

## Making Plans for Heaven

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
Mitchellville, MD, July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2009

“Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

Somehow it seems a little presumptuous to be making plans to go to heaven – as if, well, we really don’t deserve it; and even if we did, well, really, isn’t that a little conceited? – to think we deserve it?

One problem with this is that if we don’t think we deserve it and we don’t start making plans to go to heaven, most likely we won’t really do the things that are necessary to become heavenly, and in the end we won’t make it. Goals and plans bring our lives into focus, and realistic, believable, achievable goals help us to be motivated and inspired toward the things we plan. On the other hand unrealistic, unbelievable or impossible goals de-motivate and discourage us from getting anywhere. So it has been said, “He who fails to aim aims to fail,” and “he who aims at nothing will surely hit the mark.” It is also true that the person who faces impossible conflicts, like “I should but I can’t...” is almost certain to end up in an impossible situation, which clearly is not heaven.

Now the Lord not only has but is the most perfect love and wisdom, so it shouldn’t surprise us that He has anticipated this problem and that He speaks about it in His Word. In fact, it is this very issue that the Lord addresses in the verses from Luke, chapter 12. There He talks about various anxieties – for food, clothing, and life itself, and He says unequivocally what to do, that is, “...Seek (first) the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you.” How can we seek what we do not aim and plan for? How can we seek with any confidence what we feel inadequate to find. To these questions the Lord answers simply,

“Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

It is your Father’s good pleasure. It is not that we deserve it; it is not that we can even find it on our own; the truth is that of or from ourselves without the Lord’s help we can’t do anything that makes us worthy of the kingdom. *But it is our Father’s good pleasure to give it to us.*

Of course we have to co-operate! Indeed the Lord warns us that we must sell everything we have and give alms. But like all the commandments this one is to be obeyed first of all in the spiritual sense, that is to say, the spirit of possessing things must be abandoned first, especially the thought that we might own or control any of the Lord’s goodness and truth; then the problem of owning or controlling natural things goes away. It just doesn’t matter anymore.

Now if it is the Lord’s good pleasure to give us the kingdom, and if we can receive it by co-operating with Him, it follows that we should be making plans to receive it. We should be getting organized to co-operate so that His kingdom will come *even to us* “as in heaven so upon the earth.” How can we do this? Surely there are many ways but six particular things stand out in which the Lord’s presence may be felt very powerfully. They are: –

1. Seeing a clear vision of heaven,
2. Undergoing self-examination in light of that vision,
3. Setting goals that break the task into manageable steps,
4. detailed planning,
5. prayer to the Lord for help, and
6. action according to the plan.

The first step of serious planning is to have a clear vision of what we want or what we think will happen to us. One of the most important teachings of the New Church therefore is the teaching about heaven. Nowhere in the Christian world do we find such a comprehensive set of teachings about the life after death or any that give such detailed information about the daily life of men, women and even children after they have lived in the natural world. The descriptions are so vivid that they are almost like reading a travelogue – which in a sense is exactly what they are. And as we all know, the beauty of reading a travelogue is that we can anticipate every need and pleasure in the place where we're going.

Just think of this as if you were going to visit a foreign land. You'd want to know what to take, what to do, what the place will look and feel like, what the social and economic customs are, how the people speak, write, live and worship. We're told all about these things in the book, Heaven and Hell, and much more, even including the weather there, and how the sun shines. We're told that we don't have to be awfully wise or clever to go to heaven, just honest and sincere; we don't have to be rich or poor, married or single, or even Christian at first to go there, as long as we have some religion, try to live according to it, and are willing to learn. We don't have to speak a new language – in fact we won't be able to, so we'll want to be careful of the language we use now. What a blessing all this information is, and what a confirmation of the Lord's wonderful mercy and power to help us be prepared.

The world has not long had the advantage of such amazing revelation from the Lord and yet we should note that He has provided everyone in every age with revelation adapted to their states and needs. A less scientific and perhaps less cynical age was not in need of what we have now, since their faith in the other imagery they were given was sufficient to inspire them and motivate them in the processes we are discussing this morning. But we can be thankful that the Lord has so far extended His revelation of the afterlife, for without it we would not very likely be able to overcome the arguments against religion in the world today, or have any clear ideas about how to prepare for the kingdom.

Once we have seen and accepted the positive vision of our future that the Lord has given us it is necessary, as in the reading of a road map, to go back to the place of origin so that we can see how to get where we're going *from where we are*. This is step two, and our teachings call it self-examination. There's no point in even looking at a map unless you can find yourself on it. Just the same, there's no way we can begin to change if we don't know who we are in the first place. Self-examination – looking deep within ourselves in the light of the heavenly doctrines to find out what really motivates and what pleases us reveals the situation to us.

Incidentally, self-examination includes acceptance not only of the things we find within but also the responsibility for them. It is one thing to know we have a certain kind of character for which we hold others responsible, and it is quite another thing to say, "Yes, Lord, this quality I find

within myself is here because I want it to be,” or “because I allow it to be.” If we hold the first attitude in self-examination we won’t really understand ourselves any better than when we started. We may *think* we do, but really the one we’re analyzing in that case is the one we’re blaming for our faults, not ourselves. But if we accept responsibility for our thoughts and feelings as our own (even though we know they come from elsewhere) then we have found ourselves on the road map of regeneration and we’re ready to start the journey.

The third step on this ladder to heaven is the process of realistic goal setting. When we see who and where we are compared to the Lord’s purpose for us we may become so discouraged that we just get depressed about it and stop trying. Even if this doesn’t happen very often (perhaps because we don’t undertake serious self-examination very often) when it does happen it can be devastating! We have so much to learn, so much to do, so many habits to change, we wonder that the Lord will ever be able to turn us around. You who are young may not feel the pressure of time working against you as we older folks do, but you feel the pressure in others ways as you try to cope with a world full of mixed and confusing messages about what is important in life. Those of you who are in your middle years have gained, perhaps, a bit of perspective and even confidence in your relationship with the Lord, but that same perspective from experience tells you how long it can take truly to grow in spiritual life, and when you see how much remains to be done, if you take it seriously you may get a little scared.

So what does the Lord say? Well, He encourages us to know that He is with us no matter what: He never leaves us, “neither slumbers nor sleeps,” as the Psalmist said. He warns us not to be overconfident but to read the Word daily and pray to Him for guidance – not that He isn’t giving it moment by moment all the time, but this opens our minds to receive it. And then He says simply, do what you can, and do one thing at a time. In terms of goal setting this means we need to measure out progressive steps on the path between here and where we want to be – to take an illustration from hiking, noting landmarks along the way so that we can measure progress and feel some satisfaction when we come to each one.

It is very important that these goals be clear, measurable and attainable. You can’t learn to run until you walk; you can’t – or shouldn’t – walk until you crawl. If we are babies in our spiritual lives we mustn’t expect to be able to run just as soon as we acknowledge the advantages of doing so. There are small steps between each level of achievement. For example, you know that the angels all love the Lord and other angels more than themselves, and you probably think you don’t. Well, you can find out for yourself whether you really do or don’t by taking inventory of the sorts of things that bring you either delight or sadness in life. And you can measure out a path for improvement by identifying certain specific insights, feelings or habits you would like to develop. You might even write them down. You might take note of the people who in your mind exemplify the qualities you want for yourself, and of the things that stand in the way of your achieving them. Now you are ready for the next step.

After goal setting the critical issue is to plan a detailed program that we know we can work. You may not be able to control a certain kind of attitude or feeling yet but as a means to that end you can identify various neighborly and personal devotional issues that are within your control. Perhaps you can do more volunteer service – or some volunteer service for the first time. Perhaps you can attend a few more functions at church where, with a positive attitude, you can find support and encouragement for your spiritual walk. Perhaps, if nothing else, you can read a

few more verses or pages from the Word each day, or sit quietly for ten minutes in prayerful meditation at the beginning of each day. Any of these things can help.

The point is, in your plan, to put yourself in the best possible position to succeed, that is, to receive the Lord's influx and His guiding hand. Put the other way around, the point is to get and keep yourself out of situations that clearly hinder progress. For instance, if you feel you're a poor student and you'd like to be a better student, don't hang out with other poor students. If you feel you don't have it in you to be a good student find another useful way to fulfil your potential and gain the sense of accomplishment the Lord offers you. That new use may actually be the key to your heavenly home.

Again, it has been said, "Write your goals in concrete, but your plans in sand." Plans change according to circumstances that may be out of our control, but we must not be afraid to stand strong on the goals we set, as long as they continue to reflect the heavenly end in view.

Now it goes without saying that if it is the Lord's plan we are trying to fulfil we are going to need the Lord's help with it. This is where our prayer comes in – not as some pathetic whining about what we want, but as a sincere desire that His will be done as HE would have it done, whether it means we are given some worldly advantage or not. The point is, we do not want to disappoint the Lord whom we love more than anything, and who alone knows what we really need.

Finally, it is time to act. All the vision, all the self-examination, all the goal setting, planning and prayer in the world will not get us anywhere until we go to work on our program in a steady, persistent, self-disciplined way. But if our plans are realistic, and if the goals that inspired those plans are orderly and good, with the Lord's help our actions cannot fail to take us day by day closer to the vision of heaven. For influx – the Lord's power – comes according to effort. And it works silently all the time, whether we are consciously thinking about it or not. We may not get what we thought we were going to get, as when a landmark up close turns out to be quite different than it looked in the distance, but we will make progress, and if we pause to look back once in a while we will see the territory we have covered.

In summary, then, let us learn and catch the vision! Let us look at ourselves and acknowledge where we are. Let us set some goals, make some plans, pray, and act. The Lord is with us more than we can possibly know – and even more in times of temptation than at other times.

"There is actually a sphere," we read, "proceeding continually from the Lord and filling the entire spiritual and natural worlds which raises all toward heaven. It is like a strong current in the ocean which unobservedly draws a vessel along. All who believe in the Lord and live according to His precepts enter that sphere or current and are elevated" (TCR 652), even all who do nothing more than the best they can.

"Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

Lessons: Matthew 4:1-11, for the children's talk on the Lord's temptations  
Luke 12:22-40, and Conjugal Love #400