

The San Francisco Swedenborgian Church
October 28, 2001 Worship Service

Unconquerable Joy

Edited transcript of the sermon by Rev. Dr. Rachel Rivers

Scripture References: Jeremiah 17:7-8, Luke 6:27-36

I have laryngitis and yesterday afternoon I had virtually no voice at all. I thought that I would have to deliver a sermon that was once preached by an Episcopalian priest, Rev. John Albrecht. The message that he gave to his congregation made it into the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the shortest sermon ever. When it was time for the sermon, Rev. Albrecht stood up, faced the congregation and said to them one word. And then he sat down.

Now before I tell you what that word was, if you were going to preach a one-word sermon today, what would your sermon be?

The congregation answers: Amen; Peace; Love; Joy; Pray; Listen; Forgive; Trust; Truth.

Those are all really good one-word sermons. Rev. Albrecht's was *Love*.

Now that we've already heard all these great sermons today, the challenge is for us to invite these messages to take root in our lives—for us to live out these messages of Peace and Joy, of Amen, of Listening, Truth, Love, Forgiveness, and Trust.

Since I still do have a little bit of a voice, I will keep going. And I want to continue by reading again from Jeremiah because he talks about taking root.

Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord whose confidence is in the Lord. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes. Its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and it never fails to bear fruit.

How do we do that? How can we have that kind of radical trust in the Lord so that no matter what's going on in our lives and in the world, our roots are able to draw up water from the river of Life and our leaves are able to stay green, and we are not overcome by our fears but live in joy?

The way to gain such radical trust is by recognizing and uprooting the fear and the greed that is in our lives. The gospel message gives us clear instruction on how to do this. We are told over and over again to eradicate our fear and our greed by enlarging our circle of love—by not drawing circles that shut people out. We uproot fear and greed and rend them powerless in our lives by loving our enemies.

Now this is never an easy thing to do. And now we as a nation are living with a fear that is unprecedented in our lives. We Americans have been struck by terrorism. Terrorism is well-named, isn't it? Because it does make us afraid. We are afraid for ourselves and our families, afraid for our homes, afraid for our jobs, afraid for all the people in the world who are hungry and in danger.

We've had the same postal carrier here at the church for at least 10 years. He always has the biggest grin on his face, and he always seems so relaxed and happy to be doing what he's doing. But that's not the case now. When I spoke with him on Thursday, he was wearing rubber gloves and he looked grim. As we were talking another postal carrier walked by and he was wearing a mask as well as gloves. Our postal carrier said they were all wearing masks in the sorting station. He was clearly afraid.

While we're taking precautions and doing what we need to do to live in a world that doesn't feel as safe as it did before, and as we're doing our best to help others in need, we are also called upon to not allow terrorism to kill our joy. During stressful times and even during sad times, we are called to somehow be a people of joy—to somehow find a way that our roots can draw water from the river of life that can nourish our leaves so that we may remain connected to the love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Swedenborg says that true joy is a direct result, or natural consequence, of loving connection. There is no greater need for a human spirit than to be connected to a loving community—to a *common unity*. And the best way we can do this is by not drawing circles that shut people out.

I have two stories that I want to share with you now, and one poem. The first story is from a while back and the second story is from the present.

The first story is about Benjamin Franklin. After the first year that Benjamin Franklin was appointed as clerk to the General Assembly, one of the members made a speech against him. Now Benjamin Franklin did not embarrass the speaker by answering him on the floor of the Assembly, even though with his keen mind and quick wit, Ben Franklin could have withered that man. But he didn't. What he did instead was write to the man asking if he could borrow a certain book. When the book was delivered, Franklin wrote his opponent a letter that was warm and appreciative. Soon after that, the two men began visiting each other and they became friends. What Ben Franklin did was exercise good will, and he sought to build the bridge of communication. Franklin blessed his enemy by assuring him that an unfriendly act would not hopelessly and forever divide them.

The second story I have to tell you is about a good friend of mine who lives on the East Coast. I called her last week after having not talked to her for several months. I asked her how she has been doing, and she explained that the events of September 11 were causing an extraordinary strain on her marriage. You see, she is a liberal Democrat with very strong views, and she does not believe that the way to fight terrorism is through military action. Her husband, however, is a conservative Republican, also with strong views, who thinks that President Bush is the best thing that has ever happened to the U.S., and he is a strong believer that the best way to stop terrorism is through military action.

So at a time when we all need love and support, this couple has, right in their home, two extremely different views and ways of seeing the world, and they are not able to gain from each other that sense of common unity and support about how we as a nation and as a people should proceed.

Fortunately, they also happen to love and respect each other very much. So the task that they see before them is not only to remain in loving connection, but to strengthen that loving connection. They know that if they are able to get through this difficult time together and remain deeply and lovingly connected even though they are at such extreme odds, then they will be helping, in their own personal way, to bring peace to our world.

Swedenborgian poet Edwin Markham wrote a four-line poem that I want to share with you in closing.

*He drew a circle that shut me out,
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win
We drew a circle that took him in.*

Amen.