

## The Power of Ignorance

a sermon by Rev. Michael D. Gladish  
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It is a maxim from the 16<sup>th</sup> century that knowledge is power. Indeed, the serpent in the Garden of Eden described the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as the source of enlightenment that would make a person like God Himself. And it's true, there is great power in knowledge.

But there is also great power in *ignorance*.

Today we are going to consider the use of ignorance and the benefits it offers to those who are aware of it.

That must sound pretty strange. After all, how can we be effective if we don't know what we're doing? How can we even make decisions if we don't have the facts that make it clear what we are deciding – for or against? The Lord said, "...Know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

What's more, if there is power in ignorance then the power we have with knowledge may sometimes be nothing more than illusion. And in fact, that is exactly what the Lord now says,

“...for (we read) holiness dwells in ignorance.... (Indeed), with everybody apart from the Lord, holiness is unable to dwell anywhere else than in ignorance.... Among the angels themselves, who possess a supreme light of intelligence and wisdom, holiness still dwells within ignorance, for they know and acknowledge that of themselves they know nothing and that whatever they do know comes from the Lord. They also know and acknowledge that all their knowledge, intelligence and wisdom are as nothing in comparison with the Lord's infinite knowledge, intelligence and wisdom, thus that all of theirs is lack of knowledge” (AC 1557).

Here, then, is a spiritual definition of ignorance: it is a relative thing; it is the conscious awareness of how little we know. In this sense there is nothing wrong with knowledge; the Word itself is given to increase our knowledge. But to be really useful it must have a quality of childlike humility within it, and this humility produces the sense of ignorance that allows the Lord to work with us. We therefore read,

“(The) holiness that goes with ignorance does not consist in knowing less than others but in the acknowledgement that from oneself one does not know anything at all, and that the things one does not know are infinite in comparison with the things one does know” (AC 1557).

If this seems abstract or too obvious to matter, consider this: in the 15<sup>th</sup> century everybody KNEW that the world was flat and that the sun revolved around the earth. Well, almost everybody. It was because certain people had the courage and insight to question this “knowledge,” that is, to see themselves as *ignorant* about this, that the astronomical, geophysical, navigational and even theological sciences could be completely revised, resulting in a great lurch forward of natural and spiritual progress.

In fact almost every great invention or discovery illustrates the same thing. Those who are unable or unwilling to accept the conventional wisdom on a given subject or who see that what passes for knowledge is really just assumption are empowered by their ignorance to see things a new or different way. They are freed from the limitations of a given point of view, so that they are open to the creative flow of new ideas.

In contrast, when we think we know how things are then we stop asking questions, we stop learning more (even though there is always more to learn) and so we become stagnant, which is to say, caught up in ourselves. Not only is this counterproductive in our natural lives but speaking spiritually nothing could be more dangerous for us.

This is why the Lord warned Adam not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil - not that we shouldn't learn about natural or spiritual life, but that in learning we shouldn't think we can obtain knowledge of or by ourselves. And in reflecting on our knowledge we should keep it in perspective with the infinite number of things we don't know. This is also why the Lord said we must be born again (John 3) and become as little children (Matthew 18):

“Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” Or as Mark's Gospel has it, “...whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it” (Mk.10:15).

Again, it's not as if the kingdom were reserved for children only but for those who, like children, are aware of the limitations of their knowledge, understanding and power so that they are willing to receive these things in ever greater fulness from the Lord.

By way of illustration of this point, just think about any of the times you have worried about something because you assumed you knew what was going on, only to find out you were wrong. You may have thought a friend of yours was angry at you or had done something to hurt you, or was planning something stupid and dangerous, only to find out this was not true at all. Husbands and wives, especially, can become suspicious of each other if they assume they know what their partners are thinking, or wishing, or doing, or not doing, or that they know why any of this is going on, whereas if they have the humility to ASK, and ask respectfully, and if their partners have the love and confidence (and courage) to answer, also respectfully, they may find out their fears are totally unwarranted, or in difficult cases that they can at least be discussed.

But there are other ways to illustrate what we might call “the problem of knowledge.” Maybe you have heard the expression, “too much information” - or as we say, “TMI.” Suppose you hear something about a person - something true but hurtful, or unsavoury: up until now you've had a pleasant, useful, helpful relationship with that person, but now bad feelings or negative thoughts creep into that relationship and begin to spoil it. Or you worry about things that are completely out of your control and probably none of your business. Wouldn't it have been better in such a case simply not to know? Again, unless it directly affects you, what is the use of knowing? But notice that it can take a lot of courage and self-confidence simply to say, “I don't need to know.”

Or suppose you are a young person (or recall when you were one) experiencing the wonders of

your developing sexuality. The thoughts and emotions that go through your mind are very powerful at that time and include a good deal of natural curiosity along with a perfectly healthy desire to explore this new world. But what happens if at this time you are exposed – particularly in a casual way, or in an emotionally charged environment such as we often find in books and films, TV and magazines – to detailed, intimate sensual images or experiences? The sphere can be overwhelming and can also lead to some really bad judgments. The solution? Be careful. Don't be a prude, but be prudent. Don't expose yourself to things that should be reserved for marriage. Save for yourself and for your spouse the delights of playful discovery in the environment of total trust and life-long commitment. Don't subject yourself to the burden of "too much information."

In the New Church we often stress how important it is to grow in knowledge. One subject we are especially encouraged to learn about is the nature of the Lord in His Divine Humanity. Another is the nature of the spiritual world – including the world of our own minds. Still another is the spiritual sense of the stories of the Old and New Testaments – the ancient "knowledge of knowledge," the so-called "science of correspondences." But then, the Writings warn us that if we learn just for the sake of learning, or if we allow ourselves to become proud on account of the knowledge we have learned, it doesn't matter how profound the knowledge is, it won't help us in the long run, we will simply get ourselves into more and deeper trouble.

So when we turn to the Psalms we find this striking statement: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps. 111:10). Fear! Not facts, not figures, not information. *Fear* – the reverent, respectful attitude of caution lest we offend our Maker and betray His love. This healthy or "holy" fear will lead us to enquire of the Lord over and over, knowing that we do not know, what it is we need to know in order to live well. And we will then understand how insignificant our comprehension of things is, but at the same time we will be energized by the wonders of the universe and the prospect of literally endless discoveries.

Again, Jeremiah wrote,

"Thus says the Lord: 'Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows ME, that I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgement and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,' says the Lord" (Jer. 9:23-24).

The purpose of ALL knowledge, natural and spiritual, finally is to declare the glory of the Lord, thus to win our confidence so that HE can lead us according to His perfect wisdom and love. Without that confidence we refuse to be led. Without that confidence we have no sense of personal involvement in His plan for us. Without that confidence we are only half disciples, receptive as to the will perhaps but utterly naive as to the understanding and so - easily misled. This is why we must study. This is why we must learn: – not only, indeed not mainly that we may know many things, but as we will see in a moment, "that ignorance may be enlightened."

No doubt you have read passages in the Writings that explain very deep or complicated concepts, sometimes over several pages, only to conclude with the line, "...but these things are not necessary to understand, if only they serve to show that the Word is Divine and that it con-

tains such wonderful things,” or “they are written for those who would not otherwise be able to accept the truth of the Word.” In the context of our humanistic world the simple point is that we don’t need to be afraid of the logic of unbelievers. We may not fully understand the truth but we are given to see how deep and powerful it is. And that can keep us from falling into various illusions and conceits.

In fact, it may seem strange but the Lord tells us that the truth by itself cannot get us to heaven. Rather it carries a load of condemnation for every one because no one can possibly measure up to its perfect standards. However genuine truth is never separated from its essential good, which is creative and redemptive love. Therefore the corollary to this is that falsity by itself cannot condemn because it does not necessarily separate a person from the love or intention of doing good. And the Lord judges according to the heart. Remember, the Lord told the Jews who persecuted Him, “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you will not come to Me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40).

Why, then, is so much emphasis in the Word and the revelation fo the New Church placed on knowledge? Well, of course it is because love requires it to be effective, to accomplish its purposes (TCR 86). It is the means to an end. But in the context of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (and today, too) there is another reason, beautifully and poetically stated in the first passage of the work, Heaven and Hell. As we read, the problem was (and is) that there was (and is) so much emphasis on natural knowledge that spiritual things were (and are) not only being ignored but ridiculed, especially by those who were steeped in academic studies. So the Lord opened the eyes of a particular man, Swedenborg, and allowed him to see and explain many things, not primarily for the sake of the knowledge itself, but, as he said, “Lest such a negative attitude . . . should also infect and corrupt the simple in heart and the simple in faith . . . Therefore, (he went on to say) from what I have seen and heard I am permitted to describe these things in the hope that thus ignorance may be enlightened and unbelief dispelled.”

So how is it “that ignorance may be enlightened”? Indeed what is enlightened ignorance? Is it knowledge? Is it understanding? Is it wisdom? If so, then why didn’t Swedenborg just write, “that all may *know* these things”? Of course knowledge is useful; of course knowledge is important. It can help us avoid harmful or dangerous things, it can prepare us for challenges or decisions we will have to make, and it can provide the means to do wonderful, creative, healing, nurturing work. In fact it can and does save lives. But in this context the special kind of knowledge required is the knowledge – and humble acknowledgment – of how little we really know: that is “enlightened ignorance.” That is the ignorance that has innocence, the willingness to be led by the Lord, within it. And that, in the end, is what will get us to heaven.

Amen.

Lessons:     Leviticus 4:1-4, 13-15, 22-24 & 26-29  
                  Children’s talk on Forgiveness for the Sins of Ignorance  
                  Luke 18:9-14 & 24-30  
                  Arcana Caelestia 1557:2