

## **“Putting on Christ”**

**Janet Council**  
**August 10, 2003**

Psalm 46 (adapted by Stephen Mitchell)  
Romans 8: 26-27

I will open my message with the Prayer of an unknown Confederate soldier:

I asked for strength that I might achieve;  
I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for health that I might do greater things;  
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy;  
I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of men;  
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life;  
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I had asked for,  
but everything that I had hoped for.  
Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered;  
I am, among all men, most richly blessed.

I am touched by that prayer. It is a beautiful reminder to be content with exactly where we are right now. It is a reminder that our growth is inevitable - that the start and the finish are the same - that each step on our journey counts. And that by returning to our origins we are brought forward.

I find myself beyond middle age and surveying a life that took a different direction than I had expected - a life that was given to me more than formed by me. Now I reflect on how to turn my weaknesses into strengths - how to complete myself so that I am of use and able to positively affect my tiny universe.

It must begin with the inner work - that fearless moral inventory that Swedenborg calls repentance - the first step to regeneration. But what about those mental or physical defects, be they illnesses or the inescapable aging process, they we all eventually face? How do we find God in these challenges? How do we hold fast to the good and true when we are continually pulling the roots up of what we once knew as ourselves? As Swedenborgians and Christians it is our duty to become a vessel of God's love, to give to something greater than ourselves, to see the sacred in everything. This path requires great effort and attention to our every thought, word, and action. It is a journey for

the brave that in the end transforms us, and all that is around us.

I believe the trick to this is finding that center in ourselves that allows us to gain a foothold in the ebb and flow of this life. It is up to each of us to discern what keeps us centered in our quest for spiritual beauty.

In my own journey I have found a sense of humor to be imperative. Laughter keeps things in perspective and tends to keep us from taking ourselves too seriously to enjoy the process. I also consciously surround myself with people who inspire, nourish, and uplift me. For it is there that I feel "held". And it is in that place that I get the "space" around what troubles me so that I can see the direction that I need to take. A task I have more difficulty with is facing my fears to see what motivates my actions. And the "big kahuna" are the actions themselves - the thoughtless words or behaviors that do harm to myself and to others.

Last Sunday Rev. Gerry said that the religious life is comprised of the discipline of a daily spiritual practice and the fellowship that we find in worshipping together. My daily practice consists mostly of reading about the experience of others rather than listening to my own inner guidance - it's a start. But that says to me that I need to learn to trust myself so that I can trust God. I truly want to feel God's love and maybe first I need to feel my own love. I do know that I must focus on what is good and true. Whatever leads us to God is true. Swedenborg says if it is not loving then it is not true. To be faithful implies that we LIVE the values of our chosen religion. Truth from God expands our consciousness and creates spirituality. From that place we can understand the doctrine, but what usually resonates with us is not the doctrine, but the intuition and the value system that the doctrine calls up. In Swedenborgian language those are the "remains" - that memory knowledge implanted in us at birth by angels. When we elevate the mundane to the sacred we are living the life. Only personal growth can result in spiritual truth. Swedenborg also reminds us to exalt in our shortcomings, for if we were unaware of them we would not be on our regenerative path. Personal collapse can equal success if we emerge renewed.

So I am fasting - fasting from experiences detrimental to my spirit. I am slowly building a faithfulness to the most difficult choice- which for me is thinking before speaking - so that I can behave in a way that reflects who I WANT to be in spite of my opinions or emotions. One of the main functions of religion is to return our focus to the bigger picture so that our worldview doesn't become myopic and we began to think that only what affects me and mine is important.

We have been studying Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in our Wednesday evening classes. He says that Christianity is not a burden but a soul of immense power which bestows significance, beauty and a new lightness on what we are already doing. He says that if we believe then everything is illuminated and takes shape around us. Then we see how our failures, our faults, our death can be - through God - recast and transformed. What Teilhard calls "putting on Christ." The one condition is that we must believe - and in the worst of times we must believe even more. Then, he says, we shall see the universal horror unbend, and then smile upon us, and then take us in its more than human arms.

What does your faith mean to you? How can we start putting on Christ? Psalm 46 directs us to be still and know. And if in that still quiet place we pray for the power to be gentle, the strength to be forgiving, the patience to be understanding and the endurance to

accepting the consequences of holding on to what is good and true and loving we are putting on Christ.

Let us demonstrate honor through acts of kindness, caring, and reverence. For Godly self-respect is the goodness by which we lead our lives and treat others in spite of personal trials and tribulations. Let us be grateful for the nourishment we receive here in this beautiful place and let us listen for what Sue Bender calls "the spirit inside each of us that WHISPERS to be heard."