



The New Church Newsletter

Hurstville Society May 2021

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Spiritual Lessons Learned from a Dog

By Rev Todd Beiswenger

I did something this morning that would have been nearly unfathomable to me only months ago. What was more striking is that I actually enjoyed it. I took the dog for a walk. Now, this may not sound like a big deal to you, but what you probably don't realize is that for me the idea of owning a dog has been about as appealing as having brain cancer, or being buried alive in a box filled with ants that slowly devour my body until I die. So the idea that I would be enjoying taking a dog out for a walk is a pretty foreign one for me.

Being a dog-disliker isn't a good path to popularity, so I've generally kept quiet about my feelings towards canines. How did I get this way you might wonder. Well, as best as I can figure it started when I was a kid, probably 7 or 8 years old... I can't recall precisely. But what I do recall quite clearly was seeing my Dad's bloodied arms after being attacked by a couple of German Shepherds. He was a grade 8 school teacher at the time, and one of his students wasn't able to come to school for a few days. I don't remember what the student's problem was, but the point is that Dad was friendly with the family, so one afternoon he stopped by their house to drop off some school things for the kid. This way he could do some reading and/or assignments while he was out so he wouldn't get too far behind.

That seemed like a good plan at the time. However, when Dad arrived apparently nobody informed the two dogs that there was going to be a visitor. Instead of a friendly greeting they came after him and sunk their teeth into his arms. I was grateful to not have been there to not witness this, but nevertheless seeing him bloodied up quickly taught me that dogs are not friendly and should not be trusted.

As I grew older I was able to be a bit more rational about my fear of dogs, but it was one of those things where even a little, happy, harmless dog would run up at me and I would flinch or twitch to recoil from it before my brain could communicate to the rest of my body that it wasn't in imminent danger. The thing is, even as I got over my fear of dogs, I still never found them appealing. Too smelly, too messy, and basically too much work. Besides, most of the people I knew who had dogs would attest to the truth of this, and swore off ever getting another dog. Seemed reasonable to me, and I was happy to learn from their mistakes.

I also felt that my experience in studying the Word gave me further justification for being wary of dogs. In the last chapter of Revelation we're told about the river of life, and that we really need to make sure we heed the commandments because the time is coming quickly because we want to wind up inside the gates of the New Jerusalem. Sounds good, but what if you don't follow the commandments? Well, "outside *are* dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie" (Revelation 22:15). I don't know about you, but to me it's pretty clear that dogs don't keep good company. Who would want that in their life or in their home?

In case you're wondering, the explanation of the passage doesn't shed any positive light on them either.

“Dogs, sorcerers, and fornicators” stands for those who falsify the good and truth of faith. They are said “to be outside” when they are outside heaven or the Church... The reason why “dogs” means those who render the good of faith unclean by means of falsifications is that dogs eat unclean things, and also yap and bite people. (AC 9231)

That all rang true for me. I knew that dogs eat trash, and had certainly experienced them yapping and biting people. So I felt pretty comfortable in my private disdain for dogs. Clearly they were animals aligned with hell! The problem however, is that despite the doctrine my wife was in the “all dogs go to heaven” camp, and after 21 years of dog-free marriage in where there was no need to shovel or bag the droppings of any beast, I was unable to delay the inevitable any longer. Last September she found Alfie at a shelter in Goulburn, a six year old kelpie/lab mix whose previous owner was 92 years old and no longer able to take care of him. Alfie needed a new home, and Jenn decided that we were just the people to do so. My fate was sealed.

Since then it has been quite the journey. Alfie has been quite the ambassador for his species. The first couple of weeks were hard for me. He was very energetic and very much into licking us, and it was a bit much for me. But it was hard to begrudge him for it too much. It seemed he was trying to say, “I’m a nice dog. I’ll be nice to you! You want to keep me around!” Maybe there was a bit of “Please be nice to me too!” I don’t know exactly, but it just felt like an innocent presence who wanted to please, like having a little kid around.

I marvel at how he just doesn’t take offense. If I accidentally stumble into him, or step on his paw, I find myself reflexively saying, “Sorry.” Yet, I don’t need to. He doesn’t need an apology, because he’s not upset over it. He just seems to know that there was no malice, and therefore just continues on with life as if nothing has happened. It’s like he’s got no ego. Maybe he doesn’t. It seems like a really peaceful way to live.

I see this lack of ego in other areas too. He can be laying peacefully on his bed, having a nice afternoon siesta, but if I call his name he instantly jumps to attention and is quickly ready to pursue whatever activity that I have planned. None of this, “Aww, gee, do I have to?” Or “Can I do it later?” He’s just happy to go right now.

All of these observations of good dog qualities created a bit of a state of confusion in my mind. On one hand I had the doctrine telling me that dogs don’t have a good correspondence, and on the other hand I was experiencing something that certainly seemed good. Eventually what came to mind for me was the teaching that things can and do have a correspondential meaning AND their opposite. You know... water corresponds to truth, except when it corresponds to falsity. For some reason I hadn’t thought to apply this principle to dogs. Yet, what is the opposite of, “those who render the good of faith unclean by means of falsifications?” Those who render the evil of falsity clean by truth? I don’t think so because that doesn’t seem to be in line with actual dog behaviour. Even the opposite correspondential meaning is still based on reality, just how water can kill you through drowning.

So what is the positive side to dogs? Well, one thing I came up with was this: when we do go out, I've noticed he takes up the job of being chief bodyguard. He's my protector. The Writings do support the idea that being a protector is a main function of dogs. Swedenborg writes:

I once saw a large dog like Cerberus (the mythological three headed dog that guarded the entrance to hell) and asked what was meant by him. I was told that such a dog means the guard that is kept to prevent anyone filled with conjugal love from passing from delight that is of heaven to delight that is of hell, or vice versa... The dog accordingly represents the guard that is kept to prevent those contrary delights from coming into communication with each other. (AC 2743)

So maybe dogs aren't all bad. They have positive uses as protectors. I really like the idea that they spiritually protect us from ourselves, and our own worst inclinations. While dogs often identify benign things as threats, the hells know we err on the opposite side of things and fail to see many dangers posed to us. So dogs bark at all suspects and as my dad can attest, sometimes they bite to protect their people. He never seemed to hold a grudge against those dogs, let alone the entire species, but it's taken me a lot longer to get there. I never said I was a quick learner.

I've spent a fair bit of time pondering all of this. How did this dog change my mind about dogs? More precisely, how did this silly creature warm my frozen heart? Well, it's quite simple really. He basically won me over with love. We joke at the house because Alfie does seem to like me more than Jenn. I'm not sure that's the case, as I think at some level he instinctually picked up on the fact that he needed to sell me on his presence more than anybody else in the house. The Writings teach that animals know things instinctively because, unlike humanity, they haven't corrupted their will. While they're not perfect, they are also a window into what we might be like if we could just turn off our ego, insist on being there for others, and not fuss much about getting things our way. If dogs really do go to heaven, I'm sure I'll see Alfie there. In the meantime - and I still can't believe I'm admitting this publicly - I'm going to continue to enjoy our walks.

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Easter Recap

After having our Easter service only via live stream last year, it was especially nice to have a full house on Easter Sunday this year. The theme for this year's service was "Realizing the Lord was with us" which looked at the symbolism of the earthquake, splitting of the temple veil and other super natural phenomenon that happened after the death of Jesus. After all of that a Roman centurion said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54)

I didn't really mention it in the service, but it's kind of a shame that despite all of the teachings and miracles Jesus performed that it took the death of Jesus and all of these other things as well in order to convince him that was the case. But it seems for some people that we only realize what true darkness is like when the lights go completely out. Hopefully we can be convinced a little easier.

After the service we had our traditional Easter egg hunt. Every year we hide around 60 candy filled eggs, and every year for whatever reason it seems that we never find as many as were hidden. There's always one or two that escape being found. This year we had some kids who were attending our church for the first time, so I was hopeful that maybe they would be the key to actually finding all of the eggs this year. No such luck! We've still got two eggs to be found. If you see me out in the garden looking for them, you'll know that I'm having a real sugar craving!

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Live Stream Upgrade

One of the things the General Church offers me as a pastor is a technology budget. It's not a huge amount of money, but it is useful, and it is one of those deals where it refreshes every five years, but anything you don't use just goes away. My budget was going to expire at the end of June, and there was enough left that I decided to replace my ten year old laptop that I use for live streaming our services. This new one has a lot more processing power, and my hope is that this will enable us to provide a higher resolution broadcast. In theory it should enable me to do some other tasks as well, as the old laptop was operating at max capacity when live streaming. So potentially there are some other opportunities to upgrade the output down the line as well.

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Write Your Own Headlines

I came across this little story told by another pastor, and thought it really worth sharing...

Sometimes I just want it to stop. Talk of COVID, looting, brutality. I lose my way. I become convinced that this "new normal" is real life. Then I meet an 87 year old who talks of living through polio, diphtheria, Vietnam protests and yet is still enchanted with life.

He seemed surprised when I said that 2020 must be especially challenging for him. "No," he said slowly, looking me straight in the eyes. "I learned a long time ago to not see the world through printed headlines. I see the world through the people that surround me. I see the world with the realization that we love big. Therefore I just choose to write my own headlines:

"Husband loves wife today." "Family drops everything to come to Grandma's bedside." He patted my hand and said, "Old man makes new friend." His worlds collide with my worries, freeing them from the tether I had been holding tight. They float away. I am left with a renewed spirit and a new way to write my own headlines.

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Visit Baringa!

One of the great things we have going on at our church is what I like to call, "Hotel Baringa." Over the years it has housed many a traveller, and with travel becoming an option again we would like to put out to you that you are welcome to stop in and stay. The **Lockharts** have spent many hours giving the place a deep clean, as well as organizing some upgrades that include a new mattress in the main bedroom, along with some new

bedding and other little touches here and there. Next on the list is probably some decluttering of things that will tidy it up some more.

So if you've got a hankerin' for visiting Sydney, drop us a line and we'll book you in for a weekend - or maybe longer – at Hotel Baringa.

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Gathering Leaves UK - Alternative Planning for 2022

In an effort to welcome as many overseas visitors to Gathering Leaves as possible, the international retreat for Swedenborgian/New Church women has been moved forward once again, to 2022. Gathering Leaves at Purley Chase Centre in the UK will be Friday 26th to Monday 29th August 2022.

The generous financial aid programme is expected to be offered as originally planned.

Please contact alison.southcombe@purleychasecentre.org.uk to move your existing booking ahead to 2022, or to make a new booking.

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Birthdays

Happy Birthday to **John Sandow** (18th), **Naomi Heldon** (20th), **Matthew Cooper** (25th), **Daniel Walsh** (27th), **Brian Walsh** (31st)

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