

“Nurturing Heavenly Community: Part 1”

LaPorte New Church Swedenborgian

Rev. Kit Billings

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Scripture

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Matthew 18:20

Hymns or Songs

“Psalm 62 (Only In God),” by John Michael Talbot

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCWSz0mL888>

“That’s What Friends Are For,” by Frances England

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f38QoyaFkOY>

“You Say,” by Lauren Daigle

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slaT8Jl2zpl>

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (NIV)

⁹ Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:

¹⁰ If either of them falls down,
one can help the other up.

But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up.

¹¹ Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?

¹² Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Matthew 18:20 (ESV)

[Jesus said,] “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I among them.”

Insight for Worship

Heavenly Secrets 7233 by Emanuel Swedenborg

"The understanding cannot be enlightened unless it is believed that love for the Lord and caring for the neighbor are the principal and essential things of the church."

Given that I spend the majority of my life studying, discussing and reflecting about our congregational life here at our church, as well as attending meetings and seminars on modern Christian ministry, it is impossible for me to avoid the comment now and then that goes something like this: “Ya know, Reverend, the brick and mortar

church is a thing of the past. So many people get their 'spiritual food' online or in small groups of one sort or another. Isn't it time that you 'get with the times'?"

My response to this is something like this: "As I look at this important subject, Mr. Jones, to me what matters the most is, are we focused most of all on loving the Lord and loving our neighbor as ourselves? This was the heart of Christ's message. As my favorite theologian puts it, 'Love to the Lord and caring for the neighbor make the church.' (*Secrets of Heaven* 4723).' Another way of looking at this in my opinion is, as Christ Himself said, wherever two or three are gathered together in His name, there He is in the midst of us."

Now at this point, "Mr. Jones" and I either feel inspired to dive even deeper into this great topic, or he may look at his watch and say, "Pardon me, Reverend, but I think I've got a meeting to attend to!" and, he's off!

I believe that what makes or breaks any spiritually oriented group, whether it be a group of Swedenborgian Christians, Catholic Christians, evangelicals, Presbyterians, Muslim believers, transcendentalists or Zen Buddhists is whether we are choosing to love God as we know the Divine and whether we choose to sincerely care for and nurture one another with compassion. Stated succinctly, the question is, **are we nurturing heavenly community as God encourages us to do?**

The Lord's New Christian faith teaches that spirituality is about focusing on love for the Lord and love for the neighbor. In other words, what I think intellectually or memorize doctrinally really doesn't matter that much...*if I'm not trying to live my life according to its wisdom*. Truths in our minds that stem from God's Word only seriously help us if and when we choose to love them and incorporate them into our lives and relationships. Here's an example of what I'm talking about here. Some Christian churches or groups have their major focus on having the "right or correct faith doctrine," such as memorizing the famous line, "I believe that Jesus Christ died for my sins and through His atoning death I am saved." The New Church's focus is on love---on loving the Lord so much that I not only believe in Him as God-made-visible, but also, it becomes my mission to form my life according to the Lord's Commandments---and then also on loving all people as part of God's family.

One reason I feel very much at home being a Swedenborgian or New Church Christian, is that our theology teaches that God is fully able to gradually save (or regenerate) **anyone within any faith, religion or tradition, as long as they love and follow God as they understand God, as well as caring for others from kindness and compassion**. In other words, the real issue is, is my heart wrapped around the Lord and His Divine Love for all people, and, am I really concerned with listening to other's struggles and pain, and then being willing to be of service to others and my community?

When anyone is essentially focusing his or her life on genuine spiritual issues and concerns in life, then they are dealing with what New Church teachings call ***nurturing heavenly community***. In my experience this depth of life happens quite easily really, whenever we do things like what we all are doing right now—that is, focusing on looking to the Lord and exploring His truth, with the goal of applying God’s wisdom to my own life situations and relationships. To flesh this out a bit more with you, the Lord is calling us to come together offering mutual acceptance (regardless of our failures and mistakes), giving supportive listening, and offering one another encouragement for each other’s goals. Nurturing heavenly community is also about giving compassion for other’s suffering, and sharing together what gives us hope for tomorrow.

When regular, everyday people like you and me love coming together with these kinds of *heavenly* goals, this opens up deep and wonderful channels of God’s Divine life-force to flow inside and through us in conscious ways, and when that happens....watch out world! ‘Cause God is happening here! I would add here that in my experience, forming small groups within a church community is very good to help us in nurturing heavenly community within and around us. All of our Journey Programs we have had over at Manna House, for instance, and our online Book Club that discussed the book, *Voices From An Open Door*, are great examples of small groups of people coming together to look toward the Lord, to study and apply His heavenly truths, and to listen and share together at a much deeper level than may often be achieved during a coffee hour on Sunday mornings.

Jesus our Lord once said, “**For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.**” (Mtt. 18:20) The Lord’s name, Jesus Christ, corresponds to all qualities related to love, goodness and mercy...as well as to all forms of truth and wisdom that help us in putting love into action in ways that are useful and good. To more substantively enable this to happen, it can be very helpful to engage in smaller sized support groups of one kind or another. In small groups we have an opportunity to get to know people on a deeper level, to understand their struggles, to help them in a way that is truly beneficial to them and to loving their best qualities. This is hard to do if our only interaction with others with church is a brief comment about the weather after the Sunday service.

Another amazing aspect of nurturing heavenly communities on Earth and in Heaven after we physically die, is to learn that any kind of heavenly community becomes more perfect (or more of an image and likeness of God) as more people enter into them. Our theology adds this helpful insight: “Every perfection in the heavens increases with increase of number.” (*Heaven and Hell* 418) So, the more people that are

involved in a way where they're really connecting with others, the more heavenly is the world around them! As you may be aware, our human bodies are made of not just millions or even billions of cells, but trillions of them! Science tells us that our bodies are made up of 37 trillion cells! And these cells are not identical. There is an enormous variety of types of cells that go into the structure of one body. We have heart cells, lung cells, liver cells, stomach cells, brain cells, muscle cells, bone and cartilage cells and the list goes on! All of these amazing types of cells in our bodies are not just thrown together haphazardly. Rather, in order for each kind of cell to become useful to the whole, they form together into groups---groupings that we call organs. And each organ performs its own vitally needed function, which benefits the larger whole.

So, a huge bunch of brain neuron cells form inside of our skulls to help us think, to reason, to reflect and to feel all kinds of important emotions inside. A large grouping of stomach cells enable us to digest the food we eat. Likewise, every community on Earth is also a reflection of the human form, and is made up of a wide variety of people, many who form into smaller groups who have a similar purpose, function and qualities. Small groups make it possible for a wide variety of purposes and uses to happen in life, both in our towns and cities and in our congregations. We can have groups for people who love to read and learn, and groups for those who enjoy working and doing good for others, groups for those who love gardening, groups for those in need and groups for those who love to give. But no matter what the title of a group may be, within each of them we can honor and love God and offer each other genuine friendship and love. This kind of banding together in friendship and common purpose is reflected so beautifully in *Ecclesiastes 4* and summarized in verse 12: [“A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”](#)

The Lord our Good Shepherd invites us all to help Him build the church in people's hearts, minds and lives—to help Him build heavenly communities. But the foundation of this great purpose begins with the **core principles of loving the Lord most of all and the neighbor as one's self**. As *Psalms 127* reads, [“Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.”](#) (vs. 1) It is not we ourselves who build the church, but the Lord Himself, as He is the architect. **He is our pattern and guide**. As you may recall, when the Lord was in the world, He ministered to a variety of types of groups---He preached to thousands of people, in cities and on hillsides, or to large crowds from off shore in a fishing boat; He often worked with small groups or one-on-one, as when He healed the boy possessed by a demon, or the man crippled for many years, or the woman who had a blood disease for twelve years. And of course, He ministered often to His inner circle, His twelve disciples, sometimes leading them off to a secluded place for a while. Many times He would dine at someone's home,

ministering to both family and guests while there. He even once attended a wedding, and then performed a miracle to make sure that everyone had the choicest wine to drink while in celebration.

Our Lord cared very much about building and nurturing heavenly communities—groups of people centered on love for God and one another. He helps us to understand that being a part of any heavenly community isn't hard to do: all we need to do is show up with an open heart, for this is all God requires of us to do beautiful things through us! We just need to come wanting to care for each other along the way. No wonder *Hebrews 10:24-25* reads: "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

Amen.