

# Unified in the Lord

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

Sunday, 24 September, 2023

## Children's Talk: We Are One

How the Lord sees people is interesting. On the one hand, He looks at each of us individually; He knows our names, and our personalities, He knows what we each like or dislike, He can see all the things that we have done or even will do. He made us all to be special and unique.

On the other hand, He also made us to be as one; as if all of us were different parts of one giant person. Listen to what the Word says about people when God first made them, and notice how it switches back and forth between creating one person and creating many people:

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

This is the book of the genealogy of Adam. In the day that God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female, and blessed them and called them Mankind in the day they were created. Genesis 5:1-2)

God created people; but in His eyes people are altogether like one person. This is actually what groups of people can look like in heaven. Emanuel Swedenborg got to look into heaven and see the communities that live there. Sometimes he would see a single person off in the distance, but then as he got closer it turned out to be a whole bunch of people working together.

I have a picture here that illustrates what that might have been like. Who is this a picture of? It is the Lord. But look closer; what do you see? It is made up of many, many smaller pictures of people! When people all look to the Lord, and work together, it is kind of like they are one person. This heritage day, we all celebrate the many, many ways that people talk, dress, work, think, behave, and do things

differently. But if we look to the Lord together, and live the way He teaches, we are actually all little parts of one grand man, one large person, guided by the Lord.

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I want to spend our time today talking about neighbours. What is a neighbour?

I want three volunteers to come up. It won't be hard. Alright, so I want you two to stand next to each other. And I want you to stand way over here. So these two we might say are neighbours. Why? Because they are right next to each other. But is that one way over there his neighbour? No, because he is not nearby. Neighbour is a word that just means someone who lives nearby. It can also be about something more than that. Let's say these two are near, not in terms of distance, but in terms of how they dress. They might think of themselves as neighbours, while he over there might dress differently. Or listen to different music, play different games, speak a different language, or be into different sports. When two people are close to each other they are like neighbours. When they are very far apart on something, they are not neighbours.

Except that it doesn't always mean that. The people of Israel knew that they were supposed to love their neighbours. But they wondered exactly who their neighbours were. So they asked Jesus. And Jesus' answer is different from what they expected. So you three can go back to your seats, and we'll hear the story that Jesus told in answer to this question. The question is who is your neighbour? Is it just people who live nearby? Is it just people who are like you? Or is it more than that?

Then Jesus answered and said: "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his

own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, "Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.' So which of these three do you think was neighbour to him who fell among the thieves?"

And he said, "He who showed mercy on him."

Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:30-37)

So there was a man who was in need of help. But the people who were most like him, who spoke the same language, went to the same temple, had the same beliefs, worshipped the same God, lived in the same places, passed him by and did nothing for him. But a Samaritan, a man who spoke a different language, went to a different place to worship, had very different beliefs, who lived far away, he came and helped the man. So even though he was completely different in many ways, he was actually the one who was the true neighbour.

What made him the neighbour was his goodness and love. The injured man and the Samaritan who helped him were brought close together by love and a willingness to serve. This is the most important way that we can and should be neighbours to each other. It's so easy to think that the people who dress the same as you, who speak like you, who look and act like you, who have the same interests as you, are the ones who are closest to you. But actually it is in loving others, no matter how different, that we truly become neighbours. I want you all to think right now of a person who is different from you. Who maybe irritates you. Who seems strange to you. Who you have a hard time understanding and getting along with. Who is the most different from you. And what can you do to be a neighbour to them? How can you come closer to them? It is by loving and serving others who are different that we become true spiritual neighbours.

I want now to spend a few minutes going deeper with this idea. We may have made amazing strides towards unity in the past few decades, but we all have a lot of

work to do. And for all that our cultural differences are the most obvious ones, they are by no means the only ones. So few of us these days hold it against someone for speaking a different language or having different skin colour. But what about cultural differences? Political affiliation? Lifestyle choices? Clashing personalities? Parenting style? It is still so easy to divide the world up into in and out groups, and think of “in” as good and “out” as bad. And what makes this more complicated is that we can’t just sweep all these differences under the carpet: culture, politics, lifestyle, personality, parenting, and so on all matter immensely. So the Lord does not ask us to all be the same, nor does He ask us to ignore our differences. He does, however, ask us to change our priority. The disciples illustrated this when they came to Jesus complaining that someone who did not follow them was casting out demons in Jesus’ name:

Now John answered Him, saying, “Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us.”

But Jesus said, “Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is on our side. (Mark 9:38-40)

Think for a moment how absurd the disciples’ complaint was: here was a man, who was casting out demons! And not only that, he was doing it in Jesus’ name! And yet because he was not part of the group, the disciple’s disparaged him. Yet Jesus pointed them back to what mattered: the fact that he was doing the Lord’s work. That truth rose above any and all other objections based on group loyalty.

How often do we also dismiss people doing the Lord’s work because they belong to the “wrong” group? Because they have different standards of politeness, because they vote for the other party, because they choose to live differently, because they go about life in a way contrary to our own, because they raise their children with different values? How often does our focus on these things, as

important as they are, distract us from seeing that someone at heart is motivated to serve the Lord, is doing the best they can, is in their own way trying to help the world be a better place? No matter how varied we are, we can be unified in that. The teachings of the New Church state that even millions of diverse people, if they at heart focus on love or charity, can be united as one in the Lord:

Mutual love or charity causes things, though varied, to be one, for it makes one out of varied things. If all, no matter how many - even ten thousand times ten thousand - are governed by charity or mutual love, they have but one end in view, namely the common good, the Lord's kingdom, and the Lord Himself. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1285)

There are millions of people in this country, and billions worldwide. And yet if we look to the Lord and to mutual love between each other, we will find that no matter how varied, we are all one people.

But this leaves one question left unanswered: as the man asked Jesus, who is my neighbour? If it is only those who are looking to God and living a good life, then what of those who fall outside of this definition? Are we permitted to not love them? Jesus certainly makes it clear that that is not the case:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you... (Matthew 5:43-44)

The question then is how are we to love even our enemies? How do we love those who differ from us not only in their externals, but in their very definition of good and evil, and particularly in their practice of evil? The answer lies in how we are to love our neighbour, or rather, what exactly within another person we are to love:

To love the neighbour, seen in itself, is not to love the person, but the good that is in the person. (*True Christian Religion* §417)

When we love someone, that does not mean we should love everything about them. If someone is generally a decent person but has the habit of telling lies, we ought not

to love that they lie. We love all that is good, and so from the Lord, within them, and reject the evil. In fact, we love them all the better when we do not love the evil: by rejecting the evil we may see in them, we are hoping for their well-being and benefit. They themselves are certainly not served by having evil within them; nor do we do them any favours for loving those parts of them.

The last piece of the puzzle is that every living human being has some goodness in them. No one you have ever meet has been purely evil. It may be the case that you struggle to see any of their good qualities in an extreme case; but even then you can love the potential they have, and acknowledge that there must be some good that you do not see. In this way we can see all of humanity falling within the definition of the neighbour whom we are to love. Even the worst of us has some quality from the Lord in them that unites us, that brings us together, that causes us to be part of this one grand community.