

## Love and Commitment

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The Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco

### First Lesson

#### Judges 16: 15-30 (NIV)

[The first reading today, from the book of Judges, is from the end of the story of Samson and Delilah. Samson was the strongest and most feared warrior of his time. Delilah was hired by the Philistines to help them get rid of Samson. We are picking up in the story after Delilah has made several attempts to discover the secret of Samson's strength.]

Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when you won't confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven't told me the secret of your great strength." With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death.

So he told her everything. "No razor has ever been used on my head," he said, "because I have been a Nazirite set apart to God since birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man."

When Delilah saw that he had told her everything, she sent word to the rulers of the Philistines, "Come back once more; he has told me everything." So the rulers of the Philistines returned with the silver in their hands. Having put him to sleep on her lap, she called a man to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength left him.

Then she called, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!"

He awoke from his sleep and thought, "I'll go out as before and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had left him. Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison. But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.

Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, "Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands."

When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying,  
"Our god has delivered our enemy  
into our hands,  
the one who laid waste our land  
and multiplied our slain."

While they were in high spirits, they shouted, "Bring out Samson to entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them.

When they stood him among the pillars, Samson said to the servant who held his hand, "Put me where I can feel the pillars that support the temple, so that I may lean against them." Now the temple was crowded with men and women; all the rulers of the Philistines were there, and on the roof were about three thousand men and women watching Samson perform. Then Samson prayed to the LORD, "O Sovereign LORD,

remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes." Then Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived.

## **Second Lesson**

### **Matthew 6: 19-23 (NIV)**

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

"The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

### **Message**

I usually start thinking about sermon topics far in advance of the date I deliver the sermon. Sometimes a topic that seems like it might be good loses its luster after a few days and I abandon it. Sometimes I get started on an idea and it carries me to a place I did not expect to go. That is the case with my message today. The journey to this point today started with an article by Jim Lawrence, a former pastor of this church and now the Dean of the SHS in Berkeley, on the feminization of the Christian church. The article cites research that shows a 50% decline in the participation of men in Christian churches (all denominations, not just ours) over the last 15 years and since participation was in the 40% range at the beginning of the study it puts participation now at just over 20%. Several days after reading the article I went to a men's group I am a member of in Los Gatos and I posed this question to the five other men attending that day: "What would it take for you to commit to attending and participating in a

spiritual community like a church?" I asked them because I know that none of them are members of a church or synagogue.

There were several answers: the first, "I am vulnerable when I am seeking out my spiritual identity and I don't trust that my vulnerability will be respected or honored."; second, "I have to believe in the message being delivered."; third, "I like knowing when I go to synagogue that the focus is on God."; fourth, "I need to trust that the people leading the service are living life in accord with spiritual values." And fifth—the one that caught my attention because it was not an answer to my question why—was a statement, an admission really, "Men don't have trouble with responsibility, or obligation, but they do have trouble with commitment."

Commitment. The man in my men's group pointed out that commitment is more than responsibility or obligation, because we are sometimes good at doing things we have to do even though we have no desire or love in doing them. I'm sure this is not news for women, nor for men, but admitting it takes something special, because our most public commitment, and our most important, is the commitment we make to a partner we choose to live our life with, and if we have different ideas on commitment, then the road we travel together is all together different from being the same path.

Emanuel Swedenborg, who we in this church grant some authority, poses some difficulty for us in looking at a marriage commitment. For instance: Some psychologists believe the three most common conflicts that arise between partners living together are (you can probably guess these): sex, money and housework. Well, Swedenborg never married and we don't know that much about his sex life. He was independently wealthy and not in relationship with anyone to dispute his use of money and because he was independently wealthy he hired someone to do housework.

Emanuel Swedenborg was not deterred from writing about conjugal love and as a man, based on my introduction to my sermon, I know I am immediately suspect when it comes to talking about relationships and commitment. I want to be clear that you have now been given fair warning.

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At some point in a relationship between people something changes and the relationship becomes close and deep, or it does not. The relationship may continue, or it may not, and if it continues it reaches a certain level of comfort and trust, but it may not go beyond a certain level of understanding. But there are special relationships that involve something more and we identify this something more with commitment. What is commitment? Earlier I distinguished commitment from obligation or responsibility by saying that when we do things out of obligation we may not have any love or desire in doing them.

After thinking about commitment, in the context of my adult life, but also, more intently the last two weeks, I have found that I cannot define commitment except in the context of love. Love and commitment go together. Commitment is the continuous, authentic expression of love from one person to another.

Now we need to talk about love.

I believe that one of the greatest achievements of Emanuel Swedenborg, perhaps his most important, is that he never loses sight of the oneness of God. No matter what he writes about—love, wisdom, faith, truth—one of the underlying principles you can be sure he will return to is the oneness of God, and this is especially important when it comes to love because, for Swedenborg, and for all of us for that matter, God is love. I would like to explore what that means.

All life, all love is from God. God pours his life, his love, on good and evil alike. Swedenborg wrote several books on marriage love and *Divine Love and Wisdom*, so putting these ideas into a few words is a challenge, but here it is:

Our innermost center of being is filled with life and love without interruption by God. The miracle of this transfer of life and love to human beings is the miracle of freedom. As God is free, God can only be realized in free love, so we are given freedom. It is the reciprocal connection of love with God that makes us human. This free exchange of love between God and humankind is what makes God God, for love can only be fulfilled in the other, and without human beings, the personal other, the love of God cannot realize itself. If we choose, we can choose freely, to prepare the state of our will for the influence of God's love and affection and we can prepare the state of our intellect for the influence of wisdom and faith.

Let's look at the readings today in reverse order.

Jesus said, "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"

It is important to know that our sight flows out from inside us. Love and life that flows into us, through our inner state, are what allow us to see. If we understand the world only from the external appearance of things we might believe that we see based on light entering our eyes. But if you take away the life that is flowing into us, it does not matter how much light falls on our eyes, there will be no sight. "How great is that darkness!" if we only see physically and not spiritually.

"Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth...For where your treasure is there your heart will be also." This is the source of Swedenborg's concept of ruling love.

Whether you know it or not, whether you like it or not, our love is the determining impulse of our lives. The actual life of a human being receives its inner form, its direction, its goal through the love that dominates our life. We are not just talking about physical things here. Where is your mind all day long? What do you give your thoughts to? What kind of self-concept rules your life? This ruling love is not altered by death and does not dictate only the earthly form of a person's existence, but it is also our spiritual destiny. Our spiritual destiny is based on the unity of will and understanding that resides in us. What is that innermost center? To answer that you only need to look at what you think about and where you spend your time and money.

Now, if we look at Samson and Delilah, we see the complete distortion and lack of understanding that causes the tragedy in today's reading. Delilah's question, "How can you say 'I love you' when you will not confide in me?" is an interesting trap. When Samson's eyes are gouged out it is simply the material manifestation of a darkness that already existed. Was it love that led to this tragedy? No, because love is not blind. Love sees things, for instance, that medicine cannot. The loving attention of a partner notices when the breath is different, it notices the small stumbles, or the different aches and pains that signal the greater physical difficulties that a physician cannot measure with numbers. No, love is not blind. Lust, infatuation, obsession are blind, not love, especially love joined with wisdom. Sometimes, when the glow seems to go out of a relationship, it feels like the quality of the love has changed. Is that true? It is the lust, infatuation and obsession that fade after the newness of a relationship

wears off, and it is our attachment to those that prevent us from reconnecting with the love of God through another person. Remember, if we freely accept the inflow of love from God, that means we align our will with love and we align our intellect with wisdom and faith. We realize our love for God—our love becomes real—in the other person: our partner, our friend, people we meet and interact with every day. A person who freely submits to God gives his faith and love back to God, becomes a single image with God; that person transforms into a free collaborator of God, they are permeated with divine life and its associated love and wisdom all the way down to the smallest external details of life and God has the power to make all things new.

Can we lose that connection? Yes, in rebellious self-assertion, attributing to ourselves what belongs to God. We lose being in the image of God and this results in the destruction of the spiritual person. Blindly, we seek powers that do not belong to us, we push over the pillars that support the temple, we become like Samson and we kill many in the process of our own self-destruction.

John Gottman, a psychologist at the University of Washington in Seattle, believes there are four very important warning signs in a relationship of commitment:

- 1) Criticism, especially when it is general and blaming.
- 2) Contempt, or lack of respect.
- 3) Defensiveness, especially when it manifests in making excuses, or denying responsibility.
- 4) Stonewalling, when one partner stops listening and distances themselves from the conversation and the other person.

The first three—criticism, contempt, and defensiveness—protect a false self. The fourth, stonewalling, cuts us off from the flow of love

and life in our relationship, basically we stop being in relationship, and since love is fulfilled in relationship, we can say the love is gone at that point. I have been in a relationship where I was not able to be authentically present, and because I was not authentically present I think my partner had a hard time trusting me because she could feel that she was not seeing and feeling the real me, and a terrible cycle of criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling occurred exactly like the one described by John Gottman, all the way to the point where the spiritual foundation of that relationship died and then the earthly manifestation of that relationship between us died as well.

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It is fundamental to understand that we meet God in our relationships with each other. It is part of the commandment to love God and to love one another. The continuous authentic expression of love is an active process and I think it is fair to say that this process is a solution to many, many problems we face as human beings, perhaps all of them. This process lives and breathes and is constantly unfolding and revealing itself to us if we have eyes that are a lamp to our body.

I have learned that I must surrender myself to the love of God continuously. It is not an easy thing to do because it can mean giving up a lifetime of thinking, knowing, doing and working out who you think you really are. Surrendering to the love of God was the single most important step for me to begin, to begin, to fully realize love in another human being, and even after that beginning it can seem as distant as ever. I was not socialized as a young boy to surrender, I was socialized to compete and win, to be the one to know, to be decisive, to provide, to be strong, I was socialized to avoid giving in

to emotion, I was taught to distance myself when I was afraid, and it was continuously reinforced in me that expressing fear was a sign of weakness. I was taught to forgive, but not to forgive myself or to seek forgiveness; I was taught that surrender was failure. Somehow, love was disconnected from the kind of surrender I needed. In other words, I was not taught how to be authentically present with another human being. How easy is it for us to love someone through the process of their failures? I don't know if you can sit there and see the love of God in me, or any other person, but regardless of what we do see, I know we are asked to see love in that other person and the effect is the same as seeing God in that person. Surrender to the love of God is a different kind of free choice. As a member of this church, I pray every day for the love and wisdom to surrender, to surrender to the kind of service each of you needs from me as a person, to make the commitment to be authentically present, to act with the continuous expression of love.

I hope this is the love and commitment we can all have with each other.