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SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

OUR DAILY BREAD



Happiness

Prayer

God of life,
When our lives have no music in them,
When our hearts are lonely
And our souls have lost their courage,
Flood the path with light,
Turn our hearts to skies full of promise,
And quicken our spirits
With the memory of your heroes and
saints;
Through Christ our Lord.

- St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE)

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We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us . . . we are far too easily pleased. - C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

Dear Readers,

Happiness: it is disarmingly straightforward—and ridiculously elusive. The absence of happiness leaves us with a void we find ourselves desperate to fill. And we humans are, as Lewis points out, easy to please. Throw a little sensory or egoistic pleasure our way—good food and drink, an impressive career, physical beauty, economic security, social status—and we think we're good to go.

It is right to enjoy life, as long as we're not just pretending to enjoy it in a frantic attempt to ignore the fact that we're actually lonely, bored, sad, scared, or angry. But real happiness does not come from any one thing in particular, not even winning the lottery. Real happiness rises up out of the spiritual freedom that comes from realizing that none of us would even exist, except that God loves us just that much. "You have to lose your life to find it," said Jesus (Matthew 16:25), which is another way of saying that happiness cannot be bought, eaten, earned, invested, or preened over. You have to let go of it to experience it.

In all your endeavors, we pray for your happiness, both earthly and spiritual.

Many blessings,

Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

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Deuteronomy 25:13-19

You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, large and small. You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, large and small. You shall have only a full and honest weight; you shall have only a full and honest measure, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are abhorrent to the Lord your God. Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way, when you were faint and weary, and struck down all who lagged behind you; he did not fear God. Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies on every hand, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; do not forget.

Matthew 5:38-48

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

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

Divine Providence 251

It is not because of divine providence that wars happen, because wars are inseparable from murder,

plunder, violence, cruelty, and other appalling evils that are diametrically opposed to Christian caring. However, it is absolutely necessary that they be permitted, because since the earliest times, . . . our life's love has become basically a love of controlling others, ultimately everyone, and of gaining possession of the world's wealth, ultimately all of it. These two loves cannot be kept in chains as long as it is the intent of divine providence that we act freely and rationally. . . . There is also the fact that if it were not for this permission, the Lord could not lead us out of our evil, so we could not be reformed and saved. That is, unless evils were allowed to surface, we would not see them and therefore would not admit to them; so we could not be induced to resist them. That is why evils cannot be suppressed by some exercise of divine providence. If they were, they would stay closed in, and like the diseases called cancer and gangrene, would spread and devour everything that is alive and human.

Sermon

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. Matthew 5:45

We are urged on this day to remember the events of 9/11, and it is well that we do so, especially if we bear in mind that if we merely remember but do not reflect and learn, our memories are of little use to us. The philosopher George Santayana (1863-1952) said it well and clearly: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

It was a large event, certainly, and a large event is in some ways like a large building—you have to stand back from it to see the whole thing. In 1898, the cry was "Remember the *Maine*!", and that cry led to a brief and in many ways successful war against Spain. There is no one alive now who can actually remember the *Maine*, but our present relationships with both Cuba and the Philippines would be far different had it not been for that event and our reaction to it. Given a distance of a century or more, we are freed from emotional oversimplifications and can weigh the evidence more fair-mindedly. A good many people still can "remember Pearl Harbor," and in like manner can look at that immense event with less desire to prove ourselves right and more desire to understand.

9/11 is now ten years behind us. This means that for most high school freshmen, it is something of which they have no direct, personal memories; but it will still be something that had a formative impact on the lives and thinking of their own parents and teachers. By the time they are adults, they will be capable of that “twenty-twenty hindsight” that enables them to see the whole forest and not just a few of the closest trees.

Ten years, though, is a significant distance. Wordsworth said that poetry “takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility”; by now we should be capable of enough tranquility to make some sense of the emotional turmoil that engulfed so much of the world on that extraordinary day, especially if we look at it through the lens of our faith.

There does remain a core simplicity—the fact that certain individuals, honestly believing that they were doing God’s will, deliberately brought about the death of 2,752 individuals without warning. There could hardly be a more dramatic instance of an evil that had been “closed in,” festering under the surface, until finally it could no longer be restrained but burst forth in all its appalling ugliness.

That, of course, was not the end of the story. The immediate responses were of extraordinary, life-sacrificing heroism. It was virtually incredible how many individuals got out of the buildings alive, with only the staircases for escape routes. Equally significant, there was a worldwide outpouring of compassion and support. For al-Qaeda, it was a public relations disaster of the first order. According to one article, “After the terrorist attacks of September, 11, al-Qaeda (or al-Qa’ida, pronounced al-KYE-da) surpassed the IRA, Hamas, and Hezbollah as the world’s most infamous terrorist organization.”¹

It is ironic that the most conspicuous reference to the Gospels on the part of our own government was to say, “These are evil people. And we’re not going to win this fight by turning the other cheek.” For better or for worse, our military casualties in deaths alone have now exceeded the 9/11 death toll, and month after month we hear of the burden being borne by the wounded and traumatized. We may leave it up to

our children, or perhaps our grandchildren, to make a truly fair-minded cost-benefit evaluation.

Our theology tells us that when things like this happen, it is a clear sign that we need to look beneath the surface. To “fill in the blanks” of our text, the Lord is providing sunshine and rain to al-Qaeda as well as to us. The Lord’s life is flowing into them just as it is into us. What is the Lord trying to tell them, and why are they understanding it in the way that they do? What is the Lord trying to tell us, and why are we understanding it in the way that we do? Remember the story of the lawyer who asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responded not with one question but with two: “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” (Luke 10:26). Millions upon millions of devout Muslims read the same Qur’an as the terrorists, but they obviously read it in a very different way; and as for Christians, for all the purported allegiance to “the plain literal meaning of the Bible,” there is obviously no overwhelming agreement as to what that “plain meaning” is.

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the enemy, we must find
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are seen.*

The contrast between our two Scripture readings could hardly be more absolute. On the one hand, we find Deuteronomy saying, “Remember what Amalek did to you . . . when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies on every side . . . you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!” (Deuteronomy 25:19). On the other hand, we find Jesus annulling the law of an eye for an eye, commanding us to turn the other cheek, not to hate but to love the enemy (Matthew 5:38, 39, 44).

One thing these two texts have in common is that they are absolute. Deuteronomy says emphatically, “Do not forget!” Jesus did not say, “Turn the other cheek, unless, of course . . .” or “Love your enemy, provided . . .” We in our own times are obviously off the hook as far as Amalek is concerned, because there aren’t any Amalekites on the scene any more. We seem, then, to be left with the Gospel commands, and if we want to regard ourselves as Christians, the only answer can be “Yes.”

Actually, though, that is just the beginning of the answer. If we are really to love the enemy, we must find something in the enemy that is worthy of love; and in the case of the faceless terrorist, that is not easy. Essentially, we have to step outside ourselves and see ourselves as we are seen. The workers in the World Trade Center were not seen as individuals, of that we

1. Laura Hayes, Borgna Brunner, and Beth Rowen, <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/al-qaeda-terrorism.html#ixzz1X6h1O4YR>

can be quite sure. The Trade Center itself was seen as a symbol of undeserved wealth, of “ill-gotten gains,” so to speak. What was wrong with the people in it was that they felt entitled to that wealth, just as we ourselves feel entitled to our disproportionate share of the world’s goods.

“Entitlement” is a loaded word these days, used almost exclusively to describe government programs that benefit the lower-income levels of our society. Strangely, we rarely ask whether someone is entitled to millions of dollars for being able to hit a baseball, or whether top-level executives are really entitled to their astronomical salaries.

In a peculiar way, there is no way to tell, because that whole question depends on the value of money, and money has no more value than we believe it has. When confidence in the dollar collapses, the value of the dollar collapses. In his recent book on the politics of happiness,² Derek Bok takes a very careful look at what actually seems to lead to happiness. To make a long story very, very short, it turns out that money is not really a decisive factor until its lack becomes severe. At all levels above poverty, the key factor seems to be generosity. To grasp happiness is to lose it. To give happiness is to gain it.

This should come as no surprise to any Christian. We are, after all, commanded not to lay up treasures on earth (Matthew 6:19) and to give to those who ask of us (Matthew 5:42)—two more absolute commands, and to judge from television commercials, the first gets very little attention. Like all of the Lord’s commands, these are for our own benefit, in effect, teaching us how to be good to ourselves.

At this distance, then, remembering 9/11 seems to bring us a mixture of good news, bad news, and questions. The bad news is that there are evils festering under the surface, closed in and gathering strength, and that unless we address them, they will break out in violence. The good news is that there is an immense reservoir of good will in the world. Those who are appalled at the mindless viciousness of terrorism vastly, vastly outnumber the terrorists; and the sheer ugliness of terrorism is already starting to defeat it.

Perhaps the most urgent question for us, though, involves how we are seen at least by some—as greedy, set on “controlling others, ultimately everyone, and of gaining possession of the world’s wealth.” How much

truth is there to this view? Is it being made up out of whole cloth? I suspect that if we tried, we could find some evidence for it. One of Bok’s “discoveries” is that no matter how much wealth people have, they can be dissatisfied because they want more.

If we do grant that there is some truth to his view, it would be a tragic mistake to think that it was the whole truth. It has been startling to read of the surge of love for America in Libya, a revival of our image as “the land of the free.” There is some truth to this view, also, and again, it is not the whole truth.

To remember 9/11 well, then, we need to remember it not with resentment or anger or self-righteousness but, strange as it may sound, with love. Love will grieve over the fanaticism and the lives lost, be deeply moved by the heroism, and be grateful for the outpouring of compassion and for the sacrifice of life and limb by so many. Love will resolve to understand, and above all, not ask “What should *they* have done?” but “What can I do?” There is so much left to be done! Amen.

Prayer

O Lord, let me not live to be useless.

- John Wesley (1703-1791)

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

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2. Derek Bok, *The Politics of Happiness: What Government Can Learn from the New Research on Well-Being* (Princeton University Press: 2011).

Daily Meditations

Monday, January 7

You will say in that day: I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me. *Isaiah 12:1*

Some think that heaven consists in a life of ease, in which they are served by others; but they are told that there is no possible happiness in being at rest as a means of happiness, for so everyone would wish to have the happiness of others made tributary to his own happiness; and when everyone wished this, no one would have happiness. *Arcana Coelestia n.454*

Tuesday, January 8

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. *Isaiah 12:2*

Such a life would not be an active life, but an idle one, in which they would grow torpid, and yet they might know that there is no happiness except in an active life. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, January 9

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. *Isaiah 12:3-4*

Angelic life consists in use, and in the goods of charity; for the angels know no greater happiness than in teaching and instructing the spirits that arrive from the world; in being of service to men, controlling the evil spirits about them lest they pass the proper bounds, and inspiring the men with good; and in raising up the dead to the life of eternity, and then, if the souls are such as to render it possible, introducing them into heaven. *Ibid.*

Thursday, January 10

Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel. *Isaiah 12:5-6*

From all this they perceive more happiness than can possibly be described. *Ibid.*

Friday, January 11

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."

The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. *Psalms 126:1-3*

Thus are they images of the Lord; thus do they love the neighbor more than themselves; and for this reason heaven is heaven. So that angelic happiness is in use, from use, and according to use, that is, it is according to the goods of love and of charity. *Ibid.*

Saturday, January 12

Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb.

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves. *Psalms 126:4-6*

When those who have the idea that heavenly joy consists in living at ease, idly breathing in eternal joy, have heard these things, they are given to perceive, in order to shame them, what such a life really is, and they perceive that it is a most sad one, that it is destructive of all joy, and that after a short time they would loathe and nauseate it. *Ibid.*

JAN 13 HEAVEN, AND HOW TO ATTAIN IT

Rev. William H. Beales

Sermon

Deuteronomy 30:19-20

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live, and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Mark 8:34-38

When Jesus had called the people to him, with his disciples also, he said to them, "Whoever will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever will save his life shall lose it; but whoever will lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it. For what will it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? Whoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Heaven and Hell #420

Some people think heaven is granted to us by direct mercy, and therefore simply involves being let in and accepted out of good will. They do not realize that the Lord, in his mercy, leads everyone who accepts him; and that the people who accept him are those who live according to the laws of the divine design, which are the rules of love and faith. And they do not realize that being led by the Lord from infancy to the end of earthly life, and then on to eternity, is the true meaning of mercy. If only they knew that everyone is born for heaven, that people are accepted into heaven who accept heaven into themselves in this world, and that people who do not accept it are shut out!

Do you want to go to heaven?

That sounds like a foolish question, perhaps. We *all* want to go there, do we not?

But I'm not so sure about that. Judging by appearances, many people want to go to the other place, though they may not be aware of it. It seems clear that many people today, judging by their actions, will actually want to go to hell when they die.

We don't *know*, of course. And we have no right to point to this person or that. But if actions count for anything, a lot of people are choosing hell right now. And unless they do an about-face, they will choose it when they leave this world.

But to get back to our first question: Do *you* want to go to heaven? Are you *sure* you do?

I suppose we all feel we will want to go to heaven in the end because it is pictured as a place where everyone is *happy*. And no one will want to go to the other place, because it is pictured as a place where everyone is *unhappy*, and is being tormented for past sins. But we have learned much more about heaven and hell and there is still more to learn, if we will take the trouble to learn it.

This much we know for certain about heaven: those who dwell there are happy. And why not? I believe that happiness is the birthright of every human being. It is the end, or goal, for which the Lord created us. And it is the goal toward which he is leading us in every moment of our lives. Happiness is the reward or shall we say, the result of living a true and earnest life here on earth. Did not the Lord make this fact clear to his disciples, there on the mount? "Rejoice," he said. "Rejoice, and be exceeding glad; for great is your reward in heaven" (Matthew 5:12).

Look at the world in which we have been placed. How full it is of beauty! We miss much of it we who live in the city surrounded by rows of houses, walking on concrete pavements, almost deafened by the roar of traffic, and nearly suffocated by the smell of coal gas and exhaust from motorcars. But it is there, in the places where we haven't spoiled God's handiwork. The broad meadows, with sunlight and shadows racing across them. The tall, graceful trees reaching up toward the great expanse of the heavens. The quiet of the evening, as the west takes on the glow of sunset. Beauty is everywhere for those who love

nature: God's world, given to us by the all-loving God for the enjoyment of humanity.

Look at how the Lord has created us with the capability of finding deep and lasting happiness in the companionship and love of another, and placed in each heart the desire for that companionship and love. And the divine providence works constantly to help those who seek it to attain to that happiness. Yes, even in the most external ways. The urge to build a home. Freedom from privation and want. Furnishing the home. Seeking to provide everything for a happy, contented life, lived together in love and mutual cooperation. The very desire for these things is planted in the human heart by the Lord. And his providence is continually working toward helping us to attain that happiness.

In unnumbered ways, the Lord has created us with the ability to be happy and has provided the means for the attainment of that happiness. Surely, then, we may take it that happiness is the very goal, the very *guerdon* of our creation. It is that for which we have been placed here on earth. And it is perfectly natural that we should seek that happiness.

But we do well to think a little further on this question. Certain conditions govern the attainment of happiness. It is the part of wisdom to take them into account.

Happiness, to be true and lasting, must rest on an enduring foundation. For you see, happiness is never an arbitrary reward for living a particular kind of life. It is not given to one person and withheld from another merely at the pleasure of the Creator. Indeed, it cannot be given in the same way we might give a sum of money, a house, or an automobile. Nor is heaven a place into which the Lord invites some, and from which he bars others.

Happiness is as definitely and surely the result of right thinking and loving as the health of the body is the result of right eating and drinking—of following the laws of health. And the glories of heaven, wonderful as they are, are only the outer expression of the inner states of the angels. There is nothing arbitrary about this matter of heaven or hell—of being an angel or a devil. The angels are in heaven because they have heaven in their hearts. And the devils are in hell because they have hell in their hearts.

Heaven or hell? It is entirely a matter of "which do you really want?" And that is answered by the

answer to the question, "Which *are* you?" This is why I asked, "Do you want to go to heaven? Are you *sure* you want to go there?"

But let us get back again to the consideration of marriage, for it has the potential to be the nearest approach to the life of heaven that we can experience here on earth.

Some are foolish and ignorant enough to believe that marriage, in and of itself, will give happiness. They think that all they have to do is to go through the wedding ceremony, set up housekeeping together, and Presto! they will live happily for the rest of their lives.

Well, it just doesn't always work out that way.

Why not? Because many people ignore, or are not aware of, the *conditions* on which happiness in marriage rests. Marriage, in itself, is no guarantee of happiness. In fact, there is as much, if not more, unhappiness, misery, and loneliness among married people as among those who are not married. Why is that? Because a lot of people ignore, or are not aware of, the conditions upon which happiness in marriage rests.

In marriage, perhaps more than in any other human relationship, it is true that everyone gets out of it what he or she puts into it. Happiness in marriage rests upon the genuine desire of each to live for the other; to consider only the real good of the other, and place that first. If any marriage doesn't provide all the satisfaction and joy expected of it, it would be well for each of the partners to sit down sometime and ask themselves, frankly and honestly, "Where am I falling down in this relationship? What am I failing to do that I should do to make ours a happy marriage?" [Editor's note: This is, of course, not the case where abuse is being committed.]

The trouble is that the situation is nearly always reversed. The tendency is to make out a long, long list of the *other* person's failings, and forget one's own. This spells failure every time. [Editor's note: Again, this is not the case where abuse is taking place.]

It is the man or woman who *forgets* himself or herself who finds the truest happiness in marriage—the person who says, "It is my job to see that this loved one who has united his or her life with mine is as happy as I can make him or her," who says, "Never mind what I am getting out of this partnership; what

*Heaven or hell? It is
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"which do you really
want?"*

am I putting into it? Is my husband glad he married me? Is my wife finding the joy in life that she dreamed of when we were married?" It is this person who is at least on the right road to happiness. In other words, it is those who seek not their own happiness, but instead seek to give it, who all unconsciously find it.

"Whoever will *save* his life"—seeks to gratify his own selfish desires; seeks his own pleasure even at the expense of others—"shall *lose* it. And whoever shall *lose* his life"—is willing to forget his so-called "rights," the gratifying of his own desires, the serving of his own ends—"will *find* it." Not the old life. No, a *new* life. A new happiness of a kind that he or she did not dream of before.

So it is with heaven. Since heaven is synonymous with happiness, we naturally hope that one day we will attain it. But strangely enough, the more we set our hearts on it, believing that it will mean happiness to us, the less likely we are to realize our hope. *The heavenly life is the forgetful life*: forgetful of our own selves and our own happiness and comfort, of our own selfish interests.

Some folks think they earn the right to heaven by their good deeds. That is all wrong. Good that is done for the purpose of gaining heaven is not good—not to *us*. It may benefit others in a worldly, material way. But as far as *we* are concerned, it is only a form of selfishness. It is the man or woman who says, "Am I striving to live according to the laws of God?"; who has learned to be just in his dealings from the love of justice; who finds a delight in adding to the happiness and well-being of others; who will be *more* than just; who will be *charitable*—it is the man or woman who is willing to lose his own life for the sake of Christ and the living of his teachings who will find heaven, though he or she never gives a moment's thought to the seeking of it.

There is nothing inherently selfish in looking forward to a life of happiness in the great beyond. It is our birthright. It will, if we attain to it, be the gift of God. And at first, the desire to secure that happiness may be an influence within us to seek to do what is right and good. But in the end, that must cease to be the motive for our right living. In the end, we must be moved only by the desire to bring happiness into the lives of others; to serve them; to help others on the pathway to God and heaven.

Is that an impossible picture? Do we feel like the Psalmist, who cried, "It is high; I cannot attain unto it"? (Psalm 139:6).

"With *man*, it is impossible." In our own efforts, guided by our own prudence, lived in our own strength, it is impossible. But "with *God*, all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

Do you want to go to heaven? Do *I* want to go to heaven? We shall go there, if we do want it. But we must bring at least something of heaven into our hearts and lives here on earth if we are really going to want it in the great beyond.

Prayers

Creator God, we thank you for setting before us life and death, blessings and curses. Give us, we pray, a heart to choose life, and hands to live in the way of life. Give us a desire for heaven that is not merely theoretical, but is one that transforms us from the inside out, so that we are living a life of heaven here on earth. Then in the end, welcome us into your many mansions. Amen.

Not with the hope of gaining aught,
Not seeking a reward;
But as thyself hast loved me,
O ever-loving Lord!

E'en so I love thee, and will love,
And in thy praise will sing,
Solely because thou art my God,
And my eternal King.

- Latin, 17th century, trans. E. Caswall

Protect us, Lord, during this our earthly pilgrimage, that we may seek you diligently, walk with you lovingly, and serve you faithfully; and, having been ready to do your will in the world, may we be eager to meet you in the glory of heaven; through Christ our Lord.

- Richard Baxter (1615-1691)

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

- Julie M. Hulme, 2001

Monday, January 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. *John 1:1-2*

There were some spirits who believed from an opinion adopted in the world that heavenly happiness consisted in an idle life in which they would be served by others; but they were told that happiness never consists in being inactive and getting satisfaction therefrom. *Heaven and Hell n.403*

Tuesday, January 15

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. *John 1:3-4*

This would mean everyone's desiring the happiness of others for himself, and what everyone wished for, no one would have. Such a life would not be an active life but an idle life in which they would become slack. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, January 16

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. *John 1:5*

Moreover, they could have known that without an active life there can be no happiness of life, and that the leisure of this active life is only for the sake of recreation that one may return with more vigour to the activity of his life. *Ibid.*

Thursday, January 17

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. *John 1:9-11*

They were then shown by many evidences that angelic life consists in performing the good works of charity, which are uses, and that the angels find all their happiness in use, from use, and in accordance with use. To those who held the opinion that heavenly joy consists in living an idle life and drawing breaths of eternal joy in idleness, a perception was given of what such a life is, that they might become ashamed of the idea; and they saw that such a life is extremely sad, and that all joy thus perishing, they would, in a little while, feel only loathing and disgust for it. *Ibid.*

Friday, January 18

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. *John 1:12-14*

Those who during their lifetime have found happiness in marriage because of genuine conjugal love find happiness again in the next life, so that the happiness experienced by them in one life is continued into that of the other, where it becomes a union of minds, in which heaven consists. I have been told that even the most general types of celestial and spiritual forms of happiness from that union are unlimited in number. *Arcana Coelestia (Elliott) n. 2734*

Saturday, January 19

From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. *John 1:16-18*

I have been told that even the most general types of celestial and spiritual forms of happiness from that union are unlimited in number. *Ibid.*

1 Samuel 1: 4-20

On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb. Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. She made this vow: "O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a Nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head."

As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the Lord."

Matthew 6:24-34

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

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

Sermon

Come, Thou Fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing Thy grace...

I'm going to start off this morning with a question for the ladies: how many of you have seen the movie *27 Dresses*?

It was pretty decent, right, for a Katherine Heigl romantic comedy? Not bad.

All right, men, how about you? How many of you have seen the movie *27 Dresses*?

Not as many. Tell me this, honestly: how many of you would publicly admit it if you had?

Yeah, that's pretty much what I thought. But you all know that expression, "always a bridesmaid, never a bride," right? Well, spoiler alert, that pretty much sums up the plot of the whole movie, so you can skip

it if you want and just go watch *Skyfall* if that's more your speed.

But I bring up that phrase—"always a bridesmaid, never a bride"—because that was pretty much my little sister's life for the better part of her young adulthood.

I don't know that she had twenty-seven bridesmaids dresses in her closet, but by the time she hit thirty, that poor girl was getting close. And I can tell you that at first, it wasn't so bad. In fact, early on, picking out those dresses and getting the shoes dyed to match was actually kind of exciting. My sister would show up for a fitting and daydream about what sort of dresses she'd make her friends wear at her wedding. Then she'd arrive at the church all dolled up and ready, hoping that her Prince Charming might be amongst the guests—but for whatever reason, P.C. never showed.

So my sister got serious. She pored over advice columns in magazines, she went to therapy, she even read *The Rules*. (You all remember *The Rules*? Ugh!) She tried blind dating, speed dating, and dating services, all to no avail.

But still the invitations on the nice paper kept coming.

Few things in life are worse than having to go to a big party and make merry when you feel blue, but when that party is all about celebrating that someone else has found the one thing you wish you had, it can be excruciating.

God bless her, though, my sister is a good friend, so she'd go anyway. Only, after a time, she wised up. When yet another bride to be, a lovely young woman by the name of Shannon, asked her to be in her wedding party, my sister agreed, but she did so this time with her eyes wide open. She'd buy the dress and the shoes and she'd go to the party, but she wasn't going to go with any expectations. She wasn't going to try to make something happen. There would be no more mental note taking about her own nuptials, no anxious scanning of the crowd for Mr. Right. She was just going to go and be her own fabulous, single self with no agenda whatsoever, because, as my sister said the night before that wedding, "You know what, I'm all right. I've got a good life, and I like who I am. I'm okay. I'm just going to go to this thing and have a good time."

And she did. Sis arrived at the reception, sized up the wedding party, and said, "All right, who's single here?" A nice guy by the name of Sean said, "Um...I

am." And my sister, tossing those awful rules to the wind, said, "Well, then, I'm hanging out with you."

And they did. And it was good. And I'll come back to them in a bit, because their story isn't finished.

But first, I want to talk to you about Hannah, the woman from our Hebrew scriptures Bible story for today.

As you may have noticed from the reading, Hannah, like my sister, had to go to a big party, only she had to go to this big party every year—and it was awful.

The party took place at Shiloh. It was actually a great feast day, a holy day, a holiday, much like our Thanksgiving. After the harvest was gathered in, but before people settled down for the winter, each household was to gather up their tithe—a tenth of whatever grain, new livestock, wine, oil, or anything else they had accumulated or made during that year—and make a pilgrimage to the tabernacle in Shiloh, where they would offer their tithes to the Lord.

Few things in life are worse than having to go to a big party and make merry when you feel blue...

The priests would take the gifts and offerings and burn the meat on the altar—essentially, cook it. Then, after the priest took a portion of that meat for himself and the temple staff, each family would take the rest and go and sit down and eat together. As it says in Deuteronomy:

"You are not allowed to eat within your gates the tithe of your grain, or new wine, or oil, or the first-born of your herd or flock ...But you shall eat them before the LORD your God ... you and your son and daughter, and your male and female servants, and the Levite who is within your gates; and"—here's the kicker—"you shall rejoice before the LORD your God in all your undertakings" (Deut. 12:17-18).

Did you catch that? "You shall rejoice."

After a long year of work and toil, it was time to party. This was an event, like Thanksgiving or Christmas, when everyone was supposed to be happy. But all that happiness only made Hannah more miserable, because Hannah was already miserable, because Hannah couldn't seem to have children. Unlike her husband's second wife, Peninnah, who had so many children we don't even get a head count, Hannah was barren.

It might have been okay the first few times they'd gone up to Shiloh. Hannah probably even helped

with Peninnah's kids, all the while dreaming of what she'd do with her own, but her own never seemed to come along. And so Hannah had to watch year after year at Shiloh as her husband made sacrifices to thank God for all his children, knowing that none of those children were hers. She had to watch, year after year, as her husband would carve off a huge chunk of meat for Peninnah to share at the feast with all her little ones, and then sit there in shame as her husband carefully cut off a delicate little share for her and her alone. He was a kind man, Elkanah, and out of his love for Hannah he'd always give her a double portion, but I bet his generosity only made her feel that much worse. I bet Hannah sat there feeling a little more helpless and little more worthless as each year went by.

Until the year finally came when she just couldn't take it any more.

All the laughter and the cheer, the children running up and down, the people singing, Peninnah's smug smiles and her own grief, finally drive Hannah from the table. As soon as her duty is fulfilled, she runs off to the tabernacle in tears and falls down before God and pours out her heart before the throne. She weeps. She bargains. She rocks back and forth and prays with her whole body, her whole being, till her tears run dry and there are no words left to say.

And then Eli shuffles in. He finds her so distraught that the old priest assumes at first that she must be drunk from all the revelry, and so he says either the least pastoral or most pastoral thing any pastor has ever said:

"How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine."

Least pastoral, perhaps, because he's obviously completely oblivious to this woman's pain, but perhaps most pastoral because his unjust accusation arouses a righteous anger within Hannah—an anger that finally helps her break through the fog of her grief and distress.

"No, my lord," she says with great indignation. "I'm not drunk. I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time."

Did you catch that? Did you hear what Hannah said about herself, because thanks to Eli's accusation, I think Hannah finally did.

"Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman..."

Hannah tells Eli that she is not worthless...and in her effort to convince him, I think she finally convinces herself. Something shifts in Hannah, right in the middle of this story. Eli's accusation breaks her out of her self-pity. "I have good reason to weep," says she, "every reason to be as vexed as I am anxious, but I am not worthless."

Hannah at Shiloh, much like my sister before that wedding, has a major epiphany. In that moment, she comes to realize that, although she may not have the one thing in all the world she wants most, she doesn't have to let what she lacks define her. She realizes that, child or no child, she is still worth something in God's eyes and therefore still worth something in her own, that her life is precious whether she is a mother or not.

*Gratitude is
something you tap
into, deep within
yourself, that helps
you find peace and
hope no matter what.*

To paraphrase the great Rabbi Abraham Heschel, Hannah comes to understand that "just to live is a blessing, just to be is holy." And there's a word for that sort of realization, a name to describe that kind of understanding. I think what Hannah discovered in Shiloh at that moment, and what my sister experienced before that wedding a few years ago, was a little something called gratitude. Each woman found that she was grateful, in spite of what she lacked, not just for who she was, but for the sheer fact that she *was*. And each allowed her gratitude for what was, rather than her desire for what wasn't, to become the driving force in her life.

Friends, I know we talk a lot about gratitude at this time of year, but know that gratitude, at least as I understand it, isn't just a neat synonym for being thankful for all the good stuff. Gratitude isn't the warm, fuzzy feeling you experience when you finally get everything you want—because the truth is, you never do. No, gratitude is something you tap into, deep within yourself, that helps you find peace and hope no matter what.

Eli told Hannah to go in peace that day and prayed that the Lord would grant her a child, but Hannah, thanks to her newfound sense of gratitude, left at peace already. She left Shiloh filled with peace long

before her child was born. The Bible tells us that she “went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and *her countenance was sad no longer.*”

Hannah didn’t know what the future would hold. She had no idea if she’d ever have a baby. But thanks to that moment in Shiloh, she had found peace in the present, and that peace is what carried her home. That peace was what enabled her to start loving her husband again, with joy rather than desperation. And that peace remained hers before and even after her little Samuel was finally born.

Likewise, my sister went to that wedding. She talked and danced and shared a few drinks with that guy named Sean. She wasn’t trying to be what she thought he might want her to be. She wasn’t trying to make something happen. The truth is, she wasn’t trying at all. She was just being herself, because she’d finally learned to be grateful for who she was, and at the end of the night he not only asked for her number, he actually dialed it the very next day.

I officiated at my sister and Sean’s wedding two years ago and baptized their first child last month. I couldn’t be happier for them.

I’m glad Hannah finally had Samuel, and I’m thrilled that my sister married Sean, but what is truly precious about each one’s journey is this: it wasn’t getting what they thought they wanted that made them whole. The sense of gratitude they experienced for who they already were and what they already had—long before either Samuel or Sean showed up—helped them realize they were whole already.

And that is my hope for all of you this day, this week, and all throughout this festive holiday season. As you gather for various celebrations, I know this holiday will be happier for some of you than for others. I know that, for many of you, there will be faces missing around the table that you desperately wish were there. I know that, for others of you, there will be faces around the table that you desperately wish were missing.

I also know that, for some of you, it will be a challenge to count your blessings given the struggles, sorrows, and disappointments in your life. But know this: although you cannot change the past or control the future, any more than you can force yourself or anyone else to be happy—no matter what your circumstances, you can still practice gratitude.

Gratitude is not a feeling reserved for those times when everything is okay and all is well. Practicing gratitude doesn’t mean that you stop working or

yearning for those things you want or need. It’s simply about taking the time to pause, no matter where you are in your journey, and give thanks for the journey itself. Give thanks for what you do have. Give thanks for *who* you are and *that* you are. Gratitude is the simple realization that even when it’s hard, “just to be is *still* a blessing, just to live is holy.”

Thanks be to God.

Prayers

O Lord, as we prepare to celebrate and give thanks this year, may we find it in our hearts to be grateful no matter what. May we praise you for what we can do and praise you in spite of what we can’t. May we thank you for what is and what isn’t, for what is going well and for what is not. May we thank you for what brings us joy and even for that which brings us grief, for if our grief testifies to anything, it testifies to the depths of our love. Bless us and keep us, dear God, we pray, and turn our hearts ever and always toward your all encompassing light, you who are our creator and savior, our redeemer and friend. Amen and amen.

- Sarah Buteux

My soul is deprived of peace,
I have forgotten what happiness is;
I tell myself my future is lost,
all that I hoped for from the Lord.

The thought of my homeless poverty
is wormwood and gall;
Remembering it over and over
leaves my soul downcast within me.

But I will call this to mind,
as my reason to have hope:
The favors of the Lord are not exhausted,
his mercies are not spent;
They are renewed each morning,
so great is his faithfulness.

My portion is the Lord, says my soul;
therefore will I hope in him.
Good is the Lord to one who waits for him,
to the soul that seeks him;

It is good to hope in silence
for the saving help of the Lord.

- Lamentations 3:17-26

Daily Meditations

Monday, January 21

Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb. *Psalms 37:1-2*

The essence of love is loving others than oneself, wishing to be one with them and devoting oneself to their happiness. *True Christian Religion n. 43*

Tuesday, January 22

Trust in the Lord, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security. *Psalms 37:3*

There are two things which make up the essence of God - love and wisdom; but there are three which make up the essence of His love - loving others than oneself, wishing to be one with them, and devoting oneself to their happiness. The same three make up the essence of His wisdom, because, as I have shown above, love and wisdom are one in God. It is love which wills these things, wisdom that puts them into effect. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, January 23

Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. *Psalms 37:4*

The first essential, loving others than oneself, is to be recognised in God's love towards the whole human race. On this account God loves everything He has created, because they are the means to an end, and if you love the end, you must love the means. Everyone and everything in the universe are other than God, because they are finite and God is infinite. *Ibid.*

Thursday, January 24

Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act. *Psalms 37:5*

The second essential of God's love, wishing to be one with others, is to be recognised also in His linking Himself to the heaven of angels, the church on earth, to everyone in it, and to every good and truth which compose and make up men and the church. Love regarded in itself is nothing but a striving to be linked. *Ibid.*

Friday, January 25

He will make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday. *Psalms 37:6*

[4] The third essential of God's love, to devote Himself to the happiness of others, is to be recognised in everlasting life, which is blessedness, bliss and happiness without end, which He gives to those who receive His love into themselves. *Ibid.*

Saturday, January 26

Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him; do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices. *Psalms 37:7*

For God, just as He is Love itself, is also blessedness itself. For every love breathes out an aura of joy from itself, and the Divine Love breathes out the very height of blessedness, bliss and happiness for ever; so God makes the angels and men after death happy from Himself, which He does by being linked with them. *Ibid.*

COPING WITH LIFE'S UPS AND DOWNS

Rev. Julian Duckworth

Genesis 8:15-22

Then God said to Noah, "Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth." So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. And every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out of the ark by families.

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."

Matthew 12:9-14

He left that place and entered their synagogue; a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, "Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?" so that they might accuse him. He said to them, "Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath." Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other.

But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

Arcana Coelestia 933

Whenever we are caught up in our own concerns or those of the world, we find that our faith grows less. This is because many of our concerns come from self-interest and as long as we concentrate on them we will be far away from any beliefs about God and thoughts

of others. The reason for this is that heaven and self-interest can't coexist at the same time because then we would be pulled in two directions. When our own wishes and self-interest stop agitating and quiet down, the Lord works through other parts of us and we can be brought back into faith and charity, which feels in comparison like warmth and light. Such alternations go on in every person who is regenerating.

27 JAN

Sermon

Among the commonest things we go through are the ups and downs of life—we are up at some point and then down at another, and then back up again. It's like a roller coaster. It's quite a strange experience, and we may well wonder why it happens and why we can't be just the same, all the time.

It can happen in different kinds of ways. Here is a typical example that most of us could identify with. One day, everything feels perfectly normal and generally good, but then someone says something to us that bothers or upsets us, and suddenly we go from feeling great to feeling out of sorts or troubled for the rest of the day. Gloom has taken you over, and the good feeling you had when you got up has just disappeared as if it were never there. Try as you might, you can't retrieve that good feeling. The thing about this example is that you know very well what brought the change about: it was something someone said, and it's been going through your mind all day long.

But an up or down can happen without your being able to put your finger on why it's like it is. Some days, you just have a vague feeling of not being right in yourself. You're out of sorts, edgy, and you may wonder, "Am I getting sick?" "Am I a bit stressed?" or "Perhaps I'm not organized enough!" And then, as you get on with things, you realize it has lifted—whatever it was—and now you're fine. Sometimes you're just very tired, and all you really need is a good night's sleep to wake up feeling completely different.

We don't need to be too worried about any of this. It is very common and perfectly normal. We go through these regular ups and downs—or downs and ups—and the best thing is probably to simply accept that we do, and not start trying to find out why.

But even so, I offer two important things to remember about times like these. First, it's not just

you! Try not to fall for that idea. Every other person you know has something of the same experience, because we all move between thinking a bit too much about ourselves and thinking about other people and how they are, and in the process we forget about ourselves. There is a good clue for us: if you feel a bit down, phone someone! Call a friend, and be in their world for a few minutes instead of yours.

The other important thing I want to emphasize is that going through ups and downs is probably a very good sign that you are developing quite well. The fact that sometimes you are a bit down and sometimes you are bright and happy shows that *two* things are going on inside you, not just one. If you only ever thought about you and what you want all the time, these feelings of going up and down—or down and up—would be much less, and life would only be a question of whether or not you are getting what you want. The fact that you can go from thinking or worrying about yourself to feeling real care and concern for someone else is surely a very good thing—you are not stuck in a rut!

In the church, we talk a lot about heaven and hell, and a lot of the time we think about them as what is there after we die. But we should also think about heaven and hell as part of our life now, while we are still here. “Heaven”—which is obviously the right place to be in—is what we mean when we talk about loving other people, being sincere, being useful, being glad to be who we are, and so on. It is a good state. “Hell,” on the other hand—which is obviously *not* the best place to be—is what we mean when we talk about feeling bad about things, feeling fearful, complaining, judging people, being miserable, or thinking, “Other people have it easy but I don’t,” and so on. Hell is not a good state. It’s a rotten state.

Now, while we are here on earth, we don’t have the extremes of heaven and hell that may define eternity (although even that is a big question!). What we *do* have here is a touch of heaven and a touch of hell, a taste of heaven and a taste of hell, in fairly ordinary, normal ways that we can cope with, work through, and eventually sort out. In a way, this experience of encountering both heaven and hell is the whole point of starting our existence in this kind of life before we go on and live for ever.

This is the way the Lord has decided to arrange it for the best outcome. Obviously the Lord wants us

to be in heaven, but he can’t *make* us go there. The decision has to be much more in our court, and we have to come to want to be in heaven by keeping on choosing it. For that to happen, we are provided with these alternations, these changes of state, these ups and downs and downs and ups, on a regular basis, so that bit by bit we become aware of them, aware of how we feel in either of them, and feel that we want more of the one and less of the other. Hopefully it will be more of heaven and less of hell because we start realizing that being someone who complains, criticizes, and judges people not only makes life unpleasant for other people but also makes ourselves unhappy.

Looking at it like that, I would certainly say that the Lord knows exactly what he is doing! Most people in their right minds will soon start waking up to the difference between the two and figure out which one is offering the best deal.

There is another important thing to do with these ups and downs: we know very well from our own experience that they keep on going. We might ask, “Why do they have to do that? Why don’t we just have about a dozen or so ups and downs to help us make our mind up, and after that it’s all decided and it’s plain sailing from then on?”

Well, there are probably a few reasons why they keep going, but I want to start with the idea that variation is simply how life is. We get it a lot in the world out there—we have day and night, summer and winter, clear blue skies and cloudy skies. It seems to be the case that if something stays exactly the same, it is not a good thing. We would be in terrible trouble if it were always sunny, just as we would be building a lot of Noah’s arks if it were always raining! Nature needs changes, and (in the right way) so do we.

For example, if we felt extremely happy all the time, then gradually our sense of what real happiness means would become meaningless. We would have nothing to compare it with. So, part of being happy involves being able to feel or remember a time in the past when we were not so happy. This keeps happiness as something that “comes back” and stays fresh and new each time it returns. Just as importantly, if feeling great is something that keeps coming back, we are all the more likely to appreciate it and to want to give

We would be in terrible trouble if it were always sunny, just as we would be building a lot of Noah’s arks if it were always raining!

our gratitude to God for bringing us back into it. So, once again, it seems that the Lord really does know exactly what he is doing.

Our church teachings make an interesting point: in eternity—when people have become angels and when they are much more aware of the Lord in their life than we are—even then there is a small up-and-down change in their experience. Sometimes angels are very aware of God; they love God, they serve God, and they turn to God. But sometimes they are not so aware of God in that “full-on” way, and for them it’s like evening or twilight. The reason for this is because, like us, angels are still individual people living their own lives. Perhaps, when they have been serving God in some way, the little thought comes along, “I did that well, didn’t I?” and, just for a while, they are thinking more about themselves than about God. But because they are angels, they spot that loss of focus, and very quickly they remind themselves that all good comes from God, and not from us. And that feels like a new morning.

Life’s undulations of ups and downs is a very common experience, but it pays to know quite a lot of background information about these variations, which is what we’ve been trying to do. If we didn’t know anything, we would keep being plunged into sadness and wonder where our happiness went. Or we would keep breathing a sigh of relief just to feel happy again and wonder why on earth we had to go through “all of that.” Let’s take it as it is and recognize that these ups and downs are actually the Lord’s best way of taking us further on and further up, preparing us very well for the heaven he wants for us all. Amen.

New Music: *Songs of Innocence*, by Missing Rachel

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

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

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

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

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



Daily Meditations

Monday, January 28

Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret—it leads only to evil. *Psalms 37:8*

Heaven is union with the Lord... Since union with the Lord varies, though, and heaven is therefore not the same in one angel as it is in another, it also follows that the nature of heaven depends on the nature of the union with the Lord. *Divine Providence* n. 28.1

Tuesday, January 29

For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land.

Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there.

But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity. *Psalms 37:9-11*

Now I need to say something about how that union happens and what it is like. There is a union of the Lord with angels and a union of angels with the Lord; so it is a mutual relationship. The Lord flows into the love of angels' lives, and angels accept the Lord in their wisdom, in this way uniting themselves to the Lord in return. *Divine Providence* n. 28.2

Wednesday, January 30

The Lord knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will abide forever;
they are not put to shame in evil times, in the days of famine they have abundance.
But the wicked perish, and the enemies of the Lord are like the glory of the pastures; they vanish—like smoke they vanish away. *Psalms 37:18-20*

It needs to be clearly understood, though, that although it seems to angels that they are uniting themselves to the Lord through their wisdom, in fact the Lord is uniting them to himself through that wisdom, since their wisdom also comes from the Lord
Ibid.

Thursday, January 31

The wicked borrow, and do not pay back, but the righteous are generous and keep giving;

for those blessed by the Lord shall inherit the land, but those cursed by him shall be cut off. *Psalms 37:21-22*

We could just as well say that the Lord unites himself to angels through what is good and that they in turn unite themselves to the Lord through what is true, since everything good is a matter of love and everything true is a matter of wisdom. *Ibid.*

Friday, February 1

Our steps are made firm by the Lord, when he delights in our way;
though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong, for the Lord holds us by the hand.

I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.

They are ever giving liberally and lending, and their children become a blessing. *Psalms 37:23-26*

However, since this mutual union is a mystery that not many people can grasp unless it is explained, I want to lay it out in a comprehensible fashion to the extent that it is possible. *Divine Providence* n. 28.3

Saturday, February 2

The righteous shall inherit the land, and live in it forever.
The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom, and their tongues speak justice.
The law of their God is in their hearts; their steps do not slip. *Psalms 37:29-31*

Love unites itself to wisdom, specifically through a desire for knowing that gives rise to a desire for what is true, a desire for discerning that gives rise to a desire to grasp what is true, and a desire to see what we know and discern that gives rise to thought. *Ibid.*

Isaiah 55:1-3, 12-13

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Luke 6:27-38

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. “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.

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

We may gather the magnitude of heaven’s pleasure simply from the fact that for everyone there it is delightful to share their pleasure and bliss with someone else, and since everyone in heaven is like this, we can see how immense heaven’s pleasure is. For as I explained above (§268), there is in heaven a sharing by everyone with each individual, and by each individual with everyone. . . .

It is different for love of oneself and love for the world. Love for oneself takes away and carries off all the pleasure of others and diverts them to itself because it has only its own welfare in mind. Love of the world wants the possessions of the neighbor to be its own. So these loves by nature want to destroy pleasures for other people. If they have any tendency to share, it is for their own interests and not for others (except insofar as they can appropriate and embody the pleasures of those others); they do not tend to share but to destroy.

Sermon

Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you—a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and overflowing, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you receive in return. Luke 6:38

A recent book by Derek Bok¹ entitled *The Politics of Happiness* draws some provocative conclusions. First, current research suggests that despite the significant rise in our national standard of living, we are not appreciably happier now than we were fifty years ago. Second, we are not very good at predicting what will make us happy. The impact of something like getting a new car or a raise in salary or moving to a warmer climate is actually modest, and tends to dissipate almost entirely before long. Third, and perhaps most surprising, in connection with the growing financial inequality in our country, the only people who seem to be “measurably upset” are the well-to-do.

The latter two observations dovetail quite convincingly. There are no conspicuous signs that the well-to do are troubled by the inequality—they seem

1. Derek Bok, *The Politics of Happiness: What Government Can Learn from the New Research on Well-Being* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

to be doing little to counter it. It is more likely that they are people who believed that higher income would make them happy, and are finding that it does not. They are faced with disillusionment, then, and the more time and energy they have devoted to gaining wealth, the more they have sacrificed toward that goal, the harder it is to admit that they have failed.

Still, they keep trying, and trying even harder, and one reason is fairly obvious. Every gain *has* brought a lift of spirits, so it is not too hard to believe that the answer must be to gain more. There is no place in their vocabulary for the word, “enough.” While to some it means contentment, to them it means stagnation, defeat, something alarmingly akin to death. Is that all there is for me?

If Bok is right, the main problem is that we are short-sighted. We reach for what will give us an immediate lift, and are slow to learn that these immediate lifts don’t last. Perhaps we should regard them not so much as stimulants as painkillers. They make us feel better, but only for a while. Before long, they wear off, and we find ourselves feeling worse again. That means it’s time for another dose, and if possible a stronger one, and before long, we are addicted.

The pain we are trying to suppress is the work that we do when we are doing it primarily for the income it will bring. It is surely revealing that we have come up with images like “the rat race” and “the treadmill,” and this clearly implies the discouraging news that there is little or no real *happiness* in the work itself. Satisfaction, perhaps, and something like pride, but not a feeling that brings a smile to the face. We would rather be doing something else, presumably something that would make us happy; but as Bok indicates, we are not good judges of what will actually accomplish that for us. The prophet Haggai speaks of people who “earn wages and put them into a bag with holes” (Haggai 1:6). Isaiah asks why we spend our money for what does not nourish us and labor for what does not satisfy (Isaiah 55:2). Happiness nourishes us. Happiness satisfies us.

The rat race is not what the Lord has in mind for us. The angels did not bring the shepherds six-figure contracts. They brought the real thing, “good tidings of great joy” (Luke 2:10), and the word “gospel” means “good tidings.” “These words have I spoken to you so that my joy might be in you, and so that your joy might be full” (John 15:11).

There is nothing short-sighted about this, nothing whatever. When we speak of “having fun,” we know that we are talking about something that won’t last. In a way, that is what enables us to let go and enjoy it. We can let go and be irresponsible for a little while because we know we will take up our responsibilities again before long. The “joy” or happiness the Lord is trying to give us is long-term, *really* long-term. “In everything that it does,” we are told, “the Lord’s divine providence is focusing on what is infinite and eternal” (*Divine Providence* 46); and that is as “long-term” as you can get.

One of the healthier trends over recent decades has been toward recognizing the importance of sustainability, recognizing that policies that brought immediate benefits all too often had serious long-term consequences. Eventually, we run out of room to dispose of our trash. Eventually, the air becomes toxic. Eventually, the antibiotics don’t work. Eventually, the bills have to be paid.

Our theology is trying to tell us not only that there is such a thing as sustainable happiness but also that true happiness is self-sustaining in and of itself. We do not often put these two words together, “sustainable” and “happiness,” but that is surely where they belong. Who wants sustainable unhappiness? Who wants unsustainable happiness? To borrow an image from *Mission Impossible*, do we want happiness that comes with the message that it is programmed to self-destruct?

The solution is actually absurdly simple. Luke gives it to us in a single word: “Give.” “Give, and it will be given to you—a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and overflowing, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you receive in return.” Our third reading expands on this, telling us first of all that for everyone in heaven “it is delightful to share their pleasure and bliss with someone else,” and that on the contrary, “Love for oneself takes away and carries off all the pleasure of others and diverts them to itself because it has only its own welfare in mind.” That is the message that has self-destruction programmed into it for the simple reason that it sets us against each other.

That third reading calls attention to the immensity of heaven’s happiness, but does not mention its sustainability. Could this be because its sustainability is so obvious? When I am warmed by your happiness and you are warmed by mine, this is the polar

*My heavenly
happiness is never
at the cost of yours.
It actually increases
yours, as yours
increases mine.*

opposite of self-destructiveness. This is happiness with a programmed-in growth hormone, a hormone whose trade name is "eternal." This is happiness that is actively contagious.

That is what makes it sustainable. My true happiness is never at the cost of yours. It actually increases yours, as yours increases mine.

Not to mince words, we are talking about the polar opposites of generosity and greed. Granted that they rarely if ever occur in pure, unadulterated forms, in their essence the contrast is absolute. Generosity makes friends. Greed makes enemies. When Lincoln said that "a house divided against itself cannot stand," he had the Gospels squarely behind him (Matthew 12:25, Mark 3:25, Luke 11:17). Greed is inherently, essentially, divisive; and divisiveness is inherently, essentially, self-destructive.

At this point, we need to be clear that there is nothing inherently wrong with simple "getting." If we don't get the groceries, we won't have health. If we don't get housing, we won't have shelter. If we don't get directions, we won't know the way. Our theology says very clearly that we need to take care of ourselves, and to do this first, if we are to be of any use to each other (*New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Teachings* 97-99). It is a question of priorities. We have things backward if we live in order to eat.

The good news is clear, and it comes to us in the form of a commandment: "Give." But aren't we giving in order to get? Our text does not stop with that command. It says "Give, and it will be given to you." That argument has been dealt with at some length, though, in the verses that precede.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect a return, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order get as much back. No, love your enemies, and do good and lend, hoping for nothing in return." (Luke 6:32-35)

There is nothing particularly strange or improbable about this. We know from experience that we enjoy lending a hand from time to time. From time to time, the papers have pictures of volunteers working on a Habitat for Humanity project. With due allowances for human imperfections, these are pictures of happiness. These are people working together on something they believe is worth doing. They aren't getting paid; they are there simply because they

want to be. It would be nice to be thanked, but the experience is not spoiled if we are not.

There really is a lot of this going on, and only a tiny fraction of it gets into the papers. I wonder what would happen if each of us kept a kind of diary of such events. Some of them might be very brief; some of them might involve ongoing commitments. In some cases, we might be physically alone, but conscious of others whom our activities would be affecting, or conscious of the fact that it is their contributions that have made it possible for us to be doing something worthwhile. There is a definite warmth to realizing that we are putting to use what others have taught us, and we find ourselves wishing we could let them know that their teaching has borne fruit.

When we find ourselves enjoying a gift of learning that was given us decades ago, there could hardly be a clearer sign of the sustainability of true happiness. When we give others happiness, it is a gift that keeps giving. When we think of "commandments," the first that come to mind may be negative ones. We have needed these from time to time, and still do; but when Paul said that "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:10), he was saying that all the commandments could be summed up in a single word: "Give." Amen.

Prayers

Dearest Lord,
Whose glory is made no greater by our creation
And whose power is made no stronger by our
redemption;
Teach us to care for one another, not out of duty but
out of love,
And to be moved in all our actions by love, and love
alone;
Through Christ our Lord.
- St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

Arm us, O Lord, with the whole panoply of God,
With the shield of faith,
The sword of the Spirit,
The helmet of salvation,
The girdle of truth,
The breastplate of righteousness,
That we may be able to stand in the evil day;
And let our feet be shod
With the preparation of the gospel of peace;
That, having done all, we may stand in the same,
Now and forever.
- Eric Milner-White, Daily Prayer, 1941
(from Ephesians 6)

Daily Meditations

Monday, February 4

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. *Philippians 4:1*

Our nature from creation enables us to be more and more closely united to the Lord. There are three distinct or vertical levels in us from creation. These three levels exist in each of us from birth and can be opened. As they are opened, we are in the Lord and the Lord is in us. *Divine Providence n. 32*

Tuesday, February 5

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. *Philippians 4:2-3*

It is vital, however, that we know what these levels are. There are two kinds, distinct or vertical and gradual or horizontal, and it is vital to know how they differ. All of us have the three distinct or vertical levels within us by creation and therefore from birth. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, February 6

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. *Philippians 4:4-5*

We become involved in the first level, the one called “earthly,” when we are born, and we can gradually expand this level within us until we become rational. We become involved in the second level, the one called “spiritual,” if we live by the spiritual laws of the divine design, laws that are divine as to their truth; and we can also become involved in the third level, the one called “heavenly,” if we live by the heavenly laws of the divine design, laws that are divine as to their goodness. *Ibid.*

Thursday, February 7

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7

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

Friday, February 8

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Philippians 4:8-9

Our life is our love, and there are many kinds of love. Broadly, there is love for what is evil and love for what is good. Love for what is evil is love for adultery, vengeance, cheating, blasphemy, and taking others' possessions. A love for evil finds delight and gratification in thinking about such things and in doing them. *Divine Providence n. 33.*

Saturday, February 9

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. *Philippians 4:10-13*

Now since the Lord flows into everyone's life and flows through our life's desires into our perceptions and thoughts (and not the reverse), as already noted [€28], it follows that the closeness of our union with the Lord depends on the extent to which our love for evil and its desires--its compulsions--is dismissed. *Ibid.*

GUIDING FICTIONS

Rev. Edwin Capon

John 8:31-36

Then Jesus said to those Judeans who believed him, "If you continue in my word, then you are my disciples indeed; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, 'You will be made free'?"

Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

Arcana Coelestia #4214.2

Most people believe that the enlightened ones are those who are able to reason about what is good and true, or about what is evil and false, and that the measure of their enlightenment increases in direct proportion to their growing ability to speak about those things with greater precision and accuracy, and at the same time to back up what they say with many facts, and also to make their assertions ring true by the use of comparisons drawn mainly from sensory evidence and by the use of other convincing ways of presentation. These reasoners, however, in spite of all their mental and perceptive ability, are incapable of being enlightened at all.

Two different kinds of mental and perceptive ability exist. The first comes from the light of heaven, the second from an illusory light. Both kinds look the same in outward form, but are entirely different in inward form. That which comes from the light of heaven exists within good—that is, it exists with people who are governed by good. By virtue of that good they are able to see what is true, and to know—clear as daylight—whether something is right or not. But the kind that comes from illusory light exists within evil—that is, with people who are governed by evil. The reason they are able to reason about the things mentioned is that they do have a capacity to know them, but no desire to practice them. This is a situation in which, as anyone can see, no enlightenment is present.

Sermon

I have been intrigued by a phrase from Alfred Adler, a Viennese psychiatrist and one of Freud's early associates. Somewhere in his writings Adler speaks of "our guiding fiction," and he goes on to speak of it as "our own idiosyncratic sense of what a hero is

and what we must do to become one." I find the phrase suggestive, whether I use it quite as Adler intended it or not. It may well relate to his concept of the superiority complex; but it can be used in a broader sense. And it can be used in the plural as well as the singular. There may well be one dominant fiction by which a person lives. On the other hand there may be several. And it may be that the existence of such dominant fictions explains something Jesus said. Speaking to those Judeans who believed in him, Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, then you are my disciples indeed; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

It is some of the fictions by which we live that muck up our lives. In faithfulness to Jesus Christ, the light comes that frees us. However, Swedenborg would use the word "falsities" rather than the word "fictions," and remind us that our enslavement is to these falsities. In the *Arcana*, he actually says that "the light of heaven . . . is reflected [by which he means 'not received'] . . . with those who are in principles of falsity" (*Arcana Coelestia* #4214).

What are some of these fictions or falsities? And how do they harm us?

I'm sure most of us are familiar with the three temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness. Each is an example of the choice between living (or trying to live) by a fiction, or living by the truth.

Jesus has not eaten for forty days, the passage tells us. He feels hungry. Satan tempts him to use divine power to meet human need, ignoring the natural order of things. But this is not the way God meets the natural needs of other people. The Son of Man must not let it be different for himself. He must live by the truth that God promises us sustenance for our inner self, not for the body. Human beings have turned away from God in rejection because they have counted on help on the natural plane, guided by a fiction, and it has not come.

Jesus' next temptation, an offer of power from Satan, is usually understood as the temptation to use external means, such as force, to bring in the kingdom. Jesus chooses to remain loyal to the power of God, which is the power of love, and reject the fiction that force can be used to accomplish spiritual ends.

Finally, Satan tempts Jesus by challenging him to cast himself down from the top of the temple, counting on God to rescue him by angelic agency in accordance with Biblical promises. Jesus refuses to do so, knowing that it is a fiction that people can be won

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over to God by signs and wonders. And he persists in obedience to the truth, for later in his ministry the scribes and Pharisees tell him plainly, "Teacher, we would see a sign from you"; to which he answers, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and there shall no sign be given it but the sign of the prophet Jonah; for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:38-40).

Jesus surely would have failed in his mission had he let himself be guided by any of the three fictions with which Satan tempted him.

The fictions successfully faced by Jesus may not be fictions we are likely to face, though people have counted on God for meeting their physical needs, used external power to try to accomplish spiritual ends, and expected God to give them clear signs by which to follow the narrow path through the strait gate. And the results have more often than not been tragic. But there are other guiding fictions that lead people astray.

There are the guiding fictions that are introduced by the little conjunction "if." For example, there is this one quoted by Adler. "If I did not suffer from stage fright, what could I not do?" Such a fiction can prevent us from ever finding out what we can or cannot do and from entering upon the use God intended for us. It is a relative of the fiction by which the man in Jesus' parable excused himself after having buried his master's talent in the ground.

How many people live unfulfilled lives guided by the fiction, "I will be happy if . . . ": "I will be happy if John/Jane will marry me. I will be happy if we can move to an exclusive suburb. I will be happy if I have a lot of money. I will be happy if only we are elected to the country club." Do they know the truth about happiness?

Listen to what Adler has to say about another fiction:

Someone says, "If I were not so lazy, I could be president." . . . They hold a high opinion of themselves and take the view that they could accomplish much on the useful side of life. This is lying, of course. It's fiction, but we all know that mankind is very often satisfied with fiction. And this is especially true of persons who lack courage. They content themselves quite well with fiction. They do not feel very strong, and so they always make detours—they always want to escape difficulties. Through this escape, through

this avoiding of battle, they get a feeling of being much stronger than they really are.

What does such a fiction do to their possibility of growth?

Sometimes it is not "if" that characterizes our guiding fiction. Sometimes it is "but." Adler notes, "We always meet persons who say, 'I would do this in this way,' 'I would take that job,' 'I would fight that man, . . . but . . . !'" Of such people Adler says, "We must make them understand that they are capable of facing difficulties and solving the problems of life."

I must confess, though, that Adler does not tell us how to do this. And I'm sure it is rarely easy. Swedenborg states that "falsities can never be taken away from a person who is unwilling" (*Apocalypse Revealed* #101). And in another work he adds, "Falsities cannot be cast out except by combats from truths. . . . Those who believe falsities will perish by falsities" (*Apocalypse Explained* #131a.2, 131b.17). We will need the power of God to effect the change.

I say nothing new when I say that a major method for religious growth is self-examination. However, it may be that some of us have not thought to ask ourselves: What is my guiding fiction? Or, if I have no guiding fiction, what fictions may be influencing my life in a negative way? How am I deceiving myself about myself? How am I coloring my world to justify or excuse not doing the best that I know? How would the truth that makes people free change my seeing?

Prayer

O God of Truth, show us, we pray, any illusion there may be in the principles by which we guide our lives. For we are aware that as much as we may have endeavored to let the truth be our guide, we have inevitably mixed some of our own human error in with the genuine truth that comes from you.

It is so easy to see the faults in the thinking and actions of others. We ask you to give us eyes to see our own faults more clearly than those of others. We ask this, not so that we may condemn ourselves, but so that we will allow you to correct our minds and our hearts, and set us on a truer path. Amen.

Monday, February 11

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not
bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Isaiah 55:1-2a

The more closely we are united to the Lord, the wiser
we become. There are quite specifically three levels of
wisdom in us as well. It is these levels that are opened
for us in proportion to our union; they are opened in
proportion to our love, that is, since love is union itself
Divine Providence n. 34

Tuesday, February 12

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live. *Isaiah 55:2b-3a*

We sense an ascent of wisdom clearly if we know
and see what wisdom is. The reason we are aware of
levels of wisdom is that love enters our perceptions
and thoughts through its desires, and our perceptions
and thoughts stand out in the inner sight of our minds,
the sight that answers to our outer, physical sight. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, February 13

I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.
See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.
Isaiah 55:3b-4

The only way to arrive at [heavenly] indescribable
angelic wisdom is through union with the Lord and
in proportion to that union, since only the Lord opens
the spiritual level and the heavenly level. This step is
limited to people who are wise because of him, and we
are wise because of the Lord when we cast the devil, or
evil, away from ourselves. *ibid.*

Thursday, February 14

See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you. *Isaiah 55:5*

No one, though, should believe that we have wisdom
if we know a lot, grasp what we know fairly clearly, and
can talk about things intelligently. We are wise only if
these abilities are united to love. Love is what produces
wisdom, through its desires. *Divine Providence n. 35*

Friday, February 15

Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy
on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
Isaiah 55:6-7

The wisdom that comes to our consciousness is a
sense of what is true prompted by a desire for it. This
is the case particularly for spiritual truth: for there is
civic truth, there is moral truth, and there is spiritual
truth. *Divine Providence n. 36*

Saturday, February 16

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. *Isaiah 55:8-9*

When we are conscious of spiritual truth because
we are drawn to it we are conscious of moral and civic
truth as well, because a desire for spiritual truth is
their soul. *Ibid.*

FEB 17 THE RECEIPT OF HAPPINESS

Rev. Robert McCluskey

Joshua 5:10-12

While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal, they kept the Passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

Luke 12:22-34

He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Sermon

I have been thinking about the experience of anxiety—you know, worry and doubt and fear. Like all people, I have my share, but as a minister, I am

particularly called to make some sort of sense out of these familiar experiences of darkness.

Today's reading is a classic example of the Lord seeking to help us understand the meaning of anxiety. As I reflected on this subject, I became aware of those undeniable moments when God breaks through, takes over, dispels the clouds and doubts and fears, and reveals the simple beauty and "isness" of life. What was I so concerned and worried about? I remember that "the Lord has done great things for me" (that's an understatement!), and I realize that I am in fact very glad because of it.

Most of us are usually somewhere in between these two states: between the press of anxiety and the serenity of trusting in God, between what we call the "natural" and the "spiritual" perspectives. This is in fact our freedom, our equilibrium between two opposing forces. We are Janus faced; citizens of two worlds simultaneously; an intersection of natural and spiritual influences; creatures of the earth and inhabitants of the realm of spirit; increasingly subject to the limits of nature, of time and space, and increasingly unlimited in matters of compassion and understanding.

All of this doubleness can be confusing, and we can easily find ourselves firmly rooted in one or the other at different times. At times it seems as if "God's in his heaven and all's right with the world." At other times, it can seem as if God has abandoned us, that providence has been subverted; at times, God's apparent absence can even be mistaken for his non-existence. If each perspective seems real when we are in it, how can we tell the difference; how should we make our decisions? We are given a clue (actually, more than that) in Scripture, in revelation, which teaches us in ways that the senses and reason cannot. There we learn that this "dynamic tension" we live with, and often struggle with, is the only context in which we can grow spiritually and come to receive the happiness God longs to give us.

It is an age-old truth, whether western or eastern: the problems of the *proprium* are very serious problems to the *proprium*, but they are illusions to the higher self. To the extent that we are in the *proprium*, the problems seem all too real, and usually as insurmountable as they are unjustified. It is only as we move out of the *proprium* perspective that we can begin to see the shadowy, insubstantial nature of so many of our concerns and anxieties.

"It is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Scripture is bold to suggest to us that God

is not an irate dictator, but Divine Love and Wisdom itself; compassionate and wise, merciful and just, caring and capable. Because God is essentially love, we can begin to understand that our sense of fear, anxiety, and worry are not the ways of God; this is not what God longs for us to experience. Our burdens are not a price to pay for God's approval, but the self-imposed restraints that keep us from experiencing the warmth of God's love in the first place. Because God is essentially love itself, we need only turn to God to experience the peace and freedom he offers. "For the Lord is such that he wills to give himself to all; and therefore satisfaction and blessedness are increased with those who are images and likenesses of him" (*Arcana Coelestia* 6478).

So far so good. But first we need to deal with the proprium.

"The more a person acknowledges that in himself there is nothing alive, and nothing good, and that everything living and good is from the Lord, the more he is in happiness" (*Arcana Coelestia* 1153.2).

Emptied of self, we become filled with the God of love and wisdom; delivered from the illusions of the proprium, we receive the peace and happiness of heaven, and freedom from all fear. To say that we need only turn to God reminds us of the importance of free will in spiritual matters. Turning to God is turning from the appearances of the lower self, the proprium. This is what it means to sell our possessions and give to the poor, to relinquish the hold we have on our "truth" and open ourselves to a new understanding. (Two dogs live within each person. Which one grows? The one that is fed!) "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." The essence of God's love and wisdom is (1) to love others outside of oneself, (2) to desire to be one with them, and (3) to make them happy from oneself.

The Lord gives blessedness, satisfaction, and happiness without end to those who receive his love in themselves. For God, as he is love itself, is also blessedness itself; and as all love breathes forth delight from itself, so Divine love breathes forth blessedness and satisfaction to all eternity. Thus God makes angels, and also people after death, happy from himself; which is effected by conjunction with them." (*True Christian Religion* 43)

*The Lord gives
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his love in themselves.*

Swedenborg makes two interesting points about the Lord's divine providence that I would like to share with you. The first concerns God's famous omnipresence. The Lord, the source of all happiness, is in all things universally precisely because he is in each thing in particular. The Lord's providence and care for us is not some kind of generalized concern for our well-being, such that "everything will come out right eventually, just hang in there." His providence is omnipresent because the Divine is not in time or space to begin with. God is not another "thing" that can ever be separated out; there is no there where God is not, for God is reality itself, the author of creation. This is the transcendental thinking behind the comments about the lilies of the field and sparrows of the air, and even the hairs on our head, as another reading puts it.

The second point is similar: the Divine is the same in things least and great (small and big). It's the same divine presence that is with us whether we are considering the plight of those in the Middle East, or getting a notice of a tax audit, or stubbing our toe in the night. We are all precious and cared for, at each moment and in each moment, regardless of the world's standards. God is there to bless us, to heal us, to calm us, to strengthen us, to enlighten us, to make us happy. It is his good pleasure to give us the kingdom.

There is no absolute need to be miserable; there is absolutely no need to be miserable. For example, the rules of the healing method known as Reiki state, "Today: no anger, no fear, no pride." But to say that life is inherently good strikes the proprium as too optimistic, as not realistic enough. Here we see that the proprium equates reality with pain. How often do we see life in terms of struggle, risk, vulnerability, threat, danger, loss, illness, death, and so on? The problem is not that we experience anxiety from these things—that's natural. The problem is that we think it is perfectly normal to do so—and that's downright unspiritual! I do not mean to downplay the truly serious problems we all face in the course of our lives; rather, I want to remind you that the power of God to bring us through those problems is freely offered to us at each moment. Our problems and anxieties are not the last word. God's Word is the last word.

The Lord tells us that the kingdom of heaven is within us. That is, heaven must be in our hearts before we can live in heaven. The heavenly life is a

happy life, because everyone in heaven is freely and consciously involved with the Lord, who is love itself.

However, we know that we are not born loving to do right. We are first taught by our parents, and later we begin to make ourselves do right because we see that we get along better that way. This is like the children of Israel going about in the wilderness, obeying Moses because they were sure to get into trouble if they didn't. But this is not a heavenly state of life. However, as we continue in the work of repentance and reformation, the Lord gradually implants in our hearts a love of doing right. Then we are ready to "enter" the Holy Land, to have heaven in our hearts and minds, and so to receive the happiness that God has created us for. The occasional sense of spiritual satisfaction that we get during the process of reformation is merely a foretaste of the steady joy of heavenly living. People who live spiritually are happy with a deep, abiding happiness that no natural satisfaction can ever give. Such people are no longer divided, but fully united with God.

Here's another thought: how often do we ask God to take a burden from us? Yet how seldom do we ask God to reveal to us the path we should be walking, the task we could be performing?

My point today is simply to remind you that the good is real, no matter how dark things seem. Yes, the sun is always shining, even if it behind the clouds. But more than just a simple, optimistic platitude, we need to remember that God offers us the power to remove the spiritual clouds that block our perception of the kingdom within us (as we cannot do when it rains). Those feelings you get of peace and reassurance, sometimes to the point of laughing at yourself for getting so caught up in externals—those feelings are real! This the message of the church, the good news of the Gospel, which is alternately rejected as unreal pie in the sky and embraced as the key to life. As we know, it is the path of letting go, of surrender, of lowering our expectations of the world and others, and learning to trust in the Lord's providence, which is both loving and universal, a very present help in trouble.

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy! He that goes forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him. Happy is he whose help in the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them. Amen.

Prayers

God is a shoulder to cry on; support yourself on him.

God is a joker; laugh with him.

God is peace; relax in her.

God is a father; sit on his lap.

God is a bird; shelter under her wings.

God is a builder; work with him.

God is love; care with her.

God is a defender of justice; stand up with him for what is right.

God is creation; create with her.

God is a mother; love with her.

God is a child; marvel with him.

God is good; do not condemn yourself by her.

God is a tree; stand tall and straight with him.

God is a friend; trust in her.

God is a wind; you can't see him, but he can be felt.

God is creation; rejoice in it.

God is part of you, and you are part of God.

Laugh with and at and love yourself.

- *Oliver (a student)*, *The Living Spirit*, 2000

May all created things praise you, O Lord;

May you be blessed in the fellowship of human hearts.

May you be worshipped by the exile, hallowed by the pilgrim,

and adored by the saints; until together

we come to the palace of your heavenly glory;

and this we ask through Christ our Lord.

- *St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)*

Monday, February 18

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the
earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Isaiah 55:10-11

These times of happiness, bliss, and sheer delight intensify as the higher levels of our minds are opened within us, the levels we call spiritual and heavenly. Once our life on earth is over, these levels keep rising forever. *Divine Providence n. 37*

Tuesday, February 19

For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Isaiah 55:12

Every love has its own pleasures. A love for what is evil gives us pleasure when we are caught up in its compulsions. These pleasures come from compulsions that obsess the deeper levels of our minds and flow down from there into our bodies, where they stimulate filthy reactions that excite our very fibers.

Divine Providence n. 38

Wednesday, February 20

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Isaiah 55:13

Words cannot describe the varieties of heaven's bliss, rapture, pleasure, and delight--the joys of heaven--though these joys give us perceptible feelings in heaven. Anything we perceive only as a feeling is beyond description, because it does not fit neatly into mental concepts and therefore into words.

Divine Providence n. 39

Thursday, February 21

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name. *Psalms 63:1-4*

However, these joys enter us only as we distance ourselves from compulsions to love what is evil and false, which distancing we do apparently with our own strength, but in fact from the Lord's strength.

Divine Providence n. 39

Friday, February 22

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. *Psalms 63:5-7*

The joys proper to desires for what is good and true have their source in the Lord, so they come from the center of our being. From there they spread into our lower reaches, all the way to the lowest. These joys, with all their infinite variations, are found in every desire for what is good and true, especially in the desire for wisdom. *Ibid.*

Saturday, February 23

My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.
But those who seek to destroy my life shall go down into the depths of the earth;
they shall be given over to the power of the sword,
they shall be prey for jackals.
But the king shall rejoice in God; all who swear by him shall exult, for the mouths of liars will be stopped. *Psalms 63:8-11*

We may conclude from this that the more closely we are united to the Lord, the happier we become. This happiness is rarely evident in the world.

Divine Providence n. 41

FEB 24 HOW TO BE HAPPY

Rev. Rich Tafel

Matthew 5:1-12

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sermon

Today's text is a familiar one. The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' most well-known sermon. Some would argue that, in this sermon, the teachings of Jesus appear in distilled form.

We also know the Sermon on the Mount as the "Beatitudes." "Beatitude" means "blessing." From the word "blessing," we get the word "bliss," or happiness. The Beatitudes are about how to be happy.

Today, we love to attach numbers to teachings. We read *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, and Alcoholics Anonymous organizes around the Twelve-Step Program. In the Hebrew Scriptures, we have the Ten Commandments. If we took today's text and created from it the title of a new book, we might call it *Nine Steps to True Happiness*.

When Jesus delivers this sermon, he is leading a large crowd. These people are fascinated by this new teacher who says things that ring true for them. Wherever he goes, a crowd follows. On this day, Jesus

looks out into the crowd and sees people searching for the truth, but they are filled with false teachings and a false understanding of their world and their life.

At that point, Jesus might have been thinking to himself, "This is why I'm here. This is why I came. I want to set the record straight. They seek truth, but their world is turned upside down. They think good is evil and evil is good. This is where I really begin my teaching ministry. What I'm going to say will be hard for them to understand, but I'm going to say it. And I know they really want to hear it and God will help each one of them change and grow spiritually. That's why I'm here."

So Jesus goes up to the mountain above the crowd. The symbolism is clear: in the Bible, according to our teachings, mountains symbolize a higher and closer connection with God. There's also some wonderful Biblical symmetry occurring here: as Jesus ascends the mountain to teach, he invokes the image of Moses coming down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments.

In the Sermon on the Mount, humanity begins a new stage of spiritual development. In receiving the Ten Commandments, the followers of Moses were also being offered the way to happiness, but that message consisted, to a significant degree, of a list of things you shouldn't do. If toddler Sean here were to wander around the parlor today after service and we saw him move to grab an electric outlet or a hot cup of coffee, we would very likely scream, "Stop!" We would run to him and grab him and pull him away from the danger. We wouldn't start reasoning with him across the room, though we've all seen parents try it in less dire situations: "Sweetie, is that what you really want to do? Do you really think it is a good idea?" No. We'd say, "*Thou shalt not touch cups!*"

The Israelites in this passage, on one level of interpretation, represent those who are in the childhood of spirituality; therefore, many of their teachings are written in the negative. It's almost as if God is saying, "I can't explain all of this to you now, but trust me and don't do these things. In time, I'll explain." For many of us, this time of rules-based spirituality, of trying to avoid the things we shouldn't do, is the extent of our spiritual development. We remain in our spiritual childhood. Much of organized religion gets trapped at this level.

But Jesus is saying to the world that it is time to evolve toward spiritual adulthood. The rules of the Ten Commandments all still apply, but Jesus is

moving us to a new level. Instead of saying, "Don't do these things that will hurt you," Jesus is saying, "Here is the true life of happiness. Here are examples of how you should be living your life."

Today we move from the Ten Commandments, which are important rules of life, to nine spiritual teachings that lead to true happiness. The amazing thing is that, though we've read or heard these instructions a million times, they remain as radical today as they did 2,000 years ago.

Let's break them down and put them into modern language to see if we can look at them with fresh relevance for our daily lives.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." *The first step toward true happiness is to recognize that we need to grow spiritually, because in fact we are all spiritually poor.*

Only those who are humble can recognize their need to grow. Humility is the first step in any spiritual path. To begin the spiritual journey, we have to humble ourselves. All that we have is from God. We are not to confuse true, honest humility with false humility, in which we knock ourselves in an effort to gain praise for our self-abuse. True humility is not the false humility in which we belittle ourselves because we don't love ourselves. True humility is simply being honest with ourselves. We need to do an honest self-appraisal to begin this journey. Arrogance and false humility will both get in the way.

This text is often misquoted to say that those who are financially poor are more spiritual. Neither wealth nor poverty assures us of spiritual growth. Both can get in the way of our honestly seeing our true selves. Some people may be so financially well off that they begin to believe they are the authors of their lives. This is arrogance. Some may use their poverty as an excuse for evil behavior and a scarcity view of the world. This attitude also reflects a lack of trust in God; it is excuse making that holds back spiritual growth.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." *The second step in spiritual development and true happiness is to feel true sadness for what we've done wrong.*

This is repentance, and until we are sad about the evil we've inflicted on others and ourselves, we cannot move ahead.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." *The third step to true happiness is to be less arrogant and more humble in our dealings with others.*

Meekness should not be confused with weakness. It is just the opposite. To be meek is to be strong. When we are meek, we can afford to lose face and lose arguments. When we are meek, we can listen to others without having them hear us first. To be meek means not being quick to judge or criticize others, because we've looked at our own faults and recognize that we have no right to tell others what to do until we get our own houses in order.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." *The fourth step toward true happiness is to ask God's guidance for our life's mission.*

This must happen after we've made an honest assessment of ourselves, after we've recognized our need to grow, and after we've begun to change in our treatment of others. Then we are ready to grow spiritually and be truly happy. True happiness is seeking the right thing to do with our lives. True happiness is seeking to bring justice into the world. True happiness is a constant hunger to do right.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." *The fifth step toward true happiness is sharing love and kindness with others; it will then come back to you.*

After the first four steps of self-reflection and change of attitude, and after recognizing our purpose, we move from self-reflection to action. In this step, we make our faith real by applying it in our daily lives. We love those we meet each day.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." *The sixth step toward true happiness is to practice doing good to others until it comes naturally.*

At this point in our spiritual development, our heart and motivations have truly changed. We move from selfish motives to unselfish motives. We do things simply because they are right, and that gives us joy. We are generous without gaining any credit for it.

Humility is the first step in any spiritual path.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” *The seventh step toward true happiness is to bring peace to the lives of families, friends, nations, and enemies.*

This level of spiritual development takes us outside of ourselves and the circle of people we love—and who love us. We move toward building bridges between warring camps by gaining trust and respect from both sides and helping them to gain love and respect for each other.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” *The eighth step toward true happiness is to reject popularity in our attempts to bring justice and peace to the world.*

When we’ve risen beyond ourselves and those we love while really trying to bring peace to the world, the forces of evil in the world will fight back. This can be very painful. We will be demonized and lied about, and there will be name calling. Jesus assures us that this will happen in our spiritual evolution. We must truly give up wanting to be popular and loved by the world.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” *The ninth and final step of true happiness occurs when you recognize that the forces of evil will fight back against you physically.*

If you continue to grow spiritually, the forces of evil will move beyond name calling. If you evolve spiritually, you will be happy, but the forces of evil in this world will rise up against you. They will move beyond name calling to physical persecution.

The Sermon on the Mount makes the direction of our spiritual evolution clear: what begins as internal spiritual development ends with requiring that we fight for justice in the world. As we fight for justice, we are warned that we will be unpopular and ultimately physically harmed for our work. This is Jesus’ radical view of happiness, a view that is as radical today as it was in Jesus’ time.

Let me recap the nine steps to true happiness as taught to us by Jesus.

1. Recognize that we need to grow spiritually, because in fact we are all spiritually poor.
2. Recognize true sadness for what we’ve done wrong.

3. Act less arrogantly and more humbly in our dealings with others.
4. Ask God’s guidance for our life’s mission.
5. Share love and kindness with others; it will come back.
6. Practice doing good to others until it comes naturally.
7. Bring peace to the lives of families, friends, nations, and enemies.
8. Reject popularity in our attempts to bring justice and peace to the world.
9. Recognize that the forces of evil will fight back against us physically.

The first four steps are internal—looking within and changing within. These are the most crucial steps; if we truly seek this change, God will empower our angels to make these changes in our lives.

The next five steps come when our inward changes are reflected by our outward treatment of those in our circle of friends and family and the world.

So here’s the question: where are you in your spiritual development?

Are you in the early stages of self-reflection?

Are you at the stage where your internal changes are reflected in your outward actions?

Or are you at the point where your love has extended beyond your own circle to the world?

With this new perspective on the Sermon on the Mount, we can see that Jesus is telling the crowd about his own life as well. He has spent the first thirty years of his life reflecting on himself. Now his mission and ministry have brought him to love the crowds who follow him, and they love him in return. He also shows that he knows what is next for his life: he will become unpopular, and then be ridiculed and ultimately executed. In a world that tells us that money, power, beauty, sex, and celebrity will lead us to happiness, Jesus says just the opposite. If I told you I was marketing a book entitled *Nine Steps to True Happiness* that called for forgetting yourself and loving others and that the ninth step was being physically attacked, you would think I was nuts. That’s the radical message of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. That’s the ultimate ending of a life of true happiness. It is as radical and challenging now as it was then. Amen.

Monday, February 25

Jesus said, "I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them." *John 16:1-4a*

The more closely we are united to the Lord, the more clearly we seem to have our own identity, and yet the more obvious it is to us that we belong to the Lord. It seems as though the more closely we are united to the Lord the less sense of identity we have.

Divine Providence n. 42

Tuesday, February 26

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

Now since anything we do freely seems to be our own because it comes from our love (acting from our love is acting freely, as already noted), it follows that union with the Lord makes us feel that we have freedom and therefore identity; and the closer our union with the Lord, the greater our freedom and our identity. *Divine Providence n. 43*

Wednesday, February 27

"Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. . . . When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you." *John 16:7, 13-15*

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

Thursday, February 28

"A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me." Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." *John 16:16, 20-22*

Since the goal of the Lord's divine providence is a heaven from the human race, it follows that the goal is the union of the human race with the Lord. It follows also that the goal is that we should be more closely united to him and thereby be granted a more inward heaven. *Divine Providence n. 45*

Friday, March 1

"On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete. . . . The Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God." *John 16:23-24, 27*

It also follows that the goal is for us to become wiser and happier because of this union, because we are given heaven through our wisdom and in proportion to it, and this is what gives us happiness. *Ibid.*

Saturday, March 2

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

Lastly, it follows that the goal is for us to have a clearer sense of our identity and yet to be more clearly aware that we belong to the Lord. *Ibid.*

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Our Beliefs in Brief:

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

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

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

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

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