

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 28 February

Children's Talk: Seeing the Heart

Last week Mr. Smith talked about what happens to people after death. Thinking of that can be a scary thing, but the Lord wants us to know that He takes care of people after they die. He makes sure that no harm comes to them, and their life actually carries on.

But that life can seem very different too, in amazing ways. It's so amazing it can sound almost like a fairy tale. One thing that is different is that you can tell what a person is like just by looking at him or her. Jesus promised that eventually everything that is hidden or hard to know about a person will eventually come out and be seen. He said,

For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have spoken in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have spoken in the ear in inner rooms will be proclaimed on the housetops. (Luke 12:2-3)

This is what happens after death. All the things hidden in a person's heart can become seen.

The Lord wanted us to know how this worked, so he showed a man named Emanuel Swedenborg what it was like, many times. I'll share just one example this morning.

While I was once thinking about marriage love, I suddenly caught sight of two naked little children in the distance, with baskets in their hands and turtledoves flying around them. Then, as they came closer, they looked like naked little children modestly decked out in garlands of flowers. Their heads were decorated with little chaplets of flowers, and their breasts were adorned with sash-like wreathes of blue-colored lilies and roses that hung diagonally from their shoulders to their hips. And round about the two of them appeared what looked like a shared chain of little leaves woven together and interspersed with olives.

When they drew nearer still, however, they did not appear as little children or naked, but as two adults in the bloom of their early youth, dressed in robes and tunics of shining silk, with beautiful-looking flowers woven into them. Moreover, when they stood next to me, a springlike warmth wafted down from heaven through them with a sweet-scented fragrance, like the fragrance of first growth in gardens and fields.

The two were a married couple from heaven, and they then spoke to me. And because I was still thinking about the things I had just seen, they asked, "What did you see?"

So I told them how they had first appeared to me as naked little children, then as little children decked out in garlands, and finally as people more grown up, dressed in garments decorated with flowers. I also told them how an atmosphere of spring had then instantly floated over me with its delights.

They laughed pleasantly at this and said that on the way they had not appeared to themselves as little children or naked or wearing garlands, but the whole time had looked the same as they did now. Their appearing as they had at a distance, they said, represented their marriage love, its state of

innocence being represented by their appearing as naked little children, its delights by the garlands, and these same delights now by the flowers woven into their robes and tunics.

"And," they continued, "because you said that as we approached, a springlike warmth floated over you with its pleasant smells, like those from a garden, we will tell you why this was.

"We have been married for centuries now," they said, "and we have remained continually in this bloom of youth in which you see us." (*Marriage Love* §137)

So here was a couple that from a distance looked like little children. Up close, they looked like young adults. And in fact, they were centuries old. If they were so old, why did they look so young and beautiful? It's because in heaven what a person looks like is based on their hearts. These two people had absolutely beautiful hearts. And they were also pure and innocent. And so from afar they looked like pure, innocent little children. And up close they looked like a handsome young man and a beautiful young woman. That's who they really were on the inside.

What Do People Do After Death?

Stories from Heaven and Hell

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn
28 February, 2021

Last week Malcolm preached about stories that take place in the afterlife, sometimes called “memorable relations.” These stories are taken from the Teachings of the New Church, as experienced and written down by Emanuel Swedenborg. On the one hand they can feel far-removed from our own earthly experiences and a little odd. On the other hand, they bring the afterlife closer and make it feel more real, more tangible, more a place that we ourselves will get to live in some day. Last week the topic was on one person navigating the initial stages of the afterlife as he worked his way towards either heaven or hell. Today we turn our attention to heaven and hell themselves.

Before getting to the stories from the Teachings of the New Church I want to start with a story from the Word. This story illustrates important principles about heaven and hell, principles which then in turn are the basis for the memorable relation we will hear later. This is the story of the rich man and Lazarus, a beggar:

“There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. ²⁰ But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, ²¹ desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

“Then he cried and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.’ ²⁵ But Abraham said, “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.’

“Then he said, ‘I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house, ²⁸ for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.’ ²⁹ Abraham said to him, “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’ ³⁰ And he said, “No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹ But he said to him, “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.’ ” (Luke 16:19-31)

This story does not tell us much in the way of tangible details of what we can expect the afterlife to be like. But again, we can derive some basic principles, such as the following:

1. Hell is torment, heaven is joy. The rich man suffered while Lazarus was comforted.

2. Unlike on Earth, one's surrounding and experiences are determined by their inner character. The rich man, while alive, received good things while Lazarus received evil. In the afterlife, they each received according to their character.
3. That inner character is determined by adherence (or not) to the Word. The law and the prophets, to which the rich man and his brothers ought to have paid attention stands for the Word itself.
4. Heaven and hell are so opposed to each other that there is no crossover whatsoever. There is a great chasm presenting anyone from straddling the two.

In themselves these principles tell us something about what to expect in the afterlife. And indeed, the Teachings of the New Church flesh them out with further explanation. But it is one thing to explain, and another to portray in real life. Because even with these principles, it can be hard to picture what heaven and hell are like.

If I were to ask people, "what will hell be like?" I'm sure I'd get a variety of answers. An old-school and traditional view of hell suggests that it is constant torture at the hands of the devil and his minions, amidst consuming flames. If you're familiar with New Church concepts you might say that it is in fact simply a place where the evil get to enjoy their selfish desires. But neither of those descriptions gets to the heart of it. Hell is a mix of pleasure and pain.

Likewise if I were to ask people, "what will heaven be like?" A more traditional Christian answer is that it will be an eternity of blissfully basking in God's love. A more concrete answer would be that it is constant praise, or perhaps constant rest and relaxation. If you're familiar with New Church concepts you would probably say that heaven is about being useful. And indeed, bits and pieces of all the other things too. But again, that doesn't get to the heart of it.

And so here now we turn to just one example of how the stories from the Teachings of the New Church flesh out and bring alive these principles and concepts. It is largely a conversation with a devil, followed by a shorter conversation with an angel. We see in it how their environments are crafted by their character; how although in both cases they are rulers, they are as different from each other as day and night; that although the devil does have pleasure, it is a fleeting one mixed with torment; and that the angel has joy in usefully serving a community as their leader. As we did last week, I'm going to read a good chunk of this story so you can get the feel for it.

As I considered the love for power that comes from loving ourselves, I was given an awareness that this is the most profoundly hellish love and that it exists among those who are in the lowest hell. I could also see that a love for power that comes from loving to be useful is the most profoundly heavenly love and that it exists among those who are in the highest heaven.

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[7] As I was meditating on these things, an angel said to me on behalf of the Lord, "In a moment you will see, and be visually convinced of, the hellish nature of that love."

Then suddenly the ground to the left opened up and I saw a devil rising up from hell. He had a square hat on his head that was pressed down over his forehead to his eyes. His face was covered with a pustular rash as if he had a high fever. His eyes were fierce. His chest protruded misshapenly. He was belching smoke from his mouth as if he was a furnace. His groin was visibly

on fire. Where his feet should have been, he had just ankles with bones but no flesh. His body gave off a rotten, filthy heat.

When I saw him I was terrified and shouted to him, "Stay where you are! But tell me, where are you from?"

"I am from below," he answered in a rasping voice. "I live there in a community of two hundred people. It is the single most important community of all. All of us there are emperors of emperors, kings of kings, dukes of dukes, and princes of princes. No one there is just an ordinary emperor, king, duke, or prince. We sit there on thrones above thrones and issue commands to the entire universe and beyond."

"Are you aware," I asked him, "that your fantasy about ruling the world has made you insane?"

"How can you say such a thing?" he replied. "This is exactly who we see we are, and our colleagues acknowledge it too."

[8] When I heard that, I no longer wanted to tell him, "You are insane," because his fantasy actually had driven him insane.

Then I was given the knowledge that back when this devil was alive in the world, he was only a caretaker in someone's house; but he had come into such pride in his spirit that he despised the entire human race in comparison with himself. He had also indulged in the fantasy that he was more than a king, and even more than an emperor. That pride had led him to deny God and to consider all the holy teachings of the church as worthless for him, although he did think they had some value for the stupid masses.

Eventually I asked him, "The two hundred of you there, how long are you going to keep up this boasting to each other?"

"Forever," he said. "Although those among us who torture anyone for denying their utter superiority do sink down. We are allowed to boast, but not to harm anyone."

"Do you know," I asked him, "what happens to the people who sink down?"

"They sink into a kind of prison," he said, "where they are called the lowest of the low, and they have to do work."

"Take care that you yourself do not sink down," I told him.

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I was allowed to see that beneath their hells there are workhouses. The devils that cause harm to others fall down into them. All who are in hell are allowed to have their fantasy and even to boast about it, but they are not allowed to harm others.

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[13] After witnessing these depressing and distressing sights, I looked around and noticed two angels, who were standing not far from me, talking to each other. One was wearing a woolen robe of a radiant, flaming red, over a tunic of shining linen. The other was similarly dressed, but in scarlet, and with a miter that had rubies set in it on the right side.

I went up to them and greeted them by wishing them peace. I respectfully asked them, "Why are you down here?"

"We came down from heaven," they replied, "because we received a command from the Lord to tell you about the blissful outcome that awaits people who want to be in charge because they love being useful.

"We both worship the Lord. I am the leader of our community. The other angel here is the highest ranking priest in our community."

The leader then said that he was a servant of his community, in that he served it by doing useful things for it. The other angel said that he was a minister to the church there, in that by serving the members of the community he was administering holy things that were useful for their souls. They both said that they experienced lasting joys that came from an eternal happiness they felt from the Lord.

"Our community is gleaming and magnificent in every way," they said. "All the gold and precious stones make it gleam. The mansions and parks make it magnificent. Why? We love being in charge because we love being useful, not because we love ourselves. Love for being useful comes from the Lord. Because of the origin they have, all the good and useful things in the heavens have a gleam and a radiance to them. Since this is the type of love that all the members of our community have, the very atmosphere there looks golden, because the light there comes from the warm blaze of the sun, and that warm blaze corresponds to this love of ours."

[14] When they said that, I noticed a similar atmosphere around them; it smelled beautifully fragrant. I mentioned that to them, and also asked that they say some more about what it is to love being useful.

They went on to say, "We did indeed aspire to the high positions we now hold, but for the sole purpose of being more fully useful and expanding and broadening that usefulness. We are also inundated with honors, and we accept them not for our own sake but for the good of the community. Our friends and companions who make up the wider population of the community hardly realize that the honors that go along with the high positions we hold are not actually ours, or that the useful things we do are not coming from us. But we know. We can actually sense that the honors that accompany these high positions are outside of us. They are like clothing that has been put on us. The useful things we do, though, come from a love for those useful things that is planted in us by the Lord. This love finds its bliss in the shared experiences with others that happen in the course of those useful activities. We know from experience that as we carry out the useful activities we love, our love for them grows, and along with that love comes wisdom about how to involve others. If we hold this usefulness back and do not share it with others, our bliss disappears. Then that plan to be useful becomes like food lodged in our stomach that is not broken down and shared to nourish the body and all its parts but remains undigested and causes nausea.

"Briefly put, heaven in its entirety is nothing other than a framework to contain usefulness of every kind, from the highest to the lowest. What is usefulness if it is not love for our neighbor in action? What else holds the heavens together but that love?"

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After saying that, the angels went away. From a distance they looked like they were riding in a chariot of fire like Elijah and were carried back up to their heaven. (*True Christian Religion* §661)

I'm tempted now to explain in detail exactly what you should have gotten from that story. Which may be useful, but perhaps it would also take away from having shared it in story form to begin with. Rarely are these stories labelled with a clear indicator of the moral or message that we are supposed to derive from them. They stand on their

own in a sense, to be understood in their own right as meaningful experiences from the other world.

I will, however, just mention a few of those broad principles that this story illustrates.

1. That hell and heaven have their own sort of pleasure. The torment of the devil did not lie in mindless torture and flames, but in the very pleasure that he sought out. And the joy of heaven for the angels lay in the daily work of a job, much as one might have in this world, but fulfilling beyond all measure.
2. That those in the other world are surrounded by a reflection of their character. The devil appeared as a monster toiling away in a filthy workhouse. The angels were beautifully adorned and lived in splendour.
3. That character comes from adherence to the Word and following the Lord. The devils had loved themselves and so rejected entirely the Lord and things of religion. The angels gave all credit to the Lord in their ability to be good leaders, and took none for themselves.
4. That a gulf separates heaven and hell. Both the devils and the angels described in this passage had a love of ruling; and yet their inner characters were so diametrically opposed that there was nothing in common between them.

Heaven and hell are not distant and inscrutable mysteries. They are real, and ever-present in how we live our lives. And one day, when our earthly bodies are finished, we will enter fully into that life that is even more real than this one.

Amen.