

Love is What Helps Us Understand

A Children's Talk by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

Bryn Athyn Church Community Worship Service - May 17, 2026

- Did you hear the song that the choir sang at the beginning?
 - Do you know what language they were singing? (Welsh)
- Do you know what they were singing about?
 - Having a calon lân – heart that is pure.

לב טהור בְּרָא-לִי אֱלֹהִים

- Look at this:
 - Do you know what language this is? (Hebrew)
- It's also talking about having a pure heart.
- It's a prayer to the Lord to help us have a good and clean heart:
 - "Create in me a clean heart and renew a steadfast spirit within me."
 - In Hebrew it sounds like this.

יְרוּחַ נָכוֹן חַדֵּשׁ בְּקִרְבִּי

- In this world we have lots of different languages, and it can take a lot of work for us to learn how to understand someone else's language.
 - It can also take a lot of work to understand someone else, even if they speak the same language as us.
- The teachings for the New Church tell us some exciting things about language in heaven:
 - In heaven we will all speak the same language.
 - It's a language that you will already know as soon you as you get there.
 - "Spirits can express more within a minute than a person in the world can within an hour" (*Arcana Coelestia* 8734).
 - You know how sometimes here it can be hard to find the words to say what you want to say?
 - In heaven, people can fully understand each other.

- John saw a beautiful scene in the book of Revelation where people of all different languages came together to praise the Lord:
 - Revelation 7:9, 10
 - ⁹ After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"
- We can look forward to that but there are also things we learn from it for while we're living in this world.
 - The thing that makes people be able to really understand each other in the spiritual world is love – charity and good will.
 - Wanting what's best for other people.
 - When we love each other, that makes the communication go better.
- There's a story in which there are people who speak lots of different languages, but then the Lord does a miracle so that they can all understand.
 - This is from the book of the Acts of the Apostles that tells the history of what the Lord's apostles did after the Lord rose from the dead.
 - Acts 2:1-4
 - ¹ [The apostles] were all with one accord in one place. ² And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ Then divided tongues, as of fire, appeared. One sat upon each of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues.
- Speaking with other tongues means that they were speaking in different languages.
 - Acts 2:5-8
 - ⁵ And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. ⁷ Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another,.... ⁸ [H]ow is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born?

- Can you see the 12 apostles anywhere in this room? (In the stained glass.)
 - And do you see at the top, between the Lord and the apostles, there's a dove in the middle and tongues of fire on either side.
 - That's showing the the Lord's wisdom and His love coming down to His apostles.
 - That's what helped them be understood by other people.
 - It was a miracle that the Lord did.
 - When you see that window you can think about how the Lord's love and wisdom helped the apostles talk with people.
- The Lord can do something similar for us.
 - The Lord can give us the right wisdom in our minds and love in our hearts to be able to talk to other people.
 - He can give us a pure heart, a clean heart.
- If you want to have a good conversation, start with love.
 - That's what it means to have oil in our lamp and keep burning.
 - Have love for the person you're talking to.
 - Have love for the truth.
 - Have love for the Lord.
- Love from the Lord will help you to understand and to be understood.
- *Amen.*

Divine Providence and Our Choices

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Introduction: Why do our decisions matter?

- Why do our small decisions matter?
 - Why, for example, does it matter if we approach a particular conversation from love?
- We can have a sense that our small decisions *do* matter, but it can be helpful to shore that sense up with more teachings from the Lord's Word.
- Because on some days it can feel like our decisions do not matter at all.
 - Either because it feels like things are going to happen the way they're going to happen, regardless of what we do.
 - Or like other people than us have all the power and so our little decisions won't make any difference.
 - Those things aren't true, or at least aren't the full picture.
- Today, we're going to try to see a little bit more of the picture – a little bit more of how our decisions and the Lord's Divine providence can work together.
 - We're going to focus particularly on those times when things do not go – or are not going – the way we want them to.
 - What then?
 - How should we interpret those things and how should we respond to them?

Outline

- We're going to start with one image for thinking about Divine providence and our choices.
- Then we'll consider another.
- Finally, we'll think about how these ideas can help us as we navigate things that don't go our way.

Is Life Like a Rollercoaster?

- One way of picturing our role in life is as someone riding a roller coaster.
 - Here's one way that idea is expressed:
 - "Life is like a roller coaster. You can either scream every time there is a bump or you can throw your hands up and enjoy the ride" (Unknown).
- It may be overused but it's a fun analogy.
 - Because sometimes life is like a fun ride.
 - Other times it's slow, boring, and predictable like one of those kiddie roller coasters.
 - Other times you're clicking upward towards some terrible, terrifying drop.
 - And other times you're flinging around all sorts of different directions and you have no idea where you're going to go next.
- But is this analogy accurate?
 - A key characteristic of a roller coaster is that we're not in charge of where it goes.
 - And when some people talk about life being like a roller coaster, that's their exact point.
 - "Think of life as a roller coaster. We ride the coaster, we don't drive it. Can you imagine how frustrating it would be to try to make the roller coaster go the way you want it to? Not only would you not be able to steer it, you would miss the experience of just riding it, with all of its highs and lows." (Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, Kessler, David. *Life Lessons: Two Experts on Death and Dying Teach Us About the Mysteries of Life and Living*. p.164)
- There is wisdom in this.
 - There is a lot that happens in life of which we are not in control.
 - And to *pretend* to be in control or to *try* to be in control is going to be an exercise in anxiety and futility.
 - Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step programs teach people about this.
 - They talk about "taking life on life's terms."
 - The "Serenity Prayer" which was popularized by AA, begins with the line, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change...."
- There are things in life that we cannot change.
 - It is wise to accept that.
 - However, not everything falls in that category.

- The "Serenity Prayer" goes on:
 - God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change
the courage to change the things I can
and the wisdom to know the difference.
- In some ways, what we're talking about today is "the wisdom to know the difference" between what we *cannot* change and what we *can* change.
 - The problem with the rollercoaster analogy is that it has no representation of there being some things that we can change.
 - Maybe we should picture riding in a roller coaster, with a lever in our car that allows us to switch what track we're heading down.
 - But the Lord actually gives us a better analogy, so let's turn to that now.

The Stream of Providence

- There is a beautiful and well-loved passage from *Arcana Coelestia* that talks about people who trust in the Lord.
 - It's aspirational: it describes the kind of trust in the Lord and peace that probably all of us wish that we could have.
 - It talks about the Lord's providence being like a stream.
 - We'll read it in an older translation.
- *Arcana Coelestia* 8478:3-4
 - [W]ith people who trust in the Divine,... unruffled is their spirit whether they obtain the objects of their desire, or not; and they do not grieve over the loss of them, being content with their lot. If they become rich, they do not set their hearts on riches; if they are raised to honors, they do not regard themselves as more worthy than others; if they become poor, they are not made sad; if their circumstances are mean, they are not dejected. They know that for those who trust in the Divine all things advance toward a happy state to eternity, and that whatever befalls them in time is still conducive thereto.

Be it known that the Divine Providence is universal, that is, in things the most minute; and that they who are in the stream of Providence are all the time carried along toward everything that is happy, whatever may be the appearance of the means....

- Isn't that beautiful?
 - Don't you want to be like those people who still trust in the Lord and His providence, even when things don't go their way?
- However, if we're not careful, we can misunderstand this idea of the stream of Providence.
 - We might think of it kind of like that roller coaster, like a thing that's going to go where it's going to go, regardless of what we do.
 - Or, to use another amusement park analogy, we might think of it as being like a lazy river.
 - On a lazy river, you don't have to pay attention to where you're going.
 - And you can be a jerk to the people in the raft with you, or to the people in the rafts around you, and you'll still get to where you need to go.
 - But that's not how the stream of Providence works.
 - If we just read the part that we read from that passage it can sound like everyone is in the stream of Providence, but the full passage is actually explicitly contrasting what life is like for people *in* the stream of Providence as compared with people who are *not in* the stream of Providence.
 - There are other forces and currents of which we need to be aware.

The Stream of Hell

- This bring us to the first passage in your pamphlet.
- It talks about the same strong force, coming from the Lord, working to move all people in a good direction, but it also talks about a force that pulls people towards hell.
- *True Christian Religion* 652
 - From the Lord's own words, we can see that He ascribes goodness to everyone and evil to no one, and therefore that He judges no one to hell but instead lifts us all toward heaven to the degree that we will follow along.

Jesus said, "When I am raised up from the earth I will draw all people to myself." (John 12:32)

God did not send His Son into the world in order to judge the world, but so that the world would be saved through Him. Those who believe in Him are not judged; but those who do not believe have already been judged. (John 3:17-18)

When evil individuals are lifted by the Lord toward heaven, their evil drags them downward; and because they love that evil they follow it of their own accord. There is in fact a sphere that constantly emanates from the Lord, which lifts all toward heaven. It fills the entire spiritual world and the entire natural world. It is like a strong current in the ocean that secretly carries ships along. All people who believe in the Lord and live by His commandments come into that sphere or current and are lifted up. Those who do not believe, though, are unwilling to enter it. They move themselves off to the sides and are there caught in a flow that leads down into hell.

- The same Latin word that's used for "the stream of Providence" is used for the "flow that leads down into hell."
 - We need to know about that scary undertow.
 - It would be dishonest and dangerous not to warn people about that.
 - Imagine if you were going for a paddle on a lake and the guy doing the safety briefing said, "It's all good. Just go with the flow..." and meanwhile there was a large whirlpool in the lake that could suck you in.
 - We need proper warning.
 - We need to know about the currents that we're going to encounter as we paddle around our lives.

You Have a Paddle

- Maybe this gives us a good picture of our decisions in relation to the Lord's Divine Providence:
 - We're in our own little boats on a big ocean, with big strong currents.
 - Those currents are way stronger than we are, but we do have our paddles or oars.
 - We can certainly make things worse with our rowing, but we also can use our paddles to get ourselves pointed back in the right direction, and back into the good current.
- One of the passages that talks about the current of hell talks about people rowing hard to get out of that current.

- *Apocalypse Revealed* 756:2
 - [P]eople who have immersed themselves in evil delights... cannot approach the delights... of the affections of a love of goodness and truth otherwise than as people who with straining arms pull on the oars against the current of a swift river.
- That's our job: to pay attention to where we're headed and do our best to paddle in a good direction.
 - The word that the teachings for the New Church use for our efforts is our "prudence."
 - And there's good use of our prudence and there's bad use of our prudence.
- Here's the second passage printed in your pamphlet about the good use of our prudence.
 - It uses a different analogy for our relationship with our evil inclinations, but the message is the same – about our responsibility to work against our evil inclinations.
 - *Divine Providence* 210
 - If you want to be led by Divine providence, use your prudence as a servant and employee who faithfully manages the employer's assets. Love of self lives in the depths of each one of us from birth. If we do not recognize it – and it does not want to be recognized – then it lives in perfect safety and guards the door to prevent us from opening it so the Lord can evict it. We open the door by abstaining from evils as sins, apparently on our own, but admitting that it is being done by the Lord. This is prudence with which the Divine providence can cooperate.

How Can These Teachings Help When Things Don't Go Our Way?

- Alright! That's a lot of analogies and ideas.
 - Let's now get down to more practical things.
 - How can these teachings help us, when things don't go our way?

It's Not All on Us or All on God

- One of the traps that we can easily fall into, when things are not going how we want them to, is thinking that what happens is either all on God or all on us.
 - If it's all on God, then we throw up our hands and give up on even trying to make things better.
 - If things don't go how we want them to we conclude that God is punishing us, or doesn't care about us, or is unable to help us.
 - If it's all on us, then we hold far too much responsibility.
 - We blame ourselves if things don't work out.
 - We take credit for successes that really weren't our doing.
- The reality is less simplistic.
 - It's as complex as trying to understand and navigate ocean currents and weather.
 - The Lord is involved in all of the details.
 - And hell also does have an influence on what happens, especially in this natural world.
 - And we do still have some role to play.
 - When something we care about succeeds or fails we won't be able to parse exactly what caused it to go that way.
 - But we can try to resist the inclination to explain it in simplistic ways.

Is God Teaching Me a Lesson?

- Another way that people will try to make sense of difficult things that they go through is to ask themselves, "Is God trying to tell me something or teach me a lesson?"
 - Or they'll wonder, "Is God is putting a challenge in front of me, for me to face head-on?"
- These things might be the case, but they also might not.
 - Maybe we're supposed to face the difficult situation we're in, and learn from it, and face it head-on.
 - Or maybe we're supposed to learn how to paddle our way around it.
- There's a great discussion of this in an article in *New Church Life* from 40 years ago by the Rev. Dandridge Pendleton.
 - First, he acknowledges that we are taught that the Lord brings good out of temptations but then he says this:
 - It should be well noted that in none of these teachings is it said, nor implied, that a man is to simply endure whatever external circumstances may come upon him during his lifetime, nor that these are the circumstances under which he is necessarily to remain in seeking that spiritual development which the Lord would have him achieve. Too often, the conviction that every external circumstance provides an opportunity for our spiritual development is held in such a way as to mean that whatever the nature or scope of that circumstance, we are to stand and fight, regardless, and that if we feel compelled to remove ourselves from the burden, we are somehow not measuring up to our capabilities.

We should bear in mind that while every natural event, or circumstance, can and should serve our inner development, this inner development does not necessarily come only by surmounting the circumstance. If we are to develop a balanced spiritual perspective, it is just as important that we come to realize our limitations, as it is for us to develop our strengths. It is true that every such circumstance does provide an opportunity to learn; but what we are intended to learn may just as well be to say "I can't" as "I can." (Pendleton, Dandridge. "Doctrine of Permission" *New Church Life*, 1980: pp.114-115)

- Isn't that good?
 - We shouldn't assume that every difficult thing is a challenge that we're supposed to believe that we can conquer.
 - We want explanations for why things happened the way they did.
 - And it makes sense that we want that.
 - And we need to try to hold the explanations that come to our minds gently.
 - We don't really know.
 - This applies for when things go well too.

Success is Not Really the Point

- The teachings for the New Church say that "honors and riches may be blessings, and that they may also be curses" (*Divine Providence* 216:2).
 - *Divine Providence* 217:2
 - [T]hey are blessings in the case of people who do not place their heart in them, and that they are curses in the case of people who do place their heart in them. To place one's heart in them is to love oneself in them, and not to place one's heart in them is to love the uses, and not oneself, in them. [And] advancements and riches lead some people astray, and not others.
- And there are even passages that say that some good people are *not* given position and material success, because they would lead them astray (*Arcana Coelestia* 7007:3).
- So, if we do or do not have lots of apparent success, position, power, money, stuff, etc. we can conclude that...
 - ...we have no idea why we do or do not have those things.
- And we can also conclude that having or not having those things is not really the point.
 - What the Lord cares about is us using the agency that we have to try to shun evils and keep the commandments.
 - Paddle away from hell and trust that the stream of the Lord's Divine providence will pull you in a good direction.

The Difference It Makes When One Person Shuns Evil

- We can get a feel for the truth of these teachings when we think about the difference it makes when one person shuns evils.
 - Think of a man who gets filled with rage really easily and lashes out at the people around him.
 - Maybe his dad was the same way when he was growing up.
 - Imagine that that man recognizes that he's breaking the Lord's commandment against murder and that he's hurting the people around him.
 - And he works to change his behavior and repent, with the Lord's help.
 - It's hard because he has to learn all new ways of communicating.
 - He has to figure out why he gets so angry and what he can do with that anger instead.
 - But we can so easily see that that work matters.
 - Think of the difference that it would make to his wife, to his kids, to his coworkers!
 - Think of how it could change the feeling in their home, in his workplace.
 - Think of the example it would set for his kids who could then pass that example on to their kids.
- We can also see that that man working on shunning that evil over the course of his lifetime is far more important than how much money he has in the bank when he comes to the end of his life or whatever other successes or failures he may have experienced along the way.
 - The same is true for you.

Conclusion

- So yes, our little day-to-day decisions do matter.
 - In the small scale and the big scale, in the short term and in the long term.
- Thanks to the Lord we have a proper safety briefing about the waters that we are navigating, with the hellish undertow, and the stream of Providence.
 - We can use our little prudence paddles to try to paddle our way towards the Lord.
- To end, let's return to the serenity prayer, which – you may or may not know – is longer than just the first few lines.
- The rest of it is a good encapsulation of how we can try to live, taking responsibility for our decisions and trusting in Divine Providence.
 - Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time.
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace.
Taking, as Jesus did, the sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it.
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His will;
that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
and supremely happy with Him forever.
- *Amen.*

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.