

Finding Joy in Doing Boring Things

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

Bryn Athyn Church Community Worship Service - March 23, 2025

- I'd like to talk to you about some pretty boring things.
 - Things like brushing your teeth, taking a bath or shower, taking out the trash, clearing the dishes and washing them, cleaning up a room.
 - Don't worry, the point is not to just say, "You should do those things!"
 - I want us to spend a bit of time thinking deeply about those kinds of jobs.
- We might call those jobs maintenance.
 - The work we do to take care of the things we already have.
 - Not getting exciting new things, just taking care of what we have.
- Did you know that the Lord did maintenance jobs when He was on earth?
 - There was a time when He washed His disciples feet.
 - It was a common kind thing to do for people who came to your house, to give them water to wash their feet (Genesis 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; 43:24).
 - People all wore open shoes back then and so their feet would get quite dirty as they walked along the dirt paths and so it was a kind thing to give people some water to wash their feet.
 - But the only people who would wash *someone else's* feet would be the lowest servants.
 - Until Jesus washed His disciples feet.
- ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and went to God, ⁴ rises from supper, and lays aside His garments, and taking a linen cloth, girded Himself. ⁵ Then He pours water into the washbasin, and He began to wash the feet of the disciples, and to wipe them with the linen cloth with which He was girded. (John 13:3-5)
 - The way He changed His clothes was to be like a servant.
 - He probably got down on His hands and knees to wash His disciples feet.

- The disciples were confused and quite uncomfortable with this.
 - Simon Peter, one of His disciples, said, "Lord, are you washing my feet?"
 - And Jesus said, "You don't understand what I'm doing right now, but you will later on."
 - And Peter said, "You will never wash my feet!"
 - But the Lord explained that it was important that He do it for him and so Peter allowed Him to do it.

- When Jesus was done washing the disciples feet He put His regular clothes on again and then He spoke to His disciples: He said,
 - ¹⁴ If... I have washed your feet, being the Lord and the Teacher, you also ought to wash the feet of one another. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that as I have done to you, you also should do. ¹⁷ If you know these things, happy are you if you do them." (John 13:12-15, 17)

- The Lord was the God of the universe here on earth.
 - We might think, didn't He have something more important to do than to take the time to scrub dirt off of His disciples feet?
 - No. He was showing us by His example that it is very important to do even basic, boring tasks to help other people.
 - Even the supposedly most important people in the world should be working to serve other people.

- Sometimes we get to do big, impressive things for other people.
 - But a lot of the time our job is to do basic, boring things for other people like washing something for them.
 - Washing dishes, sweeping the floor, doing laundry.
 - Or even doing basic maintenance jobs to look after our own bodies so that we can be useful to people at other times, brushing our teeth, taking a bath, *etc.*

- I'd like to go through a list of some maintenance tasks now and have you give it a thumbs up, thumbs down, or thumbs sideways based on how much you like to do it; because sometimes we like doing some of these jobs.
- Here's a list:
 - Brushing your teeth; Taking a bath or shower; Washing dishes; Taking out the trash; Tidying up all the toys or clothing or books in a room; Sweeping or vacuuming; Doing yard work outside—mowing, trimming, weeding—work to maintain your yard or garden.
- Those are all maintenance tasks that have to be done over and over and over again.
 - You probably like some of those things more than others.
 - For me, it depends a lot on the day whether I enjoy doing them or find them really annoying to have to do.
 - But the Lord gave us an example of doing maintenance work and He told us that we should follow His example.
- And He also said, "Happy are you if you do them."
 - The Lord has made it so that anything useful that we might do has some joy within it.
 - We just have to work to find that joy—that satisfaction in getting something clean, that fun in doing something for somebody else so that they don't have to do it.
 - We can get some of those thumbs downs to a thumb sideways and some of the thumb sideways pointing more towards up.
- We could live our lives only having fun when there are exciting things to do, or we can gradually grow in our ability to find fun and joy even in the boring things that we have to do.
- The Lord knows that we will be happier if we learn to love serving other people and so He gave us an example and said, "as I have done... you also should do. Happy are you if you do them." *Amen.*

Prayer

- Lord, thank you for giving us a good example. Help us to be willing to do the maintenance work that we need to do and help us to find joy in it too. *Amen.*

Maintenance

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

Bryn Athyn Church Community Worship Service - March 23, 2025

Introduction

- You might know that the building that the Bryn Athyn Church School and our church offices are in is going to be demolished in a few months' time.
- It's a bit of a strange context in which to work.
 - Do we bother to maintain and clean these buildings? Yes. Somewhat. Because we are still using them for a few more months.
 - There are active reminders that we are in a transient place.
- I was realizing, though, that everything we work on in this natural world is like that building that's going to be demolished one day.
 - Everything we work to maintain is very likely to one day become rubble and dust.
 - The clothes we wear, the cars we drive in, but also the houses we live in—none of those things are going to last for thousands of years into the future.
 - And the same is true of these bodies that we inhabit—we try to maintain them in reasonable shape for as many years as we can, but we know that one day they will fall apart enough that we won't be able to use them anymore.
- The Lord works hard to acquaint us with this reality and help us to focus on the things that will last; He said,
 - ¹⁹ "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."
(Matthew 6:19-21)
 - In this natural world things are always falling apart whether because of moth, rust, thieves, weather, age, or intentional destruction.
 - It's lovely to think of laying up a kind of treasure that is not subject to those things.

- But the way that we do that is not actually to withdraw from the natural world but rather to engage in being useful to people within this natural world environment.
 - The Lord chose each of us and appointed us and He sends us into the world that we should go and bear fruit (John 15:16; 17:18).
- Let's spend some time today reflecting the work of maintenance and how the Lord in His Word might help us to approach it and hold it.
- We're going to be talking about it on all different levels.
 - We will be talking about the physical maintenance tasks and how we think about doing those tasks.
 - We will also be talking about spiritual maintenance work like working to maintain our relationships and doing clean up work in our spiritual lives.
 - And we might even be talking about how we work to maintain our relationships and repent as we are working on physical maintenance tasks.
 - It's going to be a bit of a jumble but hopefully in a useful way.

Outline

- As a way to structure these ideas we're going to talk first about the foundational role of maintenance work and then about 3 qualities that we need in order to do maintenance work: humility, courage, and trust.

The Foundational Role of Maintenance Work

- The book *New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* explains how having the basic necessities of life for ourselves provides the foundation for us to be useful.
 - We all need to make sure that we have the necessities of life, such as the food, clothing, housing, and many other things that are necessary for whatever civic life we are involved in. We need to provide these not only for ourselves but also for our dependents, and not only for the present time but also for the future, since unless we acquire the necessities of life for ourselves we are not in any condition to exercise charity to others; we ourselves are instead in need of everything.

We all need to provide our bodies with their food and clothing. This needs to come first, but the object is to have a sound mind in a sound body. Further, we all need to provide food for our minds, meaning things that build our

intelligence and wisdom, but the object is that our minds will be able to be of service to our fellow citizens, our community, our country, the church, and therefore the Lord. If we do this we are providing for our well-being to eternity.

It is also like building a house. First we need to lay the foundation, but the purpose of the foundation is the house, and the purpose of the house is living in it. (*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 97, 98)

- In order to be useful to our fellow citizens, our community, *etc.* we need to make sure that we have the necessities of life.
- But the problem with those necessities of life is that you can't just get them once and be done.
 - Take food, for example.
 - For some reason, human beings need to eat every single day, usually multiple times a day.
 - And so somebody has to decide what to eat; somebody has to go shopping for the food and schlep it back to the house; somebody has to prepare the food; somebody has to clean up afterwards; and then, a few hours later, people are going to be hungry again.
 - Or take caring for these physical bodies that we've been given.
 - They need a lot of care.
 - They need to be fed and exercised and washed and groomed regularly.
 - They need to get enough sleep.
 - And when they get sick or injured they need to be nursed back to health.
- This maintenance work takes a lot of time.
 - Keeping things maintained is not the goal in itself, but it is the foundation upon which all of our ability to serve other uses is built.
 - If our foundation is unstable then everything else built on top of that is going to be unstable too.
 - This brings us to the first quality that we need to do maintenance work: humility.

Humility

- When the Lord changed into a servant's clothes and knelt down to wash His disciples' feet, He was giving us all an example.
 - As is the case with everything the Lord did, there was a deeper meaning to what He was doing – it was a representation of how He can reform us and cleanse the externals of our lives from the filth of selfishness (*Arcana Coelestia* 3147).
- But, He also was demonstrating what our attitude should be towards the work that needs to be done.
 - It was not beneath Him to do manual labor.
 - It should not be beneath us either.
- If we want to be followers of the Lord, we're going to need to have the humility to get down on our hands and knees to serve each other.
- And if we really want to serve other people in a longterm and sustainable way, we're going to need to have the humility to take the time to take care of ourselves too.

- One of the challenges with doing maintenance work is that it is easy to start feeling superior to other people and also resentful.
 - "I do all of this and what are other people doing?"
 - This might be a sign that you need to do some renegotiating who does what.
 - An essential part of maintenance work is also maintaining relationships with the other people in your household and talking about how you're sharing the load.
- When you're trying to keep from getting resentful and trying to stay humble you can also work on connecting with gratitude and a sense of duty.

Connecting With Gratitude

- Here are a few ways you might connect with gratitude in the midst of doing maintenance.
 - When you're having to do that annoying task for the umpteenth time, you can try to feel grateful that you are able-bodied enough to be able to do it.
 - Or, you can try to feel gratitude for things that you might take for granted.
 - For example, when you're having clean out the shower drain, you might feel gratitude for the miracle that is indoor plumbing.

- Or, you might find gratitude in the fact that you get to do something that genuinely needs to be done?
 - There are people in the world who feel kind of useless and you don't have to feel that right now, because you get to do this boring, but necessary, task.
- And a final way you might connect with gratitude in the midst of maintenance is to think of all the people that you know by name, and the people that you don't know, who have done maintenance work that you are benefitting from and relying on.

Connecting With a Sense of Duty

- Aiming for a sense of duty is another good way to avoid feelings of superiority or resentment.
- Why are you making food for your children or cleaning up after them or getting them to brush their teeth?
 - Not because you're a martyr or because you're such an unselfish amazing person but simply because it's your duty as their mom or your duty as their dad.
 - One passage describes good people who do good things for the right reasons and it says that they "do not regard [their] deeds as meritorious, since they never think of that, but rather about the duty which makes a decent citizen act like this" (*True Christian Religion* 423).
- In the same vein, the Lord took His disciples down a notch when He said to them, "When you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do' " (Luke 17:10).
- We can say to ourselves, "I'm not a martyr or a saint for doing these things.
 - I'm just a not-very-good servant who's trying to have the humility to do my duty to my family and my God as best I can."

Courage

- Another quality we need in order to do maintenance work is courage.
- Why?
 - Because it takes a courageous willingness to face things that we don't want to face.
- Facing our ignorance and incompetence.
 - If we have no idea how to deal with a particular issue, it takes courage to attempt to deal with it anyway.
- Facing our fear of how bad things might be.
 - Think of this in relation to house maintenance.
 - Houses give you indications that there might be an issue with something.
 - But maybe you can just ignore it.
 - And you want to ignore it because there's a chance that it's going to be big, expensive problem to solve.
 - But if you haven't really looked at it then you don't actually know that it's a problem.
 - It takes courage to go look.
- Doing maintenance also takes the courage to face the consequences of our poor decisions.
 - If we want to get our bodies healthier, we have to have the courage to face up to the consequences of our diet and exercise decisions in the past.
 - If we want to tidy up our desk, we have to face the fact that we may have left some important pieces of paper unattended to for too long and now we are going to have to deal with the consequences.
- We can someone courageously facing all of these kinds of fears in the story of Josiah choosing to repair the temple or the house of Jehovah.
 - There was money that had been collected for people to maintain the house of Jehovah, but it took Josiah commanding that the money be given to the people doing the work for the work to actually get started.
 - He said, "let them give [the money] to those who are doing the work which is in the house of Jehovah, to make firm the cracks of the house, [give the

money] unto the craftsmen, and to the builders, and to the masons, and for buying wood and hewn stone to make the house firm" (2 Kings 22:5, 6).

- And then, as they were working to repair the house of Jehovah, they found the book of the law.
 - It seems that they hadn't read the Word in a long time.
 - They could have just put the Word in a special place and not read it, but Josiah and the others had the courage to read it and, after they read it, Josiah tore his clothes in grief.
 - This is what happens sometimes when we have the courage to do spiritual maintenance work: we read the Word and discover that we have not been following the Lord.
 - Things can seem a lot worse because we looked closely and discovered that there's some rotten stuff that has to be dealt with.

- Josiah was told that evil was coming upon that place, because of all the terrible things that people before Josiah had done but that Josiah would be gathered to his grave in peace and would not see it.
 - And yet that didn't mean that Josiah gave up on following the Word.
 - He did every thing that he could to clean the land from all the harmful practices that people were doing and he did everything he could to encourage his people to start following the Word again.
 - The text says of Josiah, "There was not a king like him before him, who returned to Jehovah with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his forces, according to all the law of Moses; and not after him arose any like him" (2 Kings 23:25).
 - Maybe we can't find quite as much courage as Josiah, but can we find some more courage to face the natural and spiritual maintenance work that we need to face?

Trust

- Another quality that we need in order to do maintenance work of any sort is trust.
 - Trust that it's worth putting in the effort.
 - That trust can be hard to find sometimes.
 - We can feel like, if the world is going to hell in a hand basket, then why bother doing laundry?
 - If so many big things in the world are so messed up, then what's the point of trying to bring order to my little corner of the world?
 - People use the phrase "rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic."
 - The effort you're putting into getting those chairs into good spots is meaningless because the whole ship is going down.
 - But maybe our little efforts are not meaningless.

Maintenance and Repair in Relationships

- Relationships also take maintenance and repair – husbands and wives, parents and children, friends, colleagues.
- If we want to have good connections with people we have to put the work in to build and maintain those connections.
 - And it can be hard to find the motivation to do that work when we're not sure that the other person is willing to do that work too.
 - But, if neither person is willing to start that work, the relationship may fall into more and more disrepair.
- We have to try to find the trust that it's worth reaching out.
 - Or trust that it's worth trying to repair what was hurt because the Lord says to do it, regardless of how the other person responds.
- When we do find the trust to put some work into maintaining or repairing a relationship and it works, it can be life changing.
 - Yes, the world is still a difficult place and yes there is still far too much laundry to do, but if we can face those things with the companionship of the people in our lives, then it's that much easier to face.

An Investment in the Future

- Josiah was explicitly told that his kingdom was going down and yet he still trusted that it was worth getting His people to follow the Lord, at least for the years that he was their king.

- Doing maintenance of any sort is an investment in the future.
- It is us standing up and saying, "This thing, this person, this relationship, or this institution is worth keeping around a little longer and I'm going to do my duty to do what I can to keep it going."
- That's an act of courage, and humility, and trust and it lays a strong foundation for the Lord to build something eternal on top of it, laying up treasures for us in heaven.

Conclusion: Willingness to Rest

- As a way of wrapping this up I want to mention one last quality that we need in our maintenance work and that is willingness to rest.
- As I've been talking today, you may have been compiling a mental list of all the things that you're going to get to when you get home from church today, but you also need a sabbath.
 - "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God" (Exodus 20:9, 10).
- Like Martha we can sometimes get "distracted with much serving" and sometimes need to just spend some time at the Lord's feet (Luke 10:38-42).
- We need to do our part and also the Lord's got this.
 - We can look around this natural world and see lots of things that are falling apart, but we can also look around and see the Lord at work maintaining so many breathtakingly beautiful and important things (*Secrets of Heaven* 3483).
- The Lord maintains things, by constantly recreating them.
 - As He says in the book of Revelation, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5).
- At least for a moment, I invite you to take a breath and reflect on this reality.
 - As you do your work to maintain things, He is maintaining you and making you new at the same time.
 - You can take a break because He's got you.
 - You can cast your burden upon the Lord and He shall sustain you (Psalm 55:22).
- Amen.

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