

A Time to Every Purpose

A spiritual message given by Joy T. Barnitz at San Francisco Swedenborgian Church on Sunday, 7 September 2008

Readings

- **Reading #1** – Psalm 149 - Stephen Mitchell's translation from the Hebrew

Sing to the Lord a *new* song; praise God with words and with silence.
Praise the Lord through all your actions; praise God in sorrow and in joy.
Praise the Lord with music and with dancing, with bodies moving in delight.
Let the wise sing out in their freedom; let the whole earth echo their song.
Let all God's creatures be peaceful and walk in the path of true life.

Note on first reading - from the Foreword of Stephen Mitchell's *A Book of Psalms: Selected & Adapted from the Hebrew*. ... the Psalmists, in the ardor of their praise, enter the sabbath mind and stand at the center of creation, saying, "Behold, it is very good". ... The praise is addressed to whom? To what? When gratitude wells up through our whole body; we don't even ask. ... How supremely silly, then, to say that God is a he or a she. But, because English lacks a personal pronoun to express what includes and transcends both genders, even those who know better may refer to God as "he". ... In the following adaptations, I have called God "him" for the lack of a better pronoun. You should, of course, feel free to substitute "her" if you wish.

Note by jtb - I have replaced all pronouns with 'the Lord' or with 'God'.

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- **Reading #2** – Matt. 18: 20 (King James Version)

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

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- Swedenborg passage for the weekly bulletin - Arcana Coelestia (*Heavenly Secrets*) #3645

The whole of the Lord's kingdom is a kingdom of ends and purposes, so that not even the least thing occurs there which does not have a purpose to achieve some end in view. Insofar as his affections, thoughts, and actions have within them the end in view of doing good from the heart, man, spirit, or angel dwells in heaven.

References:

- Kirven, R.H. *A Concise Overview of Swedenborg's Theology* Chapters 2 and 9

Some of you were here last Sunday and heard Dr. Darleen Pryds of the Franciscan School of Theology in Berkeley speak to us about 'Work in Progress'. Dr. Pryds told us a personal story of how she came to be a person of faith all because of a woman she never met. A woman who took her mother to church weekly, and because of whom, many years later, Darleen and her siblings went to church with **their** mother on communion Sunday. Dr. Pryds told of her personal faith journey, saying: because of a woman she never met, she was here preaching to us. She reminded us that sometimes we don't know the effect of our actions at the time, at the place where they occur.

We don't know **now** how our actions may reverberate through time and how they may impact others' lives.

Dr. Pryds' message reminded me that in our theology there are many meanings to the word church. Each of us is a church as an individual, together in a community this morning we are a church and as individuals and as a community we are part of the church universal, part of the people of faith who have ever lived and who ever will live.

Today we begin a new church year, a year of transition for our congregation, for our church. We can see where we have been, though **perhaps** not as clearly as we think we can. We can see the beginning of a new path, a new way opening before us.

Perhaps you are as eager as I am to start down this path. Eager ... and also a little fearful. I realized in preparing this message that I am full of hopes, full of questions and enthusiasms and more than a little concern. Although it comes to me in a variety of phrasings, my mental chatter comes down to a few key questions:

- Why am I here? Who am I – as an individual? as part of this congregation?
- Where am I going? Where do I want to be in the future as an individual?
- What am I called to do as part of this congregation and this transition?
- How can I contribute to the success of this transition?

Some here today may remember a spiritual message I gave a little over two years ago in which I described the FIVE (5) keys to success given me by a mentor over a decade ago:

- Nothing lasts forever
- Perseverance pays off
- Invest in yourself
- Your sense of humor is a most important asset
- Surround yourself with affirming persons

Let's take those individually as they may be helpful as we begin this new season, this new church year and take our first steps into this year of transition.

- **Nothing lasts forever:** if it did we would have no opportunity to grow. Sometimes, though we get comfortable in our lives as they are proceeding and we need to be shaken out of our complacency. This can be especially true in our church lives. There

have been many changes in the 113 years since this sanctuary was dedicated and through all that time there has been a vibrant congregation calling it home, looking to God while seeking the peace and safety of this lovely sanctuary and beautiful grounds. Perhaps you are like me in that it came as a shock in March when Rev. Rachel announced her retirement from parish ministry. And, although I understand, accept and respect the reasons, I was among those who were sad to learn that in our denomination, the prior pastor stays away from the church, from any potential position of authority or involvement in the life of the congregation until asked back by the new called pastor. Yet as the initial shock wore off, I was able to observe in Rev. Rachel a readiness to move along *her* new path. And to realize that one gift I could give her was to wish her well along that path. That realization enabled me to delight in the planning of her party and to fully participate in and enjoy the celebration of her years of service to us as our Pastor on June 29th ... just two short months ago.

- **Perseverance pays off:** right after Rev. Rachel's decision was announced; the Council decided it would be good to hire a trained, intentional interim minister. Sounds easy. And, in the end, it was. Rev. Jeff met Rev. Rachel at an Interfaith Council breakfast in June and from there it was 'just a matter of time' and working out some details. I'll just comment that I am fully convinced that meeting in June between Rev. Rachel and Rev. Jeff would never have happened without me doing a lot of investigation into interim ministry and making over 30 e-mail inquiries to potential interim ministers asking if they were interested in doing an interim term with us.
- **Invest in yourself:** that's what this year is going to be about. Investing in ourselves. Each of us as individuals and, most importantly, as a community. We will be reflecting on and coming to terms with our history, exploring and discerning our identity as a congregation. Reviewing and renewing our relationship to the denomination and to the world. Among our considerations will be a revitalized vision of our ministries: the congregation, the shrine, rites & sacraments, outreach. All of us have an important stake in this effort as we work with Rev. Jeff to prepare the way for our future with our next called Swedenborgian pastor. Our theology teaches us that our choices as individuals acting 'as of ourselves', prepare us for an eternal home. By our choices, by exercising our free will, we grow. As Albert Einstein said: "I must be willing to give up what I am in order to become what I will be."

Our choices as individuals and as a congregation this year will have consequences. They will reverberate long into the future of this congregation, of this sanctuary and its surrounding gardens and buildings, and in our lives.

We each will be asked to make the choice to participate – and what a responsibility it is.

We each **are able** to make the choice to participate – what an opportunity!

- **Your sense of humor is a most important asset:** this brings to mind the skits at this year's Memorial Day Retreat. Our mission as teams was to conduct a search for our next minister. A job that was defined as "25/8" and no sinking below the surface as s/he walked on water! During the search we had the help of more than one angel,

including one singing "Swedenborgians, stranger than you might think!" and the assistance of Dorothy and her companions the cowardly lion, the tin man, the scarecrow. The position was offered to the gardener (reminding those present of Chauncey Gardner in *Being There*), we considered doing an IPO, hiring a guru or a televangelist, and finally we interviewed (and rejected!) God. Experiencing the playful laughter of that evening really helped me feel more comfortable with this transition. I am confident that spirit will permeate this year and enrich our journey.

- **Surround yourself with affirming persons:** isn't that what we are doing right here? Right now? This last key is what Swedenborg teaches is the nature of heaven: the Lord's kingdom of ends and purposes. A community where people share the same values you do as an individual. A community of people who share your commitments. A community of people whose "affections, thoughts and actions have within them the end in view of doing good from the heart."

Such a community can strive to be a reflection of heaven by fostering our individual and collective spiritual growth, by serving the world around us and by so doing serving God for whom "The ultimate purpose of creation is a heaven from the human race."
(*Divine Providence* #323)

To everything there is a season. There is a time to every purpose under heaven.

Just because we hold a set of keys doesn't mean that the doors will open, that the necessary work will get done. We have to **choose** to participate, to give of our time, our talent and our treasure; to **use** the keys, to place them in the locks and to open the doors to our future.

Our second Scripture reading this morning promises that "Where two or three are gathered together, in God's name, the Lord is there among them."

Think what can be accomplished by such a community!

Let's get to work!