

“Keeping the Peace”

Sermon of July 10, 2005 to The Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco by Janet Council

Dear Lord, Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The attainment of peace is a most desirable fruit of salvation in all of the world's religions. There is the inner peace that brings tranquility to our hearts and clarity to our minds...where there is freedom from disorder, anxiety, fear and annoyance. There is the outward peace that brings harmony among people and nations. Peace is created by our efforts. It is our responsibility to become peacemakers and reconcile conflict within ourselves and with others.

That effort begins with me...and with you. How does our faith support peace? How do our lives influence peace?

It takes courage to live in this world. Sometimes we face disillusionment, monotony, weariness, illness, emptiness, unfaithfulness and pain. When you are challenged by life, do you sometimes find yourself hitting a wall spiritually? My deep appreciation of what I have to be grateful for is sometimes overshadowed by the circumstance that rocks me for a period of time. I am more likely to bask in the glow of God's world on a good day. On a less than good day, I might choose agitation rather than peace. When I am troubled, my old habit is to get wrapped up in "ain't it awful" instead of in trust. I lose my peace.

Our theology offers beautiful descriptions of the origin of peace and how we are able to access it. Swedenborg tells us that peace emanates from the Lord's divine love. That peace is the very heart of the delight that comes from what is good and true. That peace is the source of all joy. The Lord is the Prince of peace, and peace comes from him, and peace is in him. Sabbath was instituted as a reminder of quietness. Sabbath became the holiest symbol of the church. Sabbath is the union of the Lord's divine human with heaven and with the church, and it is that state of oneness through which peace and salvation come to earth to us. Inner peace is only found through wisdom, which is the origin of the good and the true. Inner peace is the result of being regenerated.

So we see that peace is not just the peace of mind we experience when anxieties are banished and things are going well for us. Freedom from anxiety may look like peace, but peace only occurs in that which is good, to those focused on heavenly good. Peace flows from the Lord into the core of those focused on heavenly good. It comes into the core of our lower natures causing peace of mind, relief of the spirit, and consequent joy. If our apparent calm comes from getting our own way, it is outward only, with no inward substance.

Swedenborg says that when we rage on the inside with hostility, vengefulness and cruelty or cravings, and our spirits rush into these feelings our delight is at home in insanity. The delight of people involved in good is at home in wisdom. That is the difference between heaven and hell. Swedenborg says do not find your peace in restlessness, for true peace is like spring on earth.

I became a member of this church for several reasons. I felt the sacredness of this space. I found the folks that attend here to be a very interesting group and found the experience to be spiritually, intellectually and socially satisfying. And my life wasn't working for me. My first service here was in the winter of 1999...the winter of my discontent. I was often angry, dissatisfied, depressed, unfulfilled, yes, restless and searching for... for WHAT??? I really wasn't sure. I was only sure that it was time for a change. I had begun exploring different ways to make a living, and different ways to engage in life. In retrospect, I see what I was looking for more clearly. I was looking for stillness, silence, serenity and tranquility. I was looking for peace.

In this church, I found a community of seekers and a safe place to explore the deepest parts of myself from a spiritual perspective. This church offered a connection with people that were also

looking for ways to be better, to contribute. About 12 of us started a spiritual growth group that lasted about 3 years and was instrumental in giving us the tools to put our attention on our newly defined intentions.

Thoughts tend to follow where our intentions lead. Thought is our inner sight and if it is turned toward heaven it becomes heavenly. This is how we define what Swedenborg calls our ruling love. In that shared experience of the spiritual growth group as well as Sunday services, Wednesday night classes, retreats and service, I began to sort out what I needed to do. I began to see how being single and childless could contribute to a life of self-absorption -- a real "aha" moment for me. I became involved in new ways with my community and that involvement contributed to dramatic changes in my life and work. It was a unique and divinely inspired experience. It seemed amazingly simple after years of struggling with myself. It was interesting, exciting, and fulfilling...it was instant gratification -- it FELT good. It seemed that as soon as I knew what I wanted -- it manifested.

WOW... why hadn't I caught on to THIS before?? This was easy!!

Well... it lasted for a while. I had tricked myself into believing that I could plant the garden and not tend it. It is in the work the struggle and the effort that we realize our full potential. So, when I got sloppy with my spiritual practice, resentful of the perceived time and work that it demanded, when my actions became contingent on my mood -- I noticed that I quickly became overwhelmed and I would freeze...it felt like I was being lazy... I found myself with a new set of problems to work through.

But...hey... at least I noticed that I had something to work on...it was a start.

Which leads me to today's topic... If I had sought and found peace, how was I to keep the peace?

It made sense to revisit what had worked before... although the same things didn't work in the same way and what I used to call my "spirituality" seemed to get lost in the effort... it needed to evolve... and it felt more like work than I was expecting. I'm definitely in the beginning stages... and beginning again and again...you get the picture.

So, it's back to the drawing board. Swedenborg tells us to act 'as if'... to trust in trust and have faith in faith. So I trust that this work will stay with me... or rather, that I will make the choice to hold onto it. So it was back to focusing on a daily spiritual practice, quiet time, living the 10 commandments and trusting that I am loved and nourished by my God in a way that the world cannot give me. Swedenborg tells us that the spiritual world is present in everyday life... Heaven and Hell are present here and now, and we must notice, are we in Heaven or are we in Hell?

Free will allows us to choose Heaven or Hell and develop the new habits necessary to choose heaven. This is regeneration. So rejoice when you see your failings... for they cannot be taken away unless we see them, admit that they are there, refuse them, and turn away from them. Swedenborg tells us to stay engaged in the world, to be of use, to be thoughtful, honest and fair in every task and that will lead us to heaven.

These last weeks of sermons have supported my journey. The messages have dovetailed into the structure, tools and exercises that I was looking for. In her last sermon before her sabbatical, Rachel spoke of seemingly simple acts like greeting others warmly, eating together with a blessing and scheduling unscheduled time for ourselves. The messages have continued through the weeks, even from non-Swedenborgians. Dr. Crawford spoke of keeping the peace in relationship with his wife, by listening. And notice, I did not say by SIMPLY listening... since listening isn't simple for all of us...certainly not for me. He shared how listening and asking questions instead of thinking about what he was going to say next took his marriage to a new level of understanding. By not defending his point of view and by not trying to win, his wife felt heard. He was not seeking to be understood, but to understand.

Listening... what a sure fire way to diffuse an emotionally charged situation and bring peace to the person that has JUST HAD IT. And a beautiful consequence of bringing peace to another, is that it brings peace to us as well.

We heard about looking for our Abraham moment -- tracing our own spiritual journey... discovering how God is calling us for our own unique work in this world. We've looked at the deeper meaning in a scripture, the deeper meaning of the Lord's Prayer. All of these are ways to keep our thoughts elevated and find peace.

I also find peace in reading, listening to music, in sunsets, being with my spaniel, being in nature and by accessing compassion for others and gratitude for all that I have.

What are some of the ways you elevate your thoughts and actions? Every action can be a Sabbath exercise. By being mindful, all actions can be spiritual or can access our spirituality. Let us keep being our best, keep being faithful, keep being good to folks that aren't being so good to us, let us stay productive in the midst of adversity.

Let us ask ourselves "What would Jesus do?" Let us remember that He took the time to rest, to contemplate, to go off alone and pray when He needed to...as should we.

I invite you to look at ways you keep your peace. Maybe through acceptance of a situation... you know, when we just quit fighting it. Let us remember that we are only in control of our responses and actions... not the actions of others. Let's try to get our minds off ourselves and be a blessing to someone else. Let us wonder how others are doing and reflect on how our actions affect their hearts. Let us remember to thank God for what we DO have and do what we can to love our neighbors -- to love the good in all people

So the next time our parking space is taken while we wait with our blinker on, the next time someone aggravates us let us soar like an eagle hold our peace by rising above the situation -- don't flap -- remain at rest... be quiet. Remember... we have a way up... and out -- we know that God has given us the ability to rise above worries, frustrations, health, finances, upset... and get back to peace. What we fight is often a small thing. Let us not become what we fight.

We grow by being defeated. We are the light of the world, we are safe and cared for, the kingdom of God is already here, it is within us, and among us. Dissolve the tendency to become self-righteous and live the art of peace with flexibility and humor.

There are no promises that everything will be OK because of our noble intentions. We are encouraged to look deeply at joy and sorrow, at living and dying, at hoping and fearing, and remember that what truly heals is gratitude and tenderness. Let us remember to let go, to surrender, while staying aware and focused -- to slow down while remaining diligent -- and to transform ourselves for the sake of all people.

Dear Lord, thank you for this time to consider what we all need to do to bring peace to our world. Keep us mindful that love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are attributes to be developed. Help us assume a relationship to life that is not dependent on any particular state, and to know that anything that is love enters into our minds as light, and that we walk in the light of the Holy City, New Jerusalem.

Peace be with you.