

## A message for our first In-Person gathering in this year of New Church Jubilee!

It's a big deal that we are here. Even for this small gathering of us, this is an important moment. We are here again in this sacred physical space, this Chapel that we love so deeply. This solid stone structure, built through the vision of our New Church ancestors. This stone Chapel that has stood here for over a hundred years, and that, we pray, by our faithful efforts will stand for hundreds more.

Here we sit. In many ways the most profound thing we will do this morning is just to sit. The practice of meditation that eludes so many of us with its different styles and practices, is at its core, just the invitation to sit. To sit still. To sit with ourselves. To sit in the midst of life. To take the time to breath, to be, and in this act of pausing, to see what comes, what emerges within. To feel what we feel. And hopefully, God willing, to become aware of what is real.

Throughout history, in all of our various cultural epochs and spiritual traditions, in war time and in peace time, somehow there seems to be evidence, that if we just sit, if we just become still, that there is something there, something beyond us, something within us, something encircling us, something that is steady.

The religious traditions of the world all carry within them this call to connect to with this steadiness. To see through the frantic impermanence of human striving to that which is unchanging, to the source of all things, to that which has given, and in every moment is giving us, life.

We human beings have needed constant reminders to return to this steadiness. Kind of like a mother having to constantly tell her child to sit still. We have needed constant reminders. We are so good at forgetting. And as our brains have evolved and our abilities increased it has been easy, too easy, for us to start believing that we are the creators of life. So easy for us to forget that life pulses within us. So easy for us to forget why we are here in the first place, or most sadly to me, if we should even be here at all.

While some of us carry on, seemingly content with reasons that are dealt out by the world, be it: success, happiness, duty, or whatever, my suspicion is that those of you gathered here today, in this space, or through the gifts of technology, that you need a better reason, a reason that is not bound to worldly pursuits. A reason that cannot be taken away. Because if our reason to be is happiness, then what do we do if we are unhappy? If our reason to be is success, what do we do when we fail? If our reason to be is duty, and the people or institution to which we are seeking to be dutiful collapses, then what?

We need a reason that has not been cobbled together by others. We need a reason that can always guide our way.

No I have invited us, our little church community, into a New Church Jubilee Year, a full 365 days, to focus our attention and to share our stories of our experiences of that 'steadiness,' the steadiness that we sometimes call God, the steadiness of the 'church', the steadiness of the holy, as it really, unquestionably exists. And in our focusing I'm inviting us to see what forms, of thinking, of speaking, of worshiping, of gathering are perhaps no longer as useful as they may once have been, in connecting us with that steadiness. And to see what new forms might be calling to us.

We know, I know, we know something new is on the way.

We know something new is on the way, because we are the New Church, we are a body of people drawn together by Emanuel Swedenborg's revelation, declared nearly 300 years ago that a New Church was

coming into being, a new church that would be totally new, unrecognizable to the historic Christian church. Our resident Swedenborgian Saint Ms. Helen Keller puts it this way.

“By ‘church’, Swedenborg did not mean an ecclesiastical organization, but a spiritual fellowship of thoughtful people who spend their lives in a service to humankind that outlasts them. Swedenborg called it a civilization that was to be born of healthy universal religion-goodwill, mutual understanding, service from each to all, regardless of dogma or ritual.”<sup>1</sup>

Swedenborg's vision of the New Church is very big. Maybe too big. Much bigger than any ecclesiastical body could possibly hold on its own. In the early gatherings of readers of Swedenborg there was a significant opposition to even trying to form an “organization” to be this new church. The famous William Blake, mystic, artist and writer was among the opposition. But still the church was formed, and for a time those early faithful held hope that they could be this new body that Swedenborg proclaimed was coming to be.

Our dusty library is full of books written by these faithful, hopeful early spiritual leaders. But over time, like those books, this idea has mostly gathered dust. We are not the fullness of the New Church, and most New Church members would acknowledge that. Now, since my time in the church we spend much more time looking for signs of the New Church outside of our Church body. We see it in the rise of interfaith collaboration. We see it in the rise of the value of human freedom. We see it in the rise of human inquiry and questioning.

We sit here in our Chapel, as William James Hall towers next to us, and we see William James as one such figure, influencing the world as a part of this New Church, his father Henry's faithful Swedenborgianism seeping out onto and through his son. We see Swedenborg's influence on the psychological movement. In Carl Jung's archetypes we see a development of Swedenborg's correspondences.

Our church body has been humbled, and we have transitioned into a comfortable identity, not as this huge New Church that Swedenborg declared, but as “the Swedenborgian Church.” And for many of us perhaps that is enough. For those of us who are here now, it may be. We gather to understand more deeply Swedenborg's vision, to learn about how Swedenborg saw the operations of the cosmos and our place in it. We gather to try and get our heads around the volumes and volumes of his writings, and to discover the gems within. I could probably quite comfortably spend the rest of my days in this pursuit.

But here's the thing. Here's what's gotten me a bit riled up as of late, and ready to turn over some apple carts.

While it feels daunting, and nearly impossible to imagine that we could be the fullness of The New Church, in that huge sense that Swedenborg declared it, I wonder if it might be possible for our ecclesiastical organization to commit to our own growth enough to allow ourselves to be expanded by this vision, and in so doing become **more** of the NEW CHURCH.

Just as each of us is always the same person, and yet we are constantly changing, I am beginning to believe that our church can too.

The crazy thing about spiritual traditions is that they are the collection of all of the people and practices and ideas that form after the initial incitement of most often an individual, an individual whose spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> [Light in My Darkness](#), Helen Keller p 142.

eyes are opened, who finds the way to live with the steadiness, to connect with it, and to share about it. And then from this bold vision, this revelation, regular human people like you and me, try to follow, and develop ways of following, ways of gathering, ways of worshiping, that we might do our best to hold fast to the vision that this initial seer awakened us to.

You can see, I hope, the problem. What begins as an invitation to a radical shift, becomes an institution. And the distance between the spirit, and the spiritual institutions life and practice widens over time. Is corrupted over time.

This truth is something Swedenborg spent a lot of time writing about. Describing how churches are born and then die in a succession, and how this process is natural and necessary for growth. It is the way of things. It's not anyone's fault. It's not a problem to be fixed. It's just the way of things.

And here. Right here in this place. This process is occurring. Those of you who have been on this journey longer than me, I hope you see it. Over the last nearly 7 years that I have been walking this path with all of you, we have seen the spirit move. This today, even though we are still a little group, even though things on the outside might not seem that different, is an entirely different community than it was when I first arrived here.

How many of you were here when I lead worship here for the first time in June of 2015? Do you remember it? Will you ever forget it? For those of you who were not here, and for those of you who somehow don't remember, as we gathered in worship. As we sat in these pews, and as I did my best to step up here in front of all of you and lead you in worship, a stranger entered this sanctuary, elderly, disheveled, appearing lost. He walked right up this isle and in the middle of whatever I was doing at the time began to yell out "There is evil here, there is evil in this place!"

Do you remember this? It was quite a way to start our journey together.

We haven't seen that man again since. But he was right. There was evil here. Not isolated in an individual, but a weight, a heavy weight of mistrust, of fear, of dishonesty and subterfuge. This evil was no one's fault but what often occurs when something is at an end. This faithful crew had no leadership, very little money, not enough people to do the work on the ground so it is in no way surprising that the state of things were as they were.

This 'evil' almost broke me. It almost broke us. I was told by many a mentor and advisor during those first few years to get out. To brush the dust off my feet and go.

I may likely have gone if I'd had any place to go. I didn't stay out of a whole lot of faith or hope or confidence at the time but because I needed a job, I had a small family to support and there are not a plethora of Swedenborgian churches out there hiring. And maybe I stayed because this was my call, but for whatever the reason I am so glad that I did.

Because today. We are different. We faced something difficult together. This introverted, conflict-averse group took a stand for this church, and here we are. And that is no small thing.

And to me what we have been through as a group these last seven years, those early years of conflict and upheaval, followed by time of discernment and the birth of the vision of A Helen Keller Center, followed by two years of making our way through a global pandemic, that we are still here, this to me is evidence

of God's activity! Evidence that we are in the stream of providence. That something was ready to die, and now something is being reborn.

We have much to look back and give thanks for, and we can see, we can practically see the imprints of the Divine on our particular story as a community. This evidence is what gives me faith to continue, to not stop now, but to see what more God might be able to do with us.

So friends. I think we have work to do. I think that this Chapel is called to be a part of bringing about a new heaven and a new earth, to being the home of a new church where people will be nurtured and inspired to love themselves, to love others, and to let this love guide us into the work of building a new world, a new world that we are becoming more and more aware is needed if this world is going to persist.

I have hope my friends. I have so much hope. This is my church. You are my church. I believe that a New Church is coming into the world and I want so very much for us to be a part of it. I think that in many ways the New Church is already here. In the safety and respect and kindness that has come to exist now. This love, this trust, this freedom is no small thing. And this love can be our guide. Even as we hold lightly the forms and structures of our church we can hold tightly to that love. We can hold tightly to our story. We can hold tightly to one another. I believe it will hold us, as we seek to discover what new forms of life we might be called into.

And here is the thing friends, I cannot do it by myself, and I don't want to. This vision of the New Church is going to come into being through all of you, and through the people who will be coming in through that door. The New Church is springing up all over outside of this institution and we pray it will spring up inside as well.

Our church has long told a story of decline, of loss, of hopelessness, but it's so easy to turn that story on its head and see, what we have been given, in this place this beautiful physical sanctuary, this stone testament to a higher life, in this important corner of the world. We have been given the powerful teachings of Emmanuel Swedenborg and this vision of hope for the future. And we've been given one another. We have so much. And now is the time to appreciate that gift and see what we can do with it.

I'm not going anywhere. I just turned 45 and I have a lot of life left in me. Love isn't going anywhere. And God is on this journey with us.

So today we begin with this small framework for what worship might look and feel like, and I pray that we will be here throughout this year, sitting together in this place, and in our homes, and listening to the call of what is coming. We are called to be the people in this place, with this vision. We are not called to be all of the New Church, but to be the New Church here, where we are planted. We can be a beacon of light. We can be a community of love. And I am so excited to see what God will bring.

Amen.