

How to Talk About What Matters: Two Kinds of Birds

By Rev. Dr. Thane Glenn

August 18, 2019

We've all probably heard the phrase, "if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." Many of us are probably also familiar with the distinction made in the teachings for the New Church between niceness and charity. True charity, true kindness in the case of a judge, for example, can mean putting harsh restraints on a destructive individual. Not exactly nice, but charitable. True charity in the case of a soldier can mean ardently fighting those who pose a threat. So speaking charitably doesn't necessarily mean saying only nice things. But then how should we talk with others about what matters most, especially when what we care about, what we believe in strongly, becomes a matter of contention?

Most of us don't have to go very far to find a contentious conversation. You log on to social media these days, and you're more than likely to stumble into a conversation about gun control and constitutional rights. As people post, as they comment and weigh in with their strongly held beliefs, things can get heated pretty quickly. It's not unusual to find people on opposite sides of a debate saying things like, "your ignorance is astounding," or "your lack of compassion is sickening." Other contentious conversations don't necessarily involve direct confrontation; it could be a discussion with our family or our friends about the frustrating choices that another person is making. It's pretty easy to let our annoyance bubble over when someone we know is making relationship choices or lifestyle choices that trespass against the things that we value. "He's setting a bad example." "She makes it impossible to like her!"

So how do we talk about the things that not everyone agrees on, but that nevertheless matter so deeply to us? I believe that one key to answering this question can be found in our story today of Abram's covenant with the Lord. And, believe it or not, the key centers on the two kinds of birds that we encounter in the story. The teachings for the New Church tell us that birds represent our thoughts. And it really makes sense if you think about it. Our thoughts, like birds, flit through the atmosphere of our minds. Some perch and chirp at us constantly, others we hear rarely and never see. Some thoughts circle around and around, others dart quickly past. Some thoughts descend in flocks, others are solitary. When we talk with others, which thoughts do we give expression to and how?

Well, the dove and the pigeon in Abram's covenant represent the ideas, the thoughts that we care most about, what *Secrets of Heaven* calls the "intellectual and rational concepts" (§1826) that constitute the matters of our faith (§1832). Now, it may seem like the examples I just gave—gun control and constitutional rights, or another person's relationship choices—might not seem like they really have much to do with our faith. Are they religious things? But any principles that we hold as central—that we value and want to live by and would like to see others live by—those things are really part of our faith. That's what the dove and the pigeon represent. And notice what Abram does with those sacred birds, those most important ideas. Here, I think, is the first directive of the story. He lays them before the Lord. Are we willing to do the same with our adamant convictions?

As we heard in the readings, our strongest convictions, as important as they are, are always somewhat imperfect. You see, the Abram story, like so many stories in the Word, includes a very odd little detail: here the fact that Abram cut the heifer, the goat, and the ram into two pieces, but he did not divide the birds. Why not? Why does the story include that distinction? Well, the teachings for the New Church offer an interpretation of this odd little detail. Now, this is a somewhat complex concept, but it's really quite beautiful and profound. It says that the warm-blooded livestock animals represent our affections, our warmth, our impulses of love and charity. Abram divides these to represent the perfect correspondence between the Lord's side and our side: the Lord imparts his love and charity directly to us (*Secrets of Heaven* §1831). The birds, on the other hand, are not divided because they really represent our side of the equation only. There's no direct connection between the Lord's divine truth and our limited human sight of truth. So our most treasured convictions, the ideas that make up our beliefs, are never quite as flawless or as divinely clear as they may seem to us. We read earlier from *Secrets of Heaven* that "the majority of these ideas have the appearance of being truths, but in fact, they are not so.... Some are

even falsities....” And yet it says the Lord can work with our imperfect ideas. “For the things that are once implanted in a person's beliefs and are held sacred, provided they are not contrary to divine order, are left by the Lord as they are; and although no parallelism or correspondence exists, He nevertheless adapts them” (§1832). I wonder, is this perhaps a reminder to hold our thoughts with some humility? To remember that we maybe don't have the whole picture.

And then what do we do when those thoughts come into contention with others around us, as they so often do? Well, remember that the story of Abram's covenant involves a second kind of bird. After making his sacrifice, Abram has to drive off birds of prey, vultures, that descend to pick apart his offering. The teachings for the New Church tell us that these birds of prey represent falsities that attack our minds. But wait a second! As we saw, the dove and pigeon – our most cherished ideas – can also, in fact, be falsities – false ideas. So what's the difference between these birds and the birds of prey?

The difference is the matter of a mere three-word phrase in the text. But it's a phrase of utmost, utmost importance. It says the birds of prey represent falsities “derived from evil” (§1834, my emphasis). Not merely misunderstandings, but false thoughts that come from evil. These are the false thoughts that stem from a spirit that wants to destroy, pick apart, tear apart and devour the ideas that (we or) another person holds dear. In fact, in describing the spiritual birds of prey, these false thoughts derived from evil, the passage goes on to talk about how in the early church when a spirit of charity started to grow cold, a spirit of fault finding, of picking apart, took its place. But when a spirit of charity was central, such picking, such contention was not part of the picture. I read to you from *Secrets of Heaven* §1834:

In those days [when charity was central], they would not even call schism schism, or heresy heresy, but rather a matter of doctrine adhered to in accordance with [a] particular belief.... That matter of doctrine they would leave to each individual's conscience, provided it did not deny anything fundamental....

And again, notice what Abram does in our story. He drives those birds of prey away. He drives them away. So here, I think is the second directive of the story. One, we lay our treasured convictions before the Lord, the dove and pigeon, recognizing in humility that they will be imperfect. And that doesn't mean that we can't speak with conviction, it doesn't mean that we can't disagree with others, but we lay those treasured convictions before the Lord with some humility. And two, when our animosity is stirred by other ideas that disagree with ours, when we find ourselves wanting to attack and pick apart, we try to drive those vultures away from our minds and hearts.

Now in the story we read from the Gospel of Matthew, we have a beautiful illustration of how the Lord both works with our imperfect human ideas and works to drive away the vultures from our minds. In His conversation with His disciples, we see Jesus patiently working with their flawed ideas, accepting, as it were, the sacrifice they offer, and then driving away the birds of prey that try to pick apart the bonds of shared humanity amongst them. So when the mother of James and John petitions the Lord to allow her sons to rule on His right and left in the kingdom, He doesn't dismiss the idea as inane. He doesn't say, “You really don't understand anything. The kingdom of heaven is the joy within you that comes from a spirit of charity and a life of useful service.” He could have said that. No, he gently bends their idea, telling his disciples repeatedly that the first will be last and the last will be first (Matthew 19:27-30, 20:16). “Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant” (Matthew 20:26). Notice that even this idea is still tainted with their limited human concepts of reward and self-importance. *Well, I want to be great, so I guess I better act like a servant!* But the point is, the Lord can use that imperfect idea to lead them to something good.

But then, of course, the vultures descend. When the other disciples heard, it says, “they were moved with indignation against the two brothers” (20:24). How often and how quickly are we moved with indignation by other people's ideas? It's worth noting that the Greek word for indignation here, *aganakteo*, is used in the gospels almost exclusively to describe these vulture-type thoughts, these thoughts bent on destruction. It's used to describe the spirit with which the ruler of the synagogue accuses Jesus of healing on the Sabbath: *aganakteo*, indignation. Used to describe the spirit with which the chief priests railed against Christ's triumphal entry and His acts in the temple: *aganakteo*, indignation. Used to describe the

spirit with which the disciples complained against the woman anointing the Lord's feet with precious ointment: *aganakteo*. And when His disciples set themselves against James and John, Jesus quickly drives those vultures away. He reminds his disciples that they should not long for the kind of dominion exercised by the rulers of the nations of the world.

So how should we talk with others about what matters most to us? Especially when the things that we care about, the things that we believe in strongly, become a matter of contention? The simple heart of my message today is this: Can we remember the two different kinds of birds in the story of Abram's covenant and strive to follow Abram's lead? Can we lay our treasured convictions before the Lord, realizing in humility that they will be imperfect? We still speak with conviction about what we believe. But when our indignation is stirred by other ideas that disagree with ours, when we want to attack and pick apart, when we want to destroy what somebody else thinks, can we strive to drive those vultures away from our minds and hearts? When we find ourselves wanting to call out another person's ignorance or insensitivity, can we check our animosity? When we feel the urge to defame another person's choices, can we just pause to question the character of our annoyance?

I started today's sermon with a familiar proverb – "if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." Well, we know that speaking charitably doesn't necessarily mean speaking only nicely. But I perhaps humbly want to suggest that, nevertheless, when in doubt, this can be a pretty good rule of thumb.

In outlining the spiritual meaning of the story of Abram's covenant, *Secrets of Heaven* here constantly remind us to hold with humility the great variety of human ideas that will arise as we all seek the truth. God first asks Abram to look at the stars of the night sky and count them if he is able. *Secrets of Heaven* tells us that this is a vision of "the Lord's kingdom, whose vastness and greatness in number surpasses anyone's belief" (§1810). Surpasses anyone's belief! "No other word than BOUNDLESS can describe it" (*ibid*). And speaking further of the variety of human ideas of truth, *Secrets of Heaven* says the following:

In the Christian world, it is their doctrines that caused churches to be distinct and separate. And because of this, they call themselves Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists or the Reformed, and Evangelicals, among other names.... This situation would never exist if they were to make love to the Lord and charity towards the neighbor the chief thing of faith. In this case, their doctrinal differences would be no more than shades of opinion concerning the mysteries of faith, which truly Christian people would leave to individual conscience.... If this were so, all the different churches would become one, and all the disagreements which stem from doctrine alone would disappear. Indeed, the hatred that one person holds against another would be dispelled in an instant, and the Lord's Kingdom on Earth would come. (§1799)

We just have to drive away those vultures. So friends, perhaps the next time we find ourselves in a contentious argument with another person, over the absolute rightness of our ideas and the absolute wrongness of their ideas, can we remember with humility, the Lord's words to Abram: "Look now toward *heaven* and count the stars, if you are able to number them."

Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 15:5-11, Matthew 20:20-28, *Arcana Coelestia* 1832

Our subject today is how to talk about what matters most to us--how to talk about our beliefs, especially when the conversation gets contentious. The first reading today is from the book of Genesis chapter 15.

And the Lord brought Abram outside and said, Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them. And He said to him, so shall your descendants be. And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness. Then He said to him, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give you this land to inherit it. And he said, Lord God, how shall I know that I will inherit it? So He said to me, and bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. Then he brought all these to Him, and cut them in two down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other. But he did not cut the birds in two. And when vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

Matthew chapter 20: The story of a time when contention arose amongst the Lord's twelve disciples.

Then the mother of Zebedee sons came to Jesus with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from him. And He said to her, What do you wish? She said to him, grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right hand on the other on the left. in your kingdom. But Jesus answered and said, You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They said to Him, we are able. So He said to them, You will indeed drink my cup and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with. But to sit on my right hand, and on my left is not mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by my father. Now when the other 10 heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brothers. But Jesus called them to Himself and said, you know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you. But whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave. Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Our final reading this morning is from one of the books of teachings for the New Church, *Arcana Coelestia* or *Secrets of Heaven*. Here it is making a commentary on Abram's sacrifice, and particularly on why Abram cut the livestock animals, the mammals, into two parts, but did not divide the birds. The passages stems from the idea that the livestock animals represent our affections, matters of our heart, but that the birds represent our thoughts.

From *Arcana Coelestia* 1832: The meaning of birds is that which is spiritual, by spiritual things are meant all those things that constitute faith. Consequently, all those things which are matters of doctrine, intellectual concepts, and rational concepts, And these are called matters of faith, even though in fact, they are not so until they have been joined to charity. Abram did not cut the birds in half, because between these intellectual matters of belief, and the Lord, no parallelism or correspondence exists, since they are not the kinds of things that flow in by way of an internal dictate or conscience as the things of love and charity do, but instead, they flow in by way of instruction and so through hearing. In other words, not from inside, but from outside. The majority of these ideas have the appearance of being truths, but in fact, they are not so, some are even falsities, which nevertheless are able to serve as vessels and containers for love and charity. With the Lord only what is holy and essentially truth exists, and therefore, no parallelism or correspondence exists with these apparent truths, yet they may be rendered suitable to serve celestial things which are matters of love and charity, as vessels. These apparent truths are what constitute the cloud and the understanding part of our mind into which the Lord can implant charity and so form conscience. These and other such things are what are meant by the statement that the birds were not divided, for the things that are once implanted in a person's beliefs and are held sacred, provided they're not contrary to divine order, are left by the Lord as they are. And although no parallelism or correspondence exists, He nevertheless adapts them.

Amen.