

Our Spiritual Reality: Associate Spirits

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Readings

Genesis 31:25-27, 31, 36, 41-46, 51-52, 55

²⁵ And Laban overtook Jacob, and Jacob pitched his tent on the mountain; and Laban pitched with his brothers on the mountain of Gilead.

²⁶ And Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done, that you have stolen my heart, and have driven my daughters like captives of the sword? ²⁷ Why did you hide yourself to run away, and did steal me, and have not told me?"

³¹ And Jacob answered and said to Laban, "Because I was fearful, for I said, 'Perhaps you will take your daughters from me by robbery.'"

³⁶ And Jacob was incensed, and strove with Laban; and Jacob answered and said to Laban, "What is my transgression? What is my sin, that you have chased after me?

⁴¹ These twenty years I have served you in your house, fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten ways. ⁴² Unless the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Dread of Isaac, had been with me, surely now you would have sent me away empty. God has seen my affliction and the toil of my hands, and reproved you last night."

⁴³ And Laban answered, and said to Jacob, "The daughters are my daughters, and the sons are my sons, and the flock is my flock, and all that you see, it is mine; and what will I do today for these my daughters, or for their sons whom they have brought forth? ⁴⁴ And now go, let us cut a covenant, I and you, and let it be for a witness between me and you."

⁴⁵ And Jacob took a stone, and made it high for a pillar. ⁴⁶ And Jacob said to his brothers, "Collect stones"; and they took stones, and made a heap, and they did eat there upon the heap.

⁵¹ And Laban said to Jacob, ⁵² "This heap be a witness, and the pillar be a witness, that I should not pass by this heap to you, and that you should not pass by this heap to me, and this pillar, for evil." ⁵⁵ And in the morning Laban got up early, and kissed his sons and his daughters, and blessed them; and Laban went and returned to his place.

Luke 8:26-30

²⁶ And [Jesus and His disciples] sailed down into the country of the Gadarenes, which is over opposite Galilee. ²⁷ And when He went out upon the land, there met Him out of the city a certain man who had demons for a considerable time, and wore no garment, and did not stay in a house, but in the tombs. ²⁸ And when he saw Jesus, he cried out, and he fell before Him, and with a great voice said, "What is there to me and to You, Jesus, Son of God Most High? I beg You, do not torment me!" ²⁹ For [Jesus] had charged the unclean spirit to come out of the man; for many times it had seized him; and he was guarded, bound with chains and fetters, and rending the bonds, he was driven by the demon into the deserts.

³⁰ And Jesus asked him, saying, "What is your name?"

And he said, "Legion," because many demons had entered into him.

Arcana Coelestia 4067:2

Interiorly, that is, as to a person's thoughts and affections, everyone is within a community of... angels or devils, although they are not actually aware of it. Everything that a person thinks and wills originates there, so much so that if the communities of spirits or angels in which a person dwells were taken away from them, they would instantly cease to have any thought or will at all; indeed they would instantly fall down completely dead. Such is the nature of a person's state of being, though they believe that they themselves are the originator of all that they think and will....

Arcana Coelestia 5851

The same spirits do not remain with a person permanently but are changed according to how the person's states undergo change—the states of the person's affection, that is, of their love and the ends they have in view. The spirits present at one time are removed and others take their place. In general what kinds of spirits are present with a person is determined by the character of the person themselves. If the person is avaricious, they are avaricious spirits; if the person is haughty, they are haughty spirits; if the person is vengeful, they are spirits with that kind of nature; or if the person is given to deceit, they are spirits given to the same thing.

Introduction

- Have you ever seen cartoons of a person with an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other?
 - The devil trying to convince the person to do the wrong thing and the angel trying to encourage the person to do the right thing.
 - The teachings of the New Church say that there is some truth to that idea: there are good and evil spirits with us, influencing our thoughts and feelings.
- Today, we're going to talk about what's accurate about that shoulder-angel and shoulder-devil picture and what's not.
 - And then we're going to use the story that we read in our lessons about Jacob leaving Laban behind to learn about how we can gradually leave certain spirits behind us.

What's Accurate and Inaccurate

- According to the teachings of the New Church, that picture of an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other does capture something true about the experience of being a human being.
 - But it's also a pretty blurry picture.
- With the help of the teachings of the New Church, we can take that blurry picture and zoom in and see what's going on with so much more detail, clarity, and understanding.
 - What a blessing to have these books!
- We're going to go through 5 clarifying points about the spirits who are with us.

1) *We are influenced by spiritual beings, all the time*

- The first accurate thing about this picture is that we *are* influenced by spiritual beings.
 - In fact, our first reading from *Arcana Coelestia* said that, if those spiritual beings were taken away from us, we would "instantly cease to have any thought or will at all... [and] would instantly fall down completely dead" (*Arcana Coelestia* 4067:2).
- Our very survival depends on our connection with spiritual beings.
 - And because of that, this connection is not something that we only experience occasionally.

- In stories people will have shoulder angels and demons appear at certain crucial moments, when a big moral decision needs to be made.
 - But that's inaccurate.
 - The teachings of the New Church say that we have these spiritual beings with us all the time.
 - They are the source of every single thought and feeling we experience.

"Associate Spirits"

- What do we call these spiritual beings?
- People who have been around the New Church for a while may be familiar with the term "associate spirits" – the spirits that we associate with.
- New Church people also the phrase "attendant spirits" and "companion spirits" but the reality is that the teachings of the New Church don't really have a consistent term for these spirits, apart from just referring to "the spirits who are with a person."
- I'll use the term "associate spirits" because it's shorter and because the word associate seems to better capture our relationship with these spirits than the word attend or companion but you can figure out what phrase works best for you.

2) They are all normal human beings who have passed away

- A second important thing to know about these associate spirits is that they are all just normal human beings who have died and are now in the spiritual world.
- The New Church teaches that there is no separate race of angels or devils.
 - There's not some red guy with a pitchfork and horns on your shoulder; and there's also not some guy with a halo and wings on your other shoulder.
 - All angels and devils were once human beings who lived in the natural world.
 - Yes, they are angels and devils but they're also somebody's uncle, or grandma, or cousin.
 - When we're picturing these spirits who are associating with us it feels useful to demystify it a bit and remember that they were all regular human beings once, muddling their way through this natural world, just like the rest of us.
- They are spiritual beings who can have an influence on your spiritual life but that's also true of people you interact with who are still alive in the natural world.

- When we're thinking about who we're associating with spiritually, it's important to remember that who we hang out with in the natural world has a big effect on what spirits we associate with in the spiritual world.
 - Our group of friends and what they're into has an effect on the spirits who are with us.
 - This is also true of the books that we read, the music we listen to, the TV shows and movies we watch, the social media sites that we go on – these are all things that influence our associate spirits and that our associate spirits influence.
- This kind of interaction is also why talking to a good friend can make such a difference.
 - It might be that our associate spirits are feeling pretty hopeless and down but when our friend listens to us and they're in better spirits than we are, that can help us to feel a bit better too.
 - I don't know whether the spirits with us feel a bit better or whether the spirits with us change but, either way, the people we associate with in the natural world can help who we associate with in the spiritual world.

3) There are generally at least four associate spirits with us

- A third thing that the teachings of the New Church clarify is that, instead of one angel and one devil with us, we each have at least four associate spirits with us: two heavenly spirits and two hellish spirits.
 - With the heavenly spirits, one acts on the desires in our will and the other acts on the thoughts in our understanding.
 - The one acting on our will influences our loves, our ends in view, and our good intentions and the one acting on our understanding influences our faith, our principal convictions, and the true ideas that we have
(*Arcana Coelestia* 5978)
 - And with the same is true of our hellish associate spirits.
 - The one acting on our understanding argues against the truth and they are delighted when they can make the truth look like falsity, and falsity look like truth.
 - And the one acting on our will senses what it is that we desire and, if it is a good desire, they work to bend it towards what is evil and they are delighted when they can make us perceive good as evil, and evil as good
(*Arcana Coelestia* 5977).

- As we make our decisions, towards good or towards evil, the heavenly or the hellish spirits draw closer to us or withdraw further from us (*Arcana Coelestia* 5470).
 - And also, depending on whether we are more in our understanding or more in our will, we will draw a particular one of our associate spirits closer to us.
 - The teachings of the New Church also explain that, through the heavenly and hellish spirits that are closely associated with each of us we are also connected with the angelic or hellish societies that they come from and through those societies we are connected with all of heaven and hell.
- This is why different passages in the teachings of the New Church talk about there being one, two, four, or many spirits with us. (For more on this see [“Our Attendant Spirits”](#) by the Rev. C. Th. Odhner, *New Church Life*, 1906. pp. 227-232; 275-290.)

4) *They can't see what we see*

- A fourth clarification about our associate spirits is that they can't see what's going on for us in the natural world (*Arcana Coelestia* 5862).
- In the shoulder-angel, shoulder-devil picture, the angel and devil are sitting on the person's shoulders and looking at the situation in front of the person.
 - That's not how it works with our associate spirits.
- Our associate spirits are very closely associated with us and are connected with what's going on in our minds, in our will and in our understanding but they are not aware of our actions or speech (*Arcana Coelestia* 6192).
- One passage says that angels and spirits don't know which human beings they are with, just like people on earth don't know which angels and spirits are with them; only the Lord knows and arranges this (*Last Judgement* 9:7).
- This is a really important boundary that the Lord has put in place to avoid hellish spirits being able to take bodily control of people, like they did when the Lord came into the world.
- Knowing that the spirits who are with us, don't know who exactly they're with feels somehow reassuring.
 - There's a safety in the anonymity.

5) *Our associate spirits change*

- The last thing to clarify about our associate spirits is that they aren't static.
- They change.
 - They change as we grow older.
 - They change as we shift our focus.
 - They change as we make spiritual progress.
- To see a picture of how they change the work that can be involved in that change, we are now going to turn to the story of Jacob leaving Laban.

Leaving Our Associate Spirits Illustrated by Jacob Leaving Laban

- The teachings of the New Church explain it in much more detail but, for the sake of simplicity, we are going to take Jacob as us in this story and we will take Laban and his sons as some of our associate spirits.
 - Laban particularly means associate spirits that are in a kind of intermediate good (*Arcana Coelestia* 4063, 4067, 4145).
 - A goodness that's not genuine but that can be a stepping stone on the way to genuine goodness.
- A truth about associate spirits that we can see illustrated in this story is that we associate spirits with us that are like us.
 - As one of our lessons said, if we are a haughty person, then the spirits with us will be haughty; if we are vengeful, then the spirits with us will be vengeful.
 - In Jacob's case, he was a tricky, wheeler and dealer who manipulated situations to his own advantage.
 - He got to spend twenty years working for his uncle, Laban, who was exactly the same way.
- It ended up working out well for Jacob.
 - He emerged from his time with Laban with a large family, lots of livestock, servants, and other possessions (Genesis 30:43).
 - And similarly the Lord does make it so that we gain many good things by means of our time spent with different societies of associate spirits.

- But there are also costs in associating with spirits that are only somewhat good.
 - Jacob said that Laban changed his wages ten ways in the time that he worked for him, always trying to cheat Jacob out of what he was owed.
 - Jacob also said to Laban, “Unless the God of my father... had been with me, surely now you would have sent me away empty” (Genesis 31:42).
 - And the funny thing is that Laban doesn’t argue the point with him.
 - Laban still claims all that Jacob has as his own.
 - He says, “The daughters are my daughters, and the sons are my sons, and the flock is my flock, and all that you see, it is mine....” (Genesis 31:43).
 - This is what makes it hard to move on in our lives – when we feel like many of the good things we have come from or belong to the very thing we’re trying to leave behind.

An Example

- An example might help this make sense.
- Think about the motivation of wanting to impress people.
- If you have a strong motivation to want to impress people that comes from your associate spirits.
 - There are many, many spirits in the spiritual world who are all about showing people the results that they can get, how smart they are, how hardworking they are, what a good person they are.
 - If we have those kinds of spirits with us, we will feel feelings and think thoughts that help us get things done.
 - We will make to-do lists.
 - We will work hard.
 - We will stay up late.
 - And good things will come from it, just like Laban gained a lot from his time spent with Laban.
- But doing things to impress people comes with costs too.
 - The goal posts keep on moving.
 - There’s always something more to achieve.
 - We can always do things a bit better.
 - And other good and important things are sacrificed on the altar of impressing people.

- So we might decide that we want to stop doing things to impress people.
 - We might want to try to move on from that.
 - But we might worry about what will happen if we aren't trying to impress people.
 - Who will we be without that?
 - Will we accomplish anything without that to drive us?
 - Maybe everything we have actually belongs to our desire to impress people.

- What the teachings of the New Church reveal to us is that the reason we're feeling this reluctance to leave that state behind is because the spirits we've been associated with are reluctant for us to leave them behind (Arcana Coelestia 4077).
 - They can even be indignant, like Laban was indignant towards Jacob.
 - Their feeling is that they were the ones who got us those good things.
 - How can we leave them behind?

- It was a process with a number of steps for Jacob to fully leave Laban behind.
 - He asked to leave and Laban talked him into staying for another six years.
 - After those six years, Jacob talked to his wives about leaving and got their agreement.
 - Then they snuck away while Laban was busy.
 - But then Laban chased after them.
 - And finally they set up a pillar and heap and made a covenant.
 - And in the morning Laban kissed them goodbye and went back to his home and left them to carry on their way.

- If it takes you a while to move on from your desire to impress other people or other not-so-great motivations, that's actually par for the course.

Conclusion

- There is lots more that we could talk about with associate spirits.
 - It's incredible to think about the fact that all of our thoughts and feelings come from spirits around us.
 - There are lots of implications of these ideas.
 - I'm interested in what comes to mind for you.

- As a concluding thought, I want to point out one final thing that's explicit, even in the literal sense of the story: the only reason Jacob could safely leave Laban and still get to keep all that he had acquired was because of the Lord protecting him.
 - The same is true for us.
 - We have all these different associate spirits with us over the course of our days and lives – some good ones, some terrible ones.
 - But they're not the only people that we have with us.
- We also have the Lord with us.
 - And the reality is that all goodness that we ever experience does not belong to or originate from any spirits or angels that might associate with us, it also certainly does not belong to or originate with us: it belongs to the Lord and He wants to share it with us.
- There are days when we're "in good spirits" and days when we're "in bad spirits" and the Lord will use all of our spiritual experiences to guide our spirits towards goodness and peace.

- *Amen.*

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