks is to name the animals—to give them identities, to shape creation. And names in the Bible tell us a lot about those who bear them. There is a Jewish mystical tradition that the first letter in God’s holy name, the Tetragrammaton, YHWH, which we say as “Yahweh,” carries within it the power of creation, the breath of all life—that’s why the name is supposedly too holy to say. Abram’s and Sarai’s names are changed to Abraham and Sarah to signify the new relationship they have with God. Saul, the persecutor of Christians, becomes Paul, great leader of the early church. And the name “Jesus” has a significance of its own: “Jesus,” or “Yeshua,” was an extremely common name in the first century. Jesus was like “John Smith.” The name “Jesus” tells us that he was, in effect, Everyman. It is a way of telling us that in Christ God comes to everyone, to all of humanity, to all of creation—and he didn’t need a unique name to make a splash.

And names matter in church, too. We use God’s name, in lots of forms, all the time. Our songs and hymns are full of God’s names: Lord, Almighty God, Christ, Redeemer, Counselor, Savior, Teacher, Warrior, Lover, Friend. But why do we do it? Is it because we’re hoping God will listen if we call him by the right name? Are we trying to pull off a magic trick? Do we hope we can pull a rabbit out of a hat by flinging his name around?

No. We call on God, call him by so many names, not as a Christian version of Abracadabra, but to remind ourselves of who God is. We speak God’s names in the hope that we will learn something just by speaking it—longing to take on some of God’s qualities as our own. Because, really, what else do we long for than to be close to God, to be like God?

Which brings us to this morning’s reading. It’s heady stuff—so heady, in fact, that if Jesus hadn’t been the one to say it, it would sound like blasphemy. Here are verses 12-14 again: “Very truly, I tell you, the one

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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.” (14:12-14)

That’s one of those verses that sometimes you forget is in the Bible. Greater works than Jesus? Greater works than God himself?

Yes. Yes, indeed.

Let’s back up a little and get some context. This morning’s passage comes when Jesus is saying goodbye to the disciples. He’s preparing them for the coming of the Holy Spirit after his death and resurrection. He’s readying them for a sea change in how they perceive him.

So who will do Jesus’ work—and even greater deeds than he performed—from now on?

He tells us in verse 12: “The one who believes in me.” But what does it mean to believe in Jesus?

Belief is more than mental acceptance. Belief has its root in love, in desire. Belief is about commitment. If we don’t believe in something, we don’t value it. It’s not relevant to us.

We don’t waste our precious time on something we don’t believe in. But the things and people we do believe in—well, that’s a different story. Our families, our communities, our country—these are all things we believe in, things we commit to. And the key here is that they’re things we act on. Because we love these things, because we care about them, we’re willing to DO things for them. Belief is not just an intellectual exercise. To believe is to love, and to love is to act. The question isn’t so much “What do you believe?” as “What difference does it make that you believe?”

So when we believe in something, we act, for better or worse, because we care. And actions have consequences. Things happen when we act.

Jesus knew that. God loved us—still loves us, has always loved us, will always love us—so fiercely that he came to us in our own form, so that we could draw closer to him and befriend him (or hate him), so that at least a few of us mortals, 2,000 years ago, could walk next to him, hear his words, watch his daily life

and his ministry, witness the miracles he performed, watch him die—and then see that even death could not conquer him. God loves us so fiercely that he came to us to save us, to make us whole, to suffer and die for us, to show us what love in its purest form really is—which is, ultimately, being willing to give everything up. This is what’s at stake when we believe in Jesus. It means that, as disciples, we express our love for God to the rest of the world by showing creation the love God shows to us.

Believing in Jesus Christ is a lot more than signing on the dotted line. It means so much more than being able to say, “I’m a Christian, I’m part of the club.” Believing in Jesus means believing in his name—in his essence. It means loving and wanting and working to express what Christ stands for: God’s steadfast love for creation. God gives us the power to

love, to believe, to care about things. That ability in itself is a sign of God’s presence with us. If God did not love us, we could not love. Showing love is how we accept God. It’s how we accept Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior. This is how we do God’s work.

So if we believe, if we care about God’s love and want to bring it to being in this world, how do we do it? Jesus tells us: “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” We have to ask in Christ’s name, so that he can work through us. But what does that mean?

It doesn’t mean conjuring up God’s presence to make magic happen or to do our bidding. No—it means, as Paul put it, “having the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.” Asking in Christ’s name means thinking and feeling, as best we can, like Jesus. It means working as his agents in the world. It means making Christ’s life—all the way to the cross and beyond—our model. Christ’s life is not a pie-in-the-sky paragon study. It’s a roadmap for our own relationship with God.

It’s different for us, of course. We’re not God, and Jesus was. But we’re not separated from God, either. He’s with us, within us, giving us life, giving us the power and courage to act on what we care about and believe in. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dwell within us, closer than the boundaries of space and time and our human imaginations let us understand. This is what Jesus is telling us when he says, “I am in the

Believing in Jesus Christ means more than being able to say, “I’m Christian; I’m part of the club.” It means loving and working to express what Christ stands for: God’s supreme love for all of his creation.

Father, and the Father in me... I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son." We are, all of us, sons and daughters of God. Jesus' work—his miracles, his teachings, his love for the people no one else would love, his dying, his rising—all that work glorified God. Two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ's work opened up people's hearts to God's presence, reality, and power. It does the same for us today. Our belief—the work and action that springs from our desire to be vessels, conduits of God—glorifies God.

But how, even if we believe, even if we ask in Christ's name, can we do greater works than Jesus Christ?

Well, he didn't have much time here, in human form. He had a brief ministry—three years, give or take. And he never left Israel. But I think it's safe to say that the Incarnation started something big. Sure, we can do lots of things that people in Jesus' time would never have dreamed of: We can cure leprosy, make the blind see, help the lame walk. These things aren't quite as miraculous anymore as they used to be. But when it comes down to it, doing Christ's work isn't just about miracles. It's about love. The work of God is

to believe in Jesus' name—in other words, it's to act in love, and be ready to accept the consequences, good or bad. Besides, "if God is for us," says Paul, "who can be against us? . . . We are more than conquerors through Christ Jesus, who first loved us."

May you go forth, today and every day, believing in Christ's love; and believing, act; and acting, find God working wonders through you. Amen.

Prayer

O Holy Spirit, giver of light and life,
impart to us thoughts higher than our own thoughts,
and prayer better than our own prayers,
and powers beyond our own powers,
that we may spend and be spent in the ways of love and goodness,
after the perfect image of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

- from *Daily Prayer*, ed. Eric Milner White, 1941



When an angel does good to somebody else he also communicates to that person the goodness, blessedness, and bliss he himself has received; and he does this in a spirit of wishing to give the other everything and hold nothing back. *Arcana Coelestia* n. 6478

Image: Howard Pyle (1853-1911), "The Angel of Friendship" (a woodcut from his children's book *Otto of the Silver Hand*)

Daily Meditations

Monday, November 29

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son.
May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. *Psalms 72:1-2*

In the internal sense "righteousness" denotes that which is from good, and "judgment" that which is from truth. Good is all that which belongs to love and charity; truth is all that which belongs to the derivative faith. Truth derives its essence from good, and is called truth from good, just as faith derives its essence from love, and in the same way judgment from righteousness.. *Arcana Coelestia n. 2235*

Tuesday, November 30

May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. *Psalms 72:3-4*

"Mountain" signifies the good of love, because in heaven those who are in the good of love to the Lord dwell upon mountains, and those who are in charity towards the neighbor dwell upon hills; or, what is the same, those who are of the Lord's celestial kingdom dwell upon mountains, and those who are of His spiritual kingdom dwell upon hills; and the celestial kingdom is distinguished from the spiritual kingdom in this, that those who are of the celestial kingdom are in love to the Lord, and those who are of the spiritual kingdom are in charity towards the neighbor. *Apocalypse Explained n. 405*

Wednesday, December 1

May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.
May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. *Psalms 72:5-6*

The sun of the spiritual world is fire in which is Divine Life. *Divine Love and Wisdom n. 157*

Thursday, December 2

In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.
May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth. *Psalms 72:7-8*

The enlightenment of people indirectly through the angelic heaven, as was the case before the Lord's advent, may be likened to the light of the moon, which is the sun's light conveyed indirectly. And because this light after His advent became one conveyed directly, it is said in Isaiah that "the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun." *Divine Love and Wisdom n. 233*

Friday, December 3

May his foes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust.
For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. *Psalms 72:9-10*

Prayer should be that the Lord may have pity, grant the power to resist the evils of which one has repented, and supply the inclination and affection for doing good, since man without Him cannot do anything (John 15:5). *True Christian Religion n. 539*

Saturday, December 4

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things.
Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen. *Psalms 72: 18-19*

Redemption means deliverance from damnation. From these considerations it is evident what is signified by the Lord redeeming mankind, namely, that He has delivered and freed them from hell, and from the evils and falsities which thence continually rise up and bring man into condemnation, and that He continually delivers them and frees them.

Apocalypse Explained n. 328.20

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

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

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

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- 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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