

Sermon Theme: *What have we learned together? What are the good things we will keep? What are the harmful patterns we will leave behind so we will no longer harm one another and our shared ministry? What, indeed, is the treasure our heart is fixed upon attaining? "Our primary vocation is that of developing values and loves that comprise heavenly character" (quote is from Rev. F. Robert Tafel. Pastor Emeritus Cambridge Swedenborg Chapel, www.swedenborgchapel.org, SUNDAY MORNING FORUM, BIBLE STUDY & SWEDENBORGIAN IDEAS, PENTECOST 11: Treasure In Heaven; found at <http://www.swedenborgchapel.com/church/lectionaryC.html>).*

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Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Luke 12:32-40

"What to Keep? What to Leave Behind?"

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Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

1The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. ... 10Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! 11What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. 12When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; 13bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation— I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. 14Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. 15When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. 16Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, 17learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. 18Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. 19If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; 20but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Psalms 50:1-9, 22-23 (Ps 50:1-6 used as responsive litany in worship)

1The mighty one, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. 2Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth. 3Our God comes and does not keep silence, before him is a devouring fire, and a mighty tempest all around him. 4He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people: 5"Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!" 6The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge. Selah 7"Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God. 8Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me. **9I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds.** ...22"Mark this, then, you who forget God, or I will tear you apart, and there will be no one to deliver. 23Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honor me; to those who go the right way I will show the salvation of God."

Luke 12:32-40

32"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 33Sell 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. 34For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. 35"Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; 36be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. 37Blessed are those slaves whom the

master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. 38If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. 39"But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. 40You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Swedenborg

The use of 'digging through a house' to mean secretly taking away another's good has its origin in representatives in the next life. There when angels are talking about falsity secretly destroying good, this destruction appears as the digging through of a wall when it is represented on a lower level, where the things angels talk about are manifested in visual images. On the other hand, when angels are talking about truth approaching good and linking itself to it, that approach is represented as an open door through which people enter. This is why the Lord, who spoke in accordance with representatives in heaven and in accordance with correspondences, says ... in Luke (12:39), Know this, that if the householder had known at what hour the thief was coming he would certainly have been awake and would not have permitted his house to be dug through. Here also 'the thief' is one who destroys forms of the good of faith by means of falsities. 'Digging through a house' means carrying out such destruction secretly, since it is done when the householder is not awake.

Arcana Celestia #9125.3

I remember seeing, during my second or third year of seminary, some students wearing t-shirts with writing in Hebrew from Psalm 50:9 (today's opening litany is from Psalm 50:1-6) on them. Psalm 50:9 in the NRSV reads, elegantly enough, "*I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds.*" Well, apparently the Hebrew is more forceful: "*I will take no bull from your house*", in which we discern the double meaning of the modern American pun.

Although one wonders if the ancient Hebrew writer didn't also have that same pun in mind in his own context, because that double meaning fits perfectly the sense of the Psalm. Its writer took his contemporaries to task for missing the point of bringing animal and other sacrifices to the altar during their services of worship. Instead of exhibiting spiritual truth and justice and compassion in society in their everyday lives, they continued to desecrate the altar of the everyday world through how they mistreated their neighbors, made alliances with those who did the same, failed to honor and assist members of their own families, and used their lives for evil rather than for good.

In the same way, the prophet Isaiah wrote to the people out of the heat of divine anger and love, for they failed the ancient test of hospitality toward the stranger, and neglected treating those without standing with justice during the week while attending temple services on the Sabbath. He reported God's word to his listeners (Is. 1:16-17): "*Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.*" This was, he was saying, true worship of God; and God would not listen to or accept their Sabbath worship, no matter how well it was done, until they changed their ways in the world, the way they put what was good and right and true in their hearts into practice.

We do not know how the readers of the Psalm and of Isaiah responded to these hard words, but we hear the same words with the awareness that we too are perfectly capable of both doing good and committing evil acts, of bringing heaven or hell to earth.

The human situation is that of learning from our own miscues, our shortcomings, our tendency to miss the mark. We respond to the push and pull of the present anxious moment without thought for the power we wield in that moment for good or for harm. We forget our core values, which guide us through the complexities of our lives with at least some congruence with our faith in the Lord.

Jesus cuts through the spiritual fog and asks us where we truly live and move and have our being; he asks us, "what lies at the center of your turning world?". He asks, "What holds your gaze when the pressure is on, when the chips are down and the decisions have to be made, and people are looking at you and waiting for you to respond to their question, their threat, their line drawn in the sand, their values?" And really, you know, the core question is, "Whom or what do you worship?" (Luke 12:34) *"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

We could see the two years we have spent together in this interim process as being ultimately about the answer to that question. We have unveiled your history and interpreted it; identified your core values and how you live them out, or not; encouraged shifts of involvement in the life of this congregation as people needed to let go or take on leadership responsibilities; connected more consciously with the denomination in its national, regional, and local contexts, and we have moved toward calling a new minister into leadership.

What have we discovered?

Plenty, for those with eyes of faith who are able to see. Allow me to name a few things we have learned over the last two years, for the purpose of pointing out those elements of our shared life and ministry which point to the heart of who you are, and which are well worth remembering and bringing to bear on the present moment.

a) The faith that the same Lord who moved in the life of the minister most often named as the founding pastor, Joseph Worcestor, is present with you today. You occupy the 5th church building to bear the name of 'The New Jerusalem' or 'Swedenborgian' in this city, and you are the next generation to join together under that banner. It is the same eternal Lord who has called you together, has moved in your midst, holds you as you continue in your transition toward the future, and promises to be with you. The Lord does not promise success, only his continued presence within you as you continue to seek wisdom.

b) The knowledge that you are the faith descendants of a group of people who formed, in 1852, under Rev. Doughty, the first Swedenborgian congregation in this city. They did so with the awareness that the sheer physical distance from the center of the denomination's life, and thus the difficulty of communicating with that center, meant that they had to find their own way while acknowledging their connection to the center. In other words, they improvised, according to the needs of their context on the western edge of this continent, while holding to the central tenets of their faith. Improvisation, experimentation, taking risks, daring to take bold steps while trusting the Lord and one another for the results, will continue to be important for you, as it is with many faith communities during this time of rapid change. Without the willingness to think outside the box, faith communities lose the flexibility necessary to regenerate themselves through their ministry to new populations and rising generations.

c) The fact that one pastor cannot do everything in this ministry, and be everything to everybody, and should not try. Between bringing in income for the upkeep of the building through the Rites and Sacraments ministry, ministering to the congregation itself through by designing worship and preaching, teaching classes, providing pastoral care, and taking a major role in the day-to-day administration of this congregation, ministers of this congregation have historically been unable to give full attention to the building up of the congregation itself. Even the equivalent of almost two full time ministers could not do everything during the heyday of the 1990's, and as a result your 115 year old buildings must receive a great deal of care within the next few years to remain viable containers of the complex life of this congregation. The members and friends of this congregation are not merely spectators at a weekly holy performance. The Lord always called his disciples to the privilege and responsibility of ministry, which meant that they became ministers in their own right, both of words, and most importantly, of actions. The way I put it is this: *the pastors of this congregation have always had a ministry, or several ministries; but what is the ministry of the congregation itself?*

d) The difference between confidentiality and secrets. Confidentiality is the glue that enables trusting friendships and ethical pastor-parishioner relationships to continue and flourish. I need to know that if I unburden myself to a friend, with the request that what I say remain between us, that he or she will keep what I have shared between us rather than telling others. I need to feel secure in that basic assurance of trust. Secrets, on the other hand, have within them the power to bring destruction to a relationship or community. They are known by one person or by a few people 'in the know' and they can be used to control others, or to protect the reputations of those who have broken the public trust. They should be brought out into the open in appropriate ways, so that they are constructively named and dealt with. When they are treated in this way, they soon lose their power to control and damage relationships and communities from the safety of the shadowy places in which they live.

e) The hard-earned knowledge that professional and personal boundaries are necessary for the health and well being of your ministers and thus of your congregation. The boundary between professional and personal life is an obvious boundary; another is the faithful observance of ethical relationships between ministers and parishioners. The failure to do so in the past has wounded this congregation's emotional life. One result of this is an ongoing struggle to understand how to work with your minister as a full partner in ministry, rather than someone who needs to be managed on one hand, or practically deified on the other.

f) The realization that well-thought-out definitions of the roles of ministers, Council, and congregation will assist you in holding clear and realistic expectations of one another. What is left murky or vague leaves a lot of room for misunderstanding and discontent, which can lead to the eruption of unnecessary conflict around who is to do what for the benefit of the whole community.

g) The understanding that a minister or Council or congregation cannot keep everyone happy, and in fact should not try to do so. Trying to make everyone feel good is a recipe for disaster, as the value of love is subverted by weakening the equal value of truth, and there is no forward movement. Love and truth are intertwined in such a way that they must not be separated. If the Lord Jesus had separated love from truth in his ministry, he would not have said things such as, *"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* He laid it on the line over and over again, both within his own life, and in his teaching, because of his dedication to both essential values which are integral to the very nature of the universe. When we separate love and truth we do so out of the anxiety that some people will not like us and may sever their relationship with us, or out of our need to keep a sense of control of the situation. Either way, we are in danger of losing our spiritual and emotional balance, along with our integrity.

h) And finally, this congregation's lived experience of the theological and spiritual movement of regeneration. Becoming aware of one's true state is not our first desire when we wake up in the morning – usually breakfast is the first order of the day. Yet, unless we become aware of who and what we are, we cannot grow into what we are meant to become. The Biblical narrative is about the formation of human beings into a community, and ultimately a global community, that approximates the New Jerusalem, or the Kingdom of God, on earth. God is not done with you, or with me, or with humanity, yet. That gritty inner movement of repentance, reformation, and regeneration, is as necessary and good as it is challenging, and it is the way of the Lord for us and for the creation itself. Becoming new, or renewed, is the way heaven is brought closer to earth, or vice versa. These days we speak of that approach in terms such as seeking justice for all; living with a deeper connection to the earth and all living things; becoming more aware that a small change in one place can result in a much larger shift somewhere else; living into wholeness, or shalom, or salvation.

The Gospel reads, *(Luke 12:35-38) "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the*

door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves."

This speaks of people who are awake to themselves and to the Lord who is coming to them and in a very real sense already present with them. They are conscious of their ultimate values, and they are willing to live by those values, though doing so demands much of them, because they know the high calling of God. That calling has at least three facets. The first: bring the individual's internal community of voices toward a level of maturity that not only lovingly wills the good and true, but incarnates it, brings it to the external level of word and action for the good of the other with whom one is in relationship. The second facet is this: that a collectivity of individuals becomes a true community when it learns that the 'us' is at least as important as the 'I'. The third facet is that the 'us' exists for a greater purpose than merely existing as 'us'; and that purpose is sharing the light of love and truth in concrete ways with the 'they', that is, the larger community 'out there'. How else will a more global community of inner peace and societal justice come to pass?

I feel as though I have said almost too much for today. That is the preacher's temptation hidden within the saying of goodbyes which are meant to bless and encourage over several weeks. This community's life is long and complex, and you have deep riches to share with the world, and of course much to learn, as do I.

Perhaps we can focus on the wonder of the spiritual journey by listening to this poem by Rumi, which I found online, as our conclusion for today.

Become the Sky

"Inside this new love...die

Your way begins on the other side.

Become the sky.

Take an axe to the prison wall.

Escape

Walk out like someone suddenly born into color

Do it now

You're covered with thick cloud

Slide out the side.

Die....and be quiet

Quietness is the surest sign that you've died.

Your old life was a frantic running away from silence.

The speechless full moon comes out now."

May it become so. Amen.