

“Nurturing Heavenly Community: Part 2”

LaPorte New Church Swedenborgian

Rev. Kit Billings

July 12, 2020

Scripture

Proverbs 18:24;

Proverbs 27:5-6

1 Corinthians 12:25-27

Hymns or Songs

“I Need Thee Every Hour” with lyrics

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pqYXTK4JYz8>

“The Servant Song” with lyrics

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSG1qm5KT1c>

Proverbs 18:24

A man of many companions may come to ruin,
but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

Proverbs 27:5-6

Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend;
profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

1 Corinthians 12:25-27

²⁵...that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. ²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually are members of it.

Insight for Worship

Secrets of Heaven n. 1103.2 by Emanuel Swedenborg

“In the other life everyone without exception must perform some use, because a person is born for no other purpose than that he may perform use to the community in which he is and to the neighbor, while he lives in the world, and in the other life.”

Secrets of Heaven n. 3986.4 by Emanuel Swedenborg

[4] “Moreover the good of love to God and the good of charity toward the neighbor, however various may be the truths and the affections of truth, are nevertheless receptive of genuine truth and good; for they are so to speak not hard and resisting, but are as it were soft and yielding, suffering themselves to be led by the Lord, and thus to be bent toward good, and through good to God. Very different is the case with those who are in the love of self and of the world. These do not suffer themselves to be led and bent by the Lord toward God’s goodness, but resist stiffly, for they desire to lead by themselves; and this is still more the case when they are in principles of falsity that have been confirmed. So long as they are of this character they do not admit the Divine.”

SERMON

Last Sunday I introduced you to my two-part theme on *nurturing heavenly community*. The takeaways or summary of that message was that heavenly communities exist and grow wherever people gather together in God's Name, which essentially happens whenever people are loving the Divine One as they know the Lord and loving and serving all people as the neighbor. Indeed, God cares for everyone equally and wants everyone to receive His Life-Force forever. I shared also that heavenly communities are welcoming of newcomers and that as each new person gets involved the church, community or group grows in its spiritual perfection; and all such groupings are always open to a diversity of people, thoughts and ways of worship and being "church." We noted that Christ was almost always involved in ministering to groups, both large and small, and He urged His followers, "**Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.**" (John 13:34) First and foremost, the Lord's Church on Earth is about loving the Lord most of all, and everyone as our neighbor, wanting to serve them in ways that are useful and good.

This Sunday I will add to this by focusing on these two values: 1) As Paul points out, when any one of us is suffering, we all are suffering, and when anyone is celebrating or happy, we choose to open ourselves up to enjoy their happiness with them (for we want to see each other literally as sisters and brothers). Thus, nurturing heavenly community is about having compassion for the hurts, the sufferings and battles we each are dealing with in life. And 2) we try consciously to be open to the humbling reality that here on Earth we **ALL** are spiritually "halfway baked," meaning that we all are somewhere along in the lifelong, seven-stage process of spiritual growing or regeneration; this means that developing genuine community will be difficult and painful sometimes, as we "suffer ourselves to be led by the Lord"...and this legitimate suffering is acceptable.

My first point today is built upon the premise that the Holy One (or God) **is pure, Divine, infinite Love itself**, which cherishes and values ALL PEOPLE equally, regardless of any external differences we may have. Racist cliques and "us vs them" mentalities angrily exclude those who are deemed different and unworthy. New Church theology, on the other hand, sees things this way: "The reason for our constant likeness [of God's Divine-Humanity] is that in the heavens all the qualities stem from a single love and therefore from a single source. **The single love that is the origin of everything good in heaven is love for the Lord from the Lord.**" This is why all heaven is a likeness of Him on

the grand scale, every community a likeness on a less grand scale, and every angel in specific.” (*Heaven and Hell* n. 72) God’s love wants to bless everyone and it enjoys being loved by everyone, and it also deeply enjoys wanting to become one with others through love and caring. Swedenborg wrote that a hallmark of Divine Love is that it loves feeling the joy of others as its own joy. This also means that God is always willing to suffering with us and to remain with us when we are suffering—to remain at hand and to be supportive. If ever I have wanted to truly know who is and who isn’t my real friend, all I need to do is see who shows up during my toughest days of life. This is reflected beautifully in *Proverbs 18:24*, which reads: “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

This depth of spiritual goodness and oneness was reflected in Paul’s words, which tell us that within genuine heavenly communities when one person is suffering we all are suffering together—and as our teachings say so well, we are wanting to feel someone else’s joy as our own. In other words everyone, real heavenly community **cultivates empathy**. And when we allow ourselves to suffer with those who are suffering, and to celebrate with those who are rejoicing, we let go inside of wanting to be in control in favor of releasing the Lord’s Spirit of unconditional love for all. The natural outgrowth of “love for the Lord from the Lord” is an attitude of wanting to be as useful as possible every day through spiritual friendship (as friends “stick closer together than a brother”). This is about wanting to play some part in helping everyone find purpose and happiness. Heavenly community fosters seeing every person within a church or community as a new friend, and this attitude inspires us to want to serve our community and the Lord’s church on Earth every day. Volunteerism, therefore, is another hallmark of genuine and growing heavenly communities.

On paper in a sermon like this, cultivating spiritual and heavenly community may sound simple, easy and neat—but in reality this can sometimes be the hardest thing we will ever do. This is because on this natural, worldly plane of life, we’re all dealing with the reality of both heavenly and hellish feelings, thoughts, dreams and affections all rolled up into each individual (which includes you and me). We are all caught in the middle between a battle royale of good vs. evil and true vs. false reasoning inside. When I was a boy, I used to love the old “Batman and Robin” T.V. show. It was just so very cool to witness the Dynamic Duo as the good guys versus that week’s bad guy(s), whether it was the Joker, the Penguin, the Riddler or Cat Woman. I loved it when Batman or Robin would slug it out with the bad people, with great sound effects and visuals that shouted, “Kapow!”, “Sock ‘Em!” or “Whack!” What my child’s mind didn’t

realize, however, is that here on Earth we all have both the Dynamic Duo and those various “bad guys” fighting it out inside of us every day.

To be blunt about this ongoing spiritual warfare being waged between our innate spiritual mind and our un-regenerate natural mind, we all receive elements of both within us. But conscious and wise followers of God understand that the Lord gives us a deep and God-given inner being and makes sure it is at least as equally strong as the hell-bound natural will we inherit at birth also. I like these words from a great new book of mine, *Becoming A True Spiritual Community*, written by Larry Crabb, stating: “Every Christian effort to think through what it takes to personally change necessarily involves some level of confusion and disappointment. And for good reason. Every Christian effort to actually change, especially with the help of people, is at times confusing and disappointing. The journey toward Christ is not easily mapped. Whatever map we come up with will be less than precise, and sincere attempts to follow it will not lead to a bump-free existence. Christian living, in some measure, and in some seasons more acutely than others, will always bewilder and frustrate us. What does maturity look like a week after your husband leaves you or two days after you lose your job? Does it look different in different people? What are the constants? How do spiritually committed folks handle it when memories of terrible abuse come back, or when a good friend betrays them?” (p. 23)

Yes, for me the daily road of opening up toward my God of pure, unyielding love and mercy can easily become painful and disappointing. As our theology teaches us, choosing to be open, inwardly soft, yielding to what is good and loving, yielding our often stiff-necked willfulness can hurt and cause us to cry out to God for help. Our American culture and many churches may try to convince us that achieving genuine community is as quick and easy as simply gathering together on Sunday mornings, singing a few songs, listening to God’s Word read aloud, listening to a sermon, perhaps having coffee and a pastry (or two!) and then going on our merry way. Engaging in real, heavenly community on the earth level of life, however, involves choosing authentic friendship, being honest and real with each other from love and thus “wounding a friend” in compassionate rebuke, as Proverbs wisely tells us, instead of kissing each other on the cheek while secretly harboring anger or ill-will.

Now you can see why I quoted from *Secrets of Heaven n. 3986.4*: “Moreover the good of love to God and the good of charity toward the neighbor...are receptive of genuine truth and good; for they are so to speak not hard and resisting, but are as it were soft and yielding, suffering themselves to be led by the Lord, and thus to be bent to good, and through good to Him. Very different is the case with those who are in the

love of self and of the world. These do not suffer themselves to be led and bent by the Lord and to the Lord, but resist stiffly, for they desire to lead themselves....”

In conclusion, this is why whenever conflict, tensions or serious problems sprout up within any good, growth-oriented church community (including our own), the more the spiritual and rational part of us can grab a hold of the reigns inside of us and wisely whisper inside of us, “Hey (*here insert your own name*), remember...conflict or problems aren’t often fun, but what a great opportunity this is to try to love others as myself, to love others as the Lord loves them, even when I feel confused or disappointed.” The truth is, the Lord doesn’t give up on anyone! He’s striving constantly to guide *everyone* toward Heaven...toward what is good and true. Larry Crabb says again, “We need each other, never more than when we are most broken. But brokenness is not a disease, like cancer, that may or may not develop. Brokenness is a condition, one that is always there, inside, beneath the surface, carefully hidden for as long as we can keep a facade in place. We live in brokenness. We just don’t always see it, either in ourselves or in others.” (ibid, p. 33) God is not afraid of legitimate suffering for the cause of love. The Lord’s Word tells us this about the suffering Messiah: He was “a Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.” (Isaiah 53:3)

Whatever it takes for you to be willing to turn yourself spiritually toward the Lord, *especially when you don’t feel like it*, yes...at times to *suffer yourself to regenerate*...turning toward God who is Love and compassion itself, *just do it*. For me, this involves reflecting on God’s Word often, praying often, asking God *seriously* for help, and letting myself weep or cry when tears and sadness or hurt need to flow. May you remain soft-hearted and yielding, my friends, and allow yourself to suffer to be led and bent by the Lord, who is Love.

Amen.