

“The Lord’s Boundless Mercy”

LaPorte New Church Swedenborgian

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Scripture Readings

Psalm 145:8-9,14-18

John 14:23; 15:14

Hymns/Songs

"Jesus Loves Even Me" 248

"Slow Down" by Sissel (Kit will play in YouTube with Mormon Tabernacle Choir; first 4:52)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFe84U kt8>

"O Perfect Love" 333

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPxr06tkYcl&t=43s>

Psalm 145:8-9,14-18

⁸ The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

⁹ The LORD is good to all,
and his mercy is over all that he has made.

[The LORD is faithful in all his words
and kind in all his works.]

¹⁴ The LORD upholds all who are falling
and raises up all who are bowed down.

¹⁵ The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.

¹⁶ You open your hand;
you satisfy the desire of every living thing.

¹⁷ The LORD is righteous in all his ways
and kind in all his works.

¹⁸ The LORD is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.

John 8:1-11

A Woman Caught In Adultery

¹ Jesus returned to the Mount of Olives. ² Early the next morning He came back to the temple. All the people came to Him, and He sat down and taught them. ³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman before Him who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst ⁴ they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" ⁶ This they said to test Him, that they might have some charge to bring against Him. But Jesus bent down and wrote with His finger on the ground. ⁷ And as they continued to ask Him, He stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸ And once more He bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ But when they

heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before Him. ¹⁰ Jesus stood up and said to her, “**Woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?**” ¹¹ She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus then said to her, “**Then, neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.**”

Insight for Worship

Revelation Explained 392.4 by Emanuel Swedenborg

“The Lord loves everyone, and does good to everyone from love; consequently where that life is received the Lord is present and is conjoined to the person, and thus flows into his higher mind which is called the spiritual mind, and by light from himself opens it.”

SERMON: “The Lord’s Boundless Mercy”

It’s often said that God is Love—in fact, the Apostle John wrote those very words. He said, “God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.” (*1 John 4:16*) All too often, however, this idea gets misunderstood. Sometimes it’s taken to mean that God is nothing but an amorphous feeling. Other times people claim that God is Love, yet they also speak of Him as though He’s capable of turning away from His people or growing cold towards them. But Love does not do those things. The Lord eternally and unyieldingly loves every single human being, from the moment of our conception all through our lives on Earth, and then on into eternity...regardless of whether we choose a heavenly or a hellish pathway. In fact, the Lord loves every one of us—even as He teaches us, very clearly, what we should and shouldn’t do. And yet, as simple as this idea is, it can be very hard to grasp.

I’m reminded of one of my favorite life events of Christ’s ministry involving the woman caught in adultery (*John 8:1-11*), which is one of the best-known stories in the Gospels. In this story the scribes and Pharisees bring to the Lord a woman “caught in adultery, in the very act” (v. 4). And they inform Him saying, “Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such people should be stoned. But what do You say?” (v. 5). The whole situation is obviously supposed to be a trap. The Pharisees clearly imagined that the Lord would have no choice but to either reject the law of Moses—and thereby throw away His credibility—or state that the stern sentence should be upheld, thereby making Himself seem less than compassionate in the eyes of the public.

I must say, those Pharisees were a crafty bunch, don’t you think?

The setup was a mockery of justice to begin with. The Pharisees did indeed know the law—but why were they dragging this woman into the street to be judged in public? Where was the man with whom she had committed adultery? The Lord’s first

act was to communicate that He wanted nothing to do with any of it. He “stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear” (v. 6). But when they pressed Him, He turned the situation around by revealing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees: famously, He told them, “**Let he who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.**” (v. 7)

All this is powerful, but what’s perhaps the most powerful part of the story occurs right at the very end. When the crowd was gone and the Lord was alone with this woman, He asked her if anyone had condemned her. When she said no, He told her, “**Then, neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.**” (v. 11)

These words sum up the Lord’s entire attitude towards our sins. He does not condemn us either. In fact, He never condemns us. He has absolutely no interest in condemnation; it doesn’t serve His purpose. Why? Because He loves us, through and through. He wants to make us happy and bring us to Heaven, which means, guiding us into our own long and lasting *heavenly character*. How would condemning us serve these purposes? It’s antithetical to His attitude towards us. The Heavenly Doctrines of the Lord’s New Christianity make this point very clearly:

“The Lord is as far from cursing or being angry with anyone as the sky is from the earth. Who can believe that the Lord, who is all-knowing and all-powerful, who with wisdom rules the universe, and so who is infinitely superior to all weaknesses, could be angry with such pitiful dust, that is, with human beings?”
(*Secrets of Heaven 1093*)

Now, being described as “pitiful dust” isn’t exactly comforting. When we describe something as “pitiful,” usually what we mean by that is that it’s worthy of our contempt. But the whole point of my reflection with you today is that the Lord is incapable of contempt. We may read contempt into the idea of pity, but it doesn’t have to be there. In this passage, “pitiful” simply means worthy of pity. Someone in a “pitiful” state is someone who needs help. And—at least in comparison with God—all of us desperately need help. How could the Lord not look at us with pity, or with compassion?

And as for us being “dust”—again, we can read a note of contempt into this statement, but it doesn’t have to be there. To say that we’re like dust in regard to the Lord simply means that compared to Him we’re powerless, and really small. Another way to put it is that God is so much bigger than we tend to realize—***including and especially His infinite Love for us—and not just us, but for EVERYONE!*** Even those persons we consider unworthy of our love, you know...the ones we merely put up with? The ones that we pity because of the way they dress or because they’ve covered their body with too many ghastly tattoos, yes, God’s Love is way bigger than them as well. If we were a speck of dust on the ground, He, by comparison, would be bigger than creation itself.

Imagine an adult being angry with a child. Not just scolding or disciplining a child, but actually being angry with that child—rejecting them, treating them with coldness, looking for vindication. We would say that that adult was out of line, right? The emotional and mental “smallness” of the child, in comparison with the adult, makes that sort of anger especially inappropriate. In comparison with God, we are that child—and in fact we’re so much smaller still. We’re a piece of dust on the ground, and He’s greater than the whole starry sky. How could He be angry with us? How could He ever see us as anything but wayward children who need His help—children who need His compassion?

All of these ideas are held within the Lord’s statement that He does not condemn us. Compassion is the very foundation of His relationship with us. He is incapable of coming to us with a critical heart, incapable of turning up His nose at us, incapable of turning away His face with disapproval. And this is true even when we sin. The Lord said that He would not condemn a woman who had been caught in the very act of adultery—and adultery is no small sin. He knows all too well how much pain adultery causes.

He does not want that pain. He has compassion on us even when we make destructive choices, but He also sees (much more clearly than we do) just how much hurt those choices cause. He will not condemn us, but we’re capable of condemning ourselves—and boy are we excellent at doing that, aren’t we? In fact, many of us become experts at emotionally condemning ourselves. This is what it means to live with a verdict of shame inside of our own hearts—judging ourselves as unworthy of mercy and forgiveness, when in reality God never gives up on us, and is ALWAYS merciful and caring towards us.

And this is what He wants us to face squarely, openly and with 100% conviction, that even though we have often committed sinful, wrongful choices and attitudes towards others and ourselves, still He is bidding us to have mercy.

But why? Why would the Lord want us to have mercy and to stop hardening our hearts towards others and towards ourselves? I mean this question seriously (and joyfully)? Why would God want us to always have mercy towards one another and towards ourselves?

Because, my friends, THIS IS WHAT PURE, BOUNDLESS, INFINITE, DIVINE LOVE does! It loves. It hopes and it never gives up. It tries to lovingly bend us toward itself. So, now we know why our great and merciful Lord, Jesus Christ, told that woman caught in adultery that He didn’t condemn her. Because, plain and simply...He loved her. But then, look what He said next to her; He also told her, “Go and sin no more.” He didn’t flinch away from calling her sin a sin. That wouldn’t have helped her make a better choice down the road—and so it would not have been loving for Jesus not to “call a spade a spade.”

Would you agree? Indeed, our Lord is infinitely wise, and that means He knows what will make us happy and what will not. Being Love itself, He's not content to simply let us make unhappy choices. He'll allow us to walk an unhappy path if we insist on it. But, because He is Love itself, He works eternally and unyieldingly to show us a better way when needed. **To put it very simply: His goal is to save us.** His goal is to save us from our sins and lead us to the greatest joy that we can possibly receive. Never—not for the smallest instant—does this cease to be His goal. And anger is incompatible with this goal. To abandon us would be incompatible with this goal. Condemnation is incompatible with this goal. Not for the smallest instant does He waver from this purpose.

At this point, I'd like to let our marvelous New Church theology have the last word on all of this now, as I close my sermon this morning:

[The Lord is] Love itself, to which no other attributes are appropriate than those of pure Love and so of pure Mercy towards the whole human race, that Mercy being such that it wills to save all people, to make them eternally happy, and to impart to them all that is its Own—thus out of pure Mercy and by the mighty power of love to draw towards Heaven, that is, towards Itself, all who are willing to follow. (Secrets of Heaven 1735)

I know why it is that sometimes I choose to harden my heart towards those that I consider to be un-savable or beyond the effort of a merciful attitude. It's because it is easier for me to have a hardened, stiff-necked heart inside...rather than take the time and energy to be soft-hearted. Because if I pull myself in the direction of having mercy, love and kindness towards everyone, then at some point I will need to cry—to weep big, warm, soft tears of sadness for others and myself when we choose to be harsh, condemning and angry. Swedenborg actually wrote once that “mercy is love weeping.”

But guess what, everyone? Even if we choose to be hard-hearted inside and stiff-necked for much of our lives...still, our gracious and loving “**LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made. [The LORD is faithful in all his words and kind in all his works.] ¹⁴ The LORD upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down.**” (Ps. 145:8,14) Amen.

LET US PRAY...

God of Goodness, we often come into your presence so aware of our human frailty and yet overwhelmed by your Love at the same time. So please, Lord, overwhelm us again, and again, and again with your Love, your mercy, your grace. I thank you, Lord, that there is no human experience that any of us might walk through where your healing Love cannot reach us. As we have heard in your Holy Word, “If I climb the highest mountain you are there and yet if I find myself in the darkest valley of my life, you are there as well.” Teach me today to love you more, gracious One...even if it

means that I will need to cry rivers and rivers of tears, to soften my heart toward your boundless and merciful Love. Help me to rest, Lord, to intentionally SLOW DOWN inside, so that I no longer rush past your oceanic and saving Love, which asks nothing more of us than the simple, trusting heart of a child.

Amen.