

## Trusting Our Sense Experience

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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There is a wonderful prophecy in Isaiah, chapter 11, that begins this way: -

“There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD. His delight is in the fear of the LORD, **and He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes, nor decide by the hearing of His ears**; but with justice He shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.”

This aligns perfectly with the Lord’s own summary in even simpler words,

“Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with just judgment.”

Of course these statements relate primarily to human life – to the kind of judgments we make about other people. But they also challenge us to think about how we judge *anything*. After all we have been given eyes and ears for good reasons, and even the Lord says that we must judge a tree by its fruit, which implies that we are in fact **observing** what goes on.

The problem, of course, is that appearances can be deceiving. What we see in our limited view is never the whole picture. So we have to look *carefully* and *deeply*, not just superficially. We also have to *listen* carefully and deeply. **But the point is we do have to look and listen.** The sense of touch is also highly instructive and a powerful medium for sharing affections – whether positive or negative! And finally both taste and smell as you all know contribute enormously to the overall enjoyment of life AND to our safety. In short, our sense experience in the world is critical to our health and wellbeing, both naturally and spiritually. And the truth is we CAN trust our senses *if we use them in a proper way*.

So what is that proper way?

Well, our third lesson this morning (AC 2568:4-6) explained it in general, and by way of follow-up, here, in AC 2588, we read,

“They who are in the negative in regard to a thing being true because it is in the Word, say at heart that they will believe when they are persuaded by things rational and scientific. But the fact is that they never believe; and indeed they would not believe if they were to be convinced by the bodily senses of sight, hearing, and touch; for they would always form new reasonings against such things, and would thus end by completely extinguishing all faith, and at the same time turning the light of the rational into darkness, because into falsities. *But those who are in the affirmative*, that is, who believe that things are true because the Lord has said so, are continually being confirmed, and their ideas enlightened and strengthened, by what is of reason and science, *and even by what is of sense*; for man has light from no other source than by means of the things of reason and memory, and such is the way with everyone.”

We should note that the word, science, in this quotation refers to all kinds of knowledge, and it's a long passage that includes many examples and illustrations. The overall point, however, is that reasoning from what we learn in the world can be used either to support faith or to reject it, the principle being that natural things cannot flow into spiritual things, any more than compound or complex things can enter into simple ones; rather it is the other way around. The mind leads; the senses follow. We see what we want to see, and we hear what we want to hear. In the eye, for example, light waves strike the retina and stimulate certain nerves, but the eye itself does not see; it is the mind that sees by interpreting and understanding what has entered the eye. So if we have no interest in what stimulates the retina, or if we bring any bias into it, we can get a completely wrong impression of what is going on. This actually happens in science all the time, which is why new discoveries lead to new theories, often leading to a complete rejection of old theories.

On a psychological level consider the example of the person who attends a church service and afterwards comes up to the minister and says she's never been to a friendlier, more welcoming church. Then within 5 minutes another person complains that she is terribly disappointed in the church because the people are so unfriendly and SO unwelcoming. Same church. Same day. This is a true story. The external evidence was the same; the difference clearly was in the sphere and disposition of the two attenders.

On a spiritual level, though, the classic question for believers is whether we can really trust our senses, or whether we have to accept the teachings of the church "on faith," *in spite of external evidence to the contrary*. This is hard, as you know, because a lot of teachings in a lot of churches don't really add up in light of the evidence. Still, the Writings are clear that "Anyone can confirm himself *in favor of the Divine* from the visible things of nature *if he chooses to do so*, and he also does confirm himself who thinks about God in regard to life" (DLW #353). "There is," as Swedenborg says, "no lack of evidence" (DLW #357).

In fact, as some of you know, Swedenborg frequently gives his own testimony about this, and as one of the most intelligent men known to history, argues quite passionately from his own experience, citing, among other things, the marvelous, orderly development of plants and animals, birds, bees and butterflies, finally asking, especially about the bees, "Can anyone of unimpaired reason fail to see that their methods do not come from the natural world" with its dead sun of pure natural fire, but rather from the organizing force of God operating through the spiritual world? (DLW #355).

"So far as I am concerned," he says, "I have regarded these things as proofs of the influx of the spiritual into the natural, or of the spiritual world into the natural world, and therefore from the Divine Wisdom of the Lord. Moreover, consider whether you can think analytically about any form of government, any civil law, any moral virtue, or any spiritual truth, unless the Divine flows in out of His Wisdom through the spiritual world. As for myself, I could not and cannot do so, *for I have observed that influx, perceptibly and sensibly, for nearly nineteen years continuously, and therefore speak from actual experience*" (Ibid.). And by the way, he does not stop at physical experience but goes on to speak of what he has seen and heard in the spiritual world as well, thus testifying to the importance of our internal senses.

Of course the person who does not want to believe all this will find countless reasons to argue against it, but philosophically all those arguments involve just as much of a "leap of faith" as does belief in God, and leave just as many questions unanswered. So the bottom line is, what are we looking for? What are we *willing* to see?

On one hand we don't want to be misled by false religious claims, and if we don't use our heads and reflect intelligently on what we see and hear we could be seduced into believing all sorts of crazy ideas – as many people are! On the other hand, we can't let the very little that we actually know from our own experience keep us from accepting and working with information that transcends and actually *informs* our experience. And just to be clear, even the so-called scientific method begins with an IDEA, a concept that does transcend particular experiences, suggests a principle that *might* explain those experiences, and then sets out to prove by repeated, controlled experiments whether it is a valid principle or not.

In this context G. K. Chesterton once famously said, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and not tried.”

When the Lord came into the world in a finite human form He made a lot of what appeared to be outrageous claims. But He proved the validity of His claims by doing miraculous things. Now, of course, many people look back and try to explain away those miracles, some as delusions, some as coincidences, and some as simple fabrications for the sake of reputation, honor and gain. Again, Swedenborg himself understood this in a very personal way. “I am well aware,” he wrote, “that many will say that no one can possibly speak with spirits and angels so long as he lives in the body; and many will say that it is all fancy, others that I relate such things in order to gain credence, and others will make other objections. But by all this I am not deterred, for I have seen, I have heard, I have felt” (AC #68).

Further, in the introduction to the book about heaven and hell, which, by the way, has the subtitle, “From Things Heard and Seen,” he addresses the lack of knowledge or understanding in the churches about the life after death and goes on to say,

“Indeed, many people born within the Church even deny [these things], saying in their hearts, ‘Who has come from that world and told us?’ Lest, therefore, such a negative attitude, which prevails especially with those who have much worldly wisdom, should also infect and corrupt the simple in heart and the simple in faith, it has been granted to me to associate with angels and to talk with them as man with man, also to see the things in the heavens as well as in the hells, and this for thirteen years. Now, therefore, 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” (HH #1:e).

Seven years later he adds these words to the introduction to the book about marriage: -

Concerning the joys of heaven and concerning weddings there - I foresee that many who read the things which follow, and the Memorable Relations at the end of the chapters, will think that they are inventions of the imagination; but I assert in truth that they are not inventions but are things actually done and seen; nor were they seen in any state of a mind asleep but in a state of full wakefulness. For it has pleased the Lord to manifest Himself to me and to send me to teach the things which shall be of the New Church, meant by the New Jerusalem in the *Apocalypse*. To this end, He has opened the interiors of my mind and spirit, whereby it has been granted me to be in the spiritual world with angels and at the same time in the natural world with men, and this now for twenty-five years” (CL 1).

So *again and again* we read about the importance of sensory experience to verify and confirm what is taught in the Word. And we know, too, that unless we experience something for ourselves it is often hard to appreciate it fully. But can we really *trust* our senses? Can we trust the reports of other people – like Swedenborg? This is the problem. Our view is limited: appearances can be misleading; hypocrites can deceive us; even upsetting words and actions don't always represent a person's real intentions.

Here's the thing. We may not ever know for sure what's really going on "out there" in the world of external appearances, and we may not – and probably should not – simply trust what someone else reports. But we CAN verify what we see and hear and read by our own experience if we are willing. We can, for example, confirm the teachings about the spiritual world by considering our own lives *in our own spiritual world*. After all, we DO all know what we are seeing, hearing, and feeling in ourselves. We know, for example, *when we have seen something good or bad*. We know what *we feel*, what *we hear*, and how things smell and taste *to us*, even if they are perceived differently by others. What we need to do, therefore, is find quiet times and places free from the *pressures* and *distractions* of the world, and really reflect on the accuracy of our perceptions and on the *meaning* of our experiences in the context of what has been revealed by the Lord. In addition we need to check our understanding and our experiences against those of others, so that we get as comprehensive a picture of reality as possible.

For example, does the guy who insulted you the other day really hate you, or was he just having a bad day? Or is he just a little odd? Perhaps he himself is a victim of someone else's abuse. How do you know? What difference does it make? If you suffer, does that mean you're bad, or that God is punishing you, or that there can't possibly be a loving God, or does it mean there are laws of order governing the universe in spite of human foolishness, providing a matrix in which we can experience our own *internal* freedom and rationality no matter what happens to us? If so, what are those laws? Why would we not take time to learn and think about them?

Seeing is believing, the Writings say, but it is seeing with understanding. If we observe and perceive things with the clear understanding that they are all expressions of internal states, and ultimately of profound, comprehensive, multi-dimensional Divine love and wisdom flowing into the universe, then *when* we observe and perceive them we will be informed not only by our senses but by *spirit of truth operating into our senses*, and so we will not judge according to appearances – about ourselves, about other people, about the world itself or about the Lord – but rather we will judge with just judgment, that is, with peace and discernment that are much greater than any of us could ever attain on our own.

Amen.

Lessons: *Matthew* 9:18-26 and 14:34-36  
 Children's talk on touching the hem of the Lord's garment

*Arcana Caelestia* #2568: selections, esp. section 4

Psalter #383: Psalm 119:33-40