

Respecting Authority

A spiritual message given by Joy T. Barnitz at San Francisco Swedenborgian Church on Sunday, 15 July 2007

Readings

- **Reading #1** – I Kings 12: 6 – 8, 13 -15 (Revised Standard Version)

Then King Rehoboam took counsel with the old men, who had stood before Solomon his father while he was yet alive, saying, "How do you advise me to answer this people? And they said to him, "If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants for ever" But he forsook the counsel which the old men gave him, and took counsel with the young men who had grown up with him and stood before him. ... And the king answered the people harshly, and forsaking the counsel which the old men had given him, he spoke to them according to the counsel of the young men, saying, "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions." So the king did not hearken to the people; for it was a turn of affairs brought about by the LORD that he might fulfill his word,

Note: Rehoboam is David's grandson. As a result of his actions, the kingdom is divided and ten tribes rebel and break off leaving Rehoboam as king of Judah. In the King James Version, the last sentence is translated as "Wherefore the king hearkened not unto the people; for the cause was from the LORD, that he might perform his saying".

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- **Reading #2** - John 18: 33 - 37 (Revised Standard Version)

Pilate entered the praetorium again and called Jesus, and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord or did others say it to you about me?" Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me; what have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world." Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice."

Note: the praetorium is termed the 'judgment room' in the King James Version; it is defined as the official quarters of Pontius Pilate and the praetorian guards and court officials.

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- **Swedenborg** – New Jerusalem and It's Heavenly Doctrine (Tafel)

323. *The law which is justice ought to be enacted in a realm by wise and God-fearing legislators; and both the king and his subjects ought afterwards to live according to it. The king who*

lives according to the law which has been enacted, and herein sets an example to his subjects, is truly a king.

324. A king who has absolute power, and who believes that his subjects are such slaves that he has a right to their possessions and lives, if he exercises such a right, is not a king but a tyrant.
325. Obedience is due to a king, according to the laws of the realm, and on no account ought he to be injured either by word or deed; for on this depends the public safety.

References:

- Rt. Rev. Alfred Acton (1975 sermon) – Civil Authority
- Ira Chaleff – The Courageous Follower
- Wikipedia – servant leadership (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Servant_leadership)
- Wikipedia – United States Declaration of Independence (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Declaration_of_Independence)

Back in April, when Rev. George Dole couldn't make it to the west coast to meet with the Swedenborgian House of Studies Board of Trustees and give Sunday sermon, Rev. Rachel found herself giving a sermon at the last minute and drawing on his sermon as the base for her talk.

That's what I am doing today.

The foundation and inspiration for this talk is a sermon originally given by the Rt. Rev. Alfred Acton in 1975 entitled "Civil Authority". Rev. Acton, who recently retired as Assistant Bishop of the General Church of the New Jerusalem, was my 8th grade religion teacher who, as a young minister, was exceptionally good at connecting with and teaching adolescents. A large and friendly man, he accepted challenges to what he said with an understanding of young minds testing their limits and he replied with humor and wit, a grace that takes many years to learn.

I first heard "Civil Authority" during my graduate school years, when the Watergate scandal was fresh in our minds, as was the recently concluded Vietnam War. About a year ago, I wrote to Rev. Acton requesting a copy of his sermon, which he graciously provided. The core of his message has stayed with me through many years and I hope that I will be able to convey, at least in a small part, his core message and the impact it continues to have on me.

Our reading from the Old Testament presents a very familiar picture of a young man who rejects the advice of the 'old men' and instead listens to the young men 'who had grown up with him'. The harsh threat that the young king Rehoboam issues, "My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions", leads to the rebellion of the ten tribes of Israel, leaving the grandson of David as king of only the southern portion of the realm ruled by his father and grandfather. At the end of this reading, we learn that this turmoil 'was a turn of affairs brought about by the LORD that his words might be fulfilled'. The kingdom of Judah over which Rehoboam now ruled was not to respond to this newly independent nation to its north; a civil war was not to break out as a result of this threatened tyranny.

This text implies that this rebellion was justified. Yet the LORD clearly does not intend for us to be lawbreakers. David, Rehoboam's grandfather who became king after Saul, did not harm Saul when given the opportunity even though Saul wished to have David killed. Coming upon Saul asleep in the night, David says to his companion "Do not destroy him; for who can put forth his hand against the LORD's anointed and be guiltless? ... As the LORD lives, the LORD will smite him; or his day shall come to die; or he shall go down into battle and perish" (1 Sam. 26: 9-10)

Moral and civil laws are clearly not the same as spiritual laws. In our reading from the New Testament, Jesus says to Pilate "My kingship is not of this world" and in Matthew (Matt. 22: 21) he says "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's". Just as clearly, only the spiritual laws of heaven come from God; moral and civil laws are human attempts to understand and apply that understanding to daily life.

When, if ever, is it 'permitted' to rebel against a duly constituted authority? If our nation can be considered 'our neighbor' in the sense Swedenborg uses that term, then what service is owed to it and to its rulers? When can it be right not only to speak against a king or a president, but in fact to reject that leadership and the person in that office? And at what cost is that choice made?

Our nation was founded by such a choice. The conclusion of the Declaration of Independence reads: *"We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these united Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States ... And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."*

Fortunately, most of us are not faced with such a drastic choice during our lifetimes as the Founding Fathers were. If they were unsuccessful, their lives and their possessions would surely have been forfeit. Living within the law is a daily necessity to enable society to exist. Without law, order is destroyed and society suffers as do individuals. Fundamental to this social contract of our society is that 'no one is above the law'.

But what if the leader, a king, a president shows no respect for the law and places himself above it? What is our response to be? Under what conditions can action against authority be sanctioned? And what is the cost of choosing the "lesser evil": to rebel against a legitimate, but tyrannical, ruler?

I'd like to quote here from Rev. Acton's sermon:

"There is no one answer. God ever asks man to turn from evil toward a state of good. Yet the doing of an evil act for the sake of good is only sanctioned if we recognize the inherent evil in the act and do not try to justify our evils on the basis of good intent. A good end never justifies evil means,

although evil recognized as such may be permitted for the sake of a good end. We can never condone lack of respect for duly constituted authority in that respect for law is essential for human survival, but on occasion evil can be permitted for the establishment of order where disorder is plainly recognized to exist. But even in such instances care must be taken lest that which is truly human be destroyed. "

The old men who advised Rehoboam were wise when they counseled him to serve his subjects or his subjects would reject him. This same concept, often called 'servant leadership' in current parlance, is a high standard that we seek in all who lead be they kings, presidents, mayors, CEOs, managers. In Swedenborg's words: "The king who lives according to the law which has been enacted, and herein sets an example to his subjects, is truly a king."

Rev. Acton's sermon resonated deeply with me at the time I first heard it because Watergate and the Vietnam War were in the recent past. As an adolescent, seeking to establish my own identity, I did not always heed the counsel of the 'old men'. Rev. Acton was one of my teachers during that time and he was one of the best as he understood that struggle to become an individual through which all of us must pass, and he did not take the challenges of his students as personal affronts. As a graduate student, I was very aware of academic 'politics'. Later still, as I matured and gained experience in corporate life, I found myself in situations where it was not clear how best to respond to assignments and requests from managers that challenged my values and thus caused me stress. How could I honorably disagree? How could I negotiate a course of action all parties could support?

About 12 years ago I came upon the concept of the Courageous Follower in a book by Ira Chaleff with the same title. The following key dimensions of courageous followership resonate with me as a practical framework that is in harmony with my values and beliefs as a Swedenborgian:

- The courage to serve –supporting the leader and the organization, looking for ways to complement the leader's strength with one's own in support of a common purpose.
- The courage to challenge – voicing discomfort when the behaviors or policies of the leader or the organization conflict with what is right as one understands it; valuing organizational harmony but not at the expense of the common purpose and individual personal integrity
- The courage to participate in transformation – recognizing behavior that jeopardizes the common purpose and working constructively with the leader and the organization to effect real change
- The courage to take moral action – taking a stand that is different than that of the leader's; potentially refusing a direct order or appealing to a higher level of authority or tendering one's resignation.

As individuals we can find our path diverging from that of our employer, our community, even our family. How do we discern the right action, the right path for us as individuals to take in this moment, at this time?

I offer a personal example: Not long ago, a reorganization at work left me with a new boss, a consultant who joined the company and was now in a position of responsibility and authority over me. Having functioned with considerable autonomy for over two years in this organization, I found myself being 'assertively' managed and I began to wonder if the time had come for me to leave the organization. When I took a mental step backward, however, I realized that while the specific tools were different, my new boss' objectives were, in fact, very similar to what I had been working toward for two years and been only partially successful. I made the conscious choice not to care whether I used her tools or my tools. So when I went to update my spreadsheet on a project that was just getting started, I used the new template and then took the opportunity to sit down with her and go through it in great detail so that

we could build a common understanding of the entries and make sure that the tool worked for both of us. I had no interest in doing this transcription to a new template multiple times and neither, as it turned out, did she. What was very interesting as a result of that choice, and it was a conscious choice on my part, is that our relationship changed profoundly. We now laugh as we confront problems together and we talk of how to approach challenges. We split up the responsibilities to take advantage of our differing expertise. I don't feel assertively managed anymore. And, as my responsibilities and background are different than her areas of familiarity, the organization now has a better strength where both of us can contribute.

Withdrawing our support from a leader or from an organization can come at great personal risk to our well-being in this natural world. To ***not*** leave a leader or organization that does not support our values can cause great physical stress and great harm to our identity and to our spirit. Finding a balance for ourselves is much easier when we open ourselves to influx from the LORD.

My prayer for each of us today is to find the courage to respect authority – both externally in our political, corporate and cultural leaders and internally to respect ourselves and our values; to recognize the good in others and support it courageously and to have the courage to support our deepest selves in seeking alignment with the "Supreme Judge of the world".

Amen.