

# “Deep Significance In Membership”

LaPorte New Church Swedenborgian

Rev. Kit Billings, M.Div., M.A.

October 2, 2022

## **Scriptures**

Psalm 100

Matthew 16:13-20

## **Hymns/Songs**

“Tis A Gift to Be Simple” 621

“There Is a Balm In Gilead” 792

“Come, Thou Fount” 82

## **Psalm 100**

### ***The Lord’s Steadfast Love Endures Forever***

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!

<sup>2</sup> Serve the LORD with gladness!

Come into His presence with singing!

<sup>3</sup> Know that the LORD, He is God!

It is He who made us, and we are His;

we are His people, and the sheep of His pasture.

<sup>4</sup> Enter His gates with thanksgiving,

and His courts with praise!

Give thanks to Him; bless His name!

<sup>5</sup> For the LORD is good;

His steadfast love endures forever,

and His faithfulness to all generations.

## **Matthew 25:14-30**

### ***Peter Confesses Jesus as The Christ***

<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” <sup>14</sup> And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.” <sup>15</sup> He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” <sup>20</sup> Then He strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that He was the Christ.

**MAY THE GOOD LORD BLESS THE HEARING,  
THE UNDERSTANDING AND THE LIVING OF HIS HOLY WORD. AMEN**

**Insights for Worship**

*Heaven and Hell* 56

“Heaven is where the Lord is recognized, trusted, and loved.”

*True Christianity* 484

“But, my friend, abstain from evil, and do what is good, and believe in the Lord with your whole heart and your whole soul; and the Lord will love you and give you love for what you do and faith in what you believe. Then you will do what is good because of love and you will believe because you have faith, which is confidence. And if you persevere like this, a reciprocal partnership [with the Lord] will develop and become permanent. This is salvation itself and eternal life.”

**SERMON: “Deep Significance In Membership”**

When you look back over the past 50 years, how would you characterize the overall spiritual and psychological trajectory of human beings in our world? If I were to answer this large question, I would have to say that on the positive side I believe humanity as a whole has grown a lot both psychologically and spiritually. I believe this is true because of the enormous advancement in psychology generally speaking, because we know now how very important it is to honor our hurts and woundedness, to pay attention to the symptoms of PTSD, to support people who are in grief, to pay close attention to and when needed to intervene where domestic abuse or incest may be happening. We also are much more compassionately concerned about and are willing to listen carefully and wisely to both our children’s and us adults when we are feeling depressed, hopeless, overly anxious all the time—and we know much, much more now about the truth of the diseases we call alcoholism, drug addiction and the evils of racism, prejudice and discrimination.

But while these and many other advancements within the human psyche in general are real and true, there are ways in which humanity has degenerated and grown much weaker, in my opinion. Racism, judgmentalism, hatred, religious fundamentalism and fanaticism are still very real monsters within a significant portion of both Americans in general and our world population as a whole. And there is another rampant weakness within our country’s various cultures as a whole, which is that we are living in a very non-committal age. Both Christians and non-Christians as a whole are much less inclined to find a religious and spiritual home or place to put down our roots and make

long-standing, objective commitments for the good of others or for ourselves. Many more people today want to keep our options open, and above all, preserve our own freedom of choice, rather than make a covenant for the long haul and embrace a framework for real life in all of its ups and downs.

But, there are some who are willing to go against the grain of our overall non-committal culture. There are those who want to join the rebellion, so to speak, and pledge their loyalty and engagement to the church, mosque or synagogue that speaks to their soul's need for having a strong, solid religious foundation. Yes, there are those who are willing to hear the voice of God calling out to them to make a covenant commitment to helping the Lord and others who are very willing to be committed caretakers of their own church, knowing that the spiritual and religious needs of future generations are in their hands.

It is true that the New Testament makes no direct argument for our modern concept of membership. The Gospel's initial advance into a pagan and pre-Christian world was a different situation than we find today in our increasingly post-Christian society. The complexities of life two millennia later—after Christ urged His followers to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”—make church-belonging as difficult, and as important, as ever (Mtt. 28:19-20).

But whether you call it “membership,” “partnership,” or something else, the New Testament assumes some form of committed, accountable belonging as a reality for every fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ. Here then are four reasons why it is wise and very significant for us to put down our spiritual roots, go against the non-committal grain of modern society, and join a particular local church, which feels like “home” to your soul.

First, being accepted into membership within any loving and faithful kind of church fellowship gives us our own conscious assurance and affirmation that this religion that makes deep, spiritual sense to my heart and mind and that has helped the Lord to feed and strengthen my life for the good, is an essential way for me to find and follow the Lord's divine Light of truth, which sheds light upon my path and helps me find the way forward into a life that is good and true. Also, becoming a member of one of the Lord's New Christian churches invigorates my own confidence that my faith is real, that it's not my own private, self-made religion, but part of the Lord's true Second

Coming in Spirit and truth, which reveals to the world the vitally needed inner meaning of the Lord's Holy Word.

Second, and this is perhaps the most often overlooked reason for joining a church: In our proclivity to self-focus, we consider most readily how our joining of a church relates directly to us and our well-being—but, how easily we may overlook how our membership relates to and powerfully affects others. In other words, our belonging somewhere establishes a base from which we can reliably care for others—where I am accountable to and help others to remain accountable to our Lord's eternal truth that we are called to "love others as well as ourselves." There are two sides to church membership, and we can't keep others accountable for their good to a covenant we ourselves haven't taken.

Allegiance to something greater than ourselves is a necessary ingredient for discovering our highest spiritual being and potential. True love is not only manifest in affection and action, but also within allegiance. Speaking for myself, I have learned that I cannot fully love my sisters and brothers in Christ if I withhold pledging my allegiance to them by covenanting with them in local-church life. In other words, *Love doesn't say, "I love these people and don't need to covenant with them." Rather, it says, "I love these people enough to covenant with them, and climb aboard the spiritual train that's bound for Heaven!"* When we deeply examine the truths of Heaven found in both God's Word and within our New Church theology, we find that living the Christian life in community is more than just loose associations, but committing to each other to be there for each other when life is hard, in sickness and in sorrow.

Third, on the flip side of the coin, it is for your own good to have others committed to genuinely caring for you in our Lord Jesus Christ's eternal Spirit and Love. The people who will care for you best in the long run are those who are willing to commit to it.

And fourth and lastly, joining a church and becoming a member is extremely good for your own perseverance in the faith. Let's face it, it is easy for any of us to begin to wander far afield off of a good, wise pathway of following the Lord. Temptations and evil impulses will come out of nowhere (or if you like baseball, out of "left field"). Evil spirits are real and they use very clever means to entice us away from our allegiance to the Lord and the wisdom of His Church on Earth. After all my friends, as Jesus said Himself, "...the love of many will grow cold. <sup>13</sup> But the one who endures to the end will be saved. <sup>14</sup> And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations." (Mtt. 24:12-14)

I will end my reflection with you this morning on the Lord's Sabbath Day, a day of spiritual reflection, worship and doing good to our neighbors, by referring you back to that powerful moment between the Lord and His twelve disciples in *Matthew 25* this morning. At first Jesus asked them, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Several of them responded with incorrect answers. And then the Lord looked them in the eye and said, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.**" And then the Lord pronounced to them that on this central truth of His divinity, on this cornerstone of truth He would build His Church. And He further told them that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

So I ask you: does joining our church (or any good Christian church on Earth) help you or hinder you in binding all that is good and true in God's Word in your daily *intentions, words and actions*? And, is your own involvement in this ministry helping you or hindering you in your own gradual growth as an angel-in-training? If your answer is "Yes," then know that this church needs you. We need you as a member, to continue helping the Lord building His New Church on Earth as it is in Heaven.

Amen.