

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**

(Delivered on March 15, 2015)

Text: **Jeremiah 31:31-34** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

“Behold, the days are coming, says YHWH, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them up out of the land of Egypt—a covenant they broke, though I was their spouse, says YHWH. But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says YHWH: I will put my Law in their minds and on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

“No longer will they need to teach one another or remind one another to listen to YHWH. All of them, high and low alike, will listen to me, says YHWH, for I will forgive their misdeeds and will remember their sins no more.

Text: **Psalms 51:1-12** (*Psalms for Praying*)

Have mercy on me, O Gracious One,  
according to your steadfast love;

According to your abundant kindness  
forgive me where my thoughts and  
deeds have hurt others.

Lead me in the paths of justice,  
guide my steps on paths of peace!

Teach me, that I may know my weaknesses,  
the shortcomings that bind me,

The unloving ways that separate me,  
that keep me from recognizing  
your Life in me;

For, I keep company with fear, and  
dwell in the house of ignorance.

Yet, I was brought forth in love,  
and love is my birthright.

You have placed your truth in the  
inner being;  
therefore, teach me the wisdom  
of the heart.

Forgive all that binds me in fear,

that I might radiate love;  
cleanse me that your light might  
shine in me.

Fill me with gladness; help me to  
transform weakness into strength.

Look not on my past mistakes  
but on the aspirations  
of my heart.

Create in me a clean heart, O Gracious One,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.

Enfold me in the arms of Love, and  
fill me with your Holy Spirit.

Restore in me the joy of your saving grace,  
and encourage me with a new spirit.

#### Reflections by Pastor Donald: **“A New Covenant; A New and Right Spirit”**

I really wouldn't have to do much more today with you, then read again the words of Psalm 51 as David did so beautifully for us. As interpreted by Nan Merrill in her inspirational and enlightening book, *Psalms for Praying*, I found myself praying and wishing and hoping all that is written therein not only for myself but for each of you as well.

“Create in [us] clean hearts, O Gracious One, and put a new and right spirit within [all of us]!”

“Teach us, that we may know our weaknesses... Forgive all that binds us in fear... Fill us with gladness; help us to transform weakness into strength.”

If you're anything like me, and I kinda know you are since you all appear to be human, you may find yourself at different times in your life, or perhaps at most times in your life, questioning whether you've done the right thing or wondering whether there was a better way you could have handled a situation or pondering the choices you've made and actions you've taken and weighing them against the alternative choices and actions you could have made or could have taken.

When I was working at DreamWorks as a producer's assistant, I was privy to the scenario for a new show one of the producers was dreaming up. In it, we would meet a different person each week and see them faced with a couple of rather, of course, dramatic choices in their lives. Then we would go on two different journeys with them during the episode or perhaps even over the course of the season. The first journey would be about the way life actually turned out because of the choice they made and, on the alternate journey, the way life would have turned out had they made the other choice instead. I thought it was intriguing to think about which choice would be considered the “right” choice and what would happen if a choice was based on fear as opposed to a choice centered in faith.

Being brought up in a rigidly conservative home, at least theologically if not politically, I absorbed the concept of guilt at an early age. I can still see the puzzled looks on my parent's faces

when, as a young child, after being put to bed, I would appear at their bedroom door to beg forgiveness for the cookie I took that day without asking or the bad thought (or two) I had entertained towards my sister. With beatific, albeit bemused smiles, they would proffer forgiveness and tell me it was all right and that I could go back to bed now. And, having received absolution, I would do just that, padding back across the terrazzo in my bare feet to a bed filled with peaceful dreams now instead of guilt induced insomnia.

How I wish I could have somehow received the message of grace and covenantal LOVE that is embodied in today's psalm as well as in the passage from Jeremiah instead of the condemnation and judgment that seemed to overwhelm and flood me with fear instead. I know that message of GRACE was primary and being preached to me often as a child, but what I heard seemed to be like the news reports we hear today with ten stories of fear and loathing throughout the whole wide world taking up most of the time and commanding our attention so that there's only a few minutes left at the end of any report for one tiny tale of goodness, justice, love, and grace.

I think the new covenant God speaks about in Jeremiah as well as the new and right spirit sung about by our Psalmist today are part and parcel of the new way in which God wants us to see ourselves in relationship with Her, and thereby in relationship with the whole wide world; that is, to see ourselves in a state of oneness with God that doesn't need to be taught because it is inherent within every cell; a law that is obvious and evident because it is in our minds and written on our hearts; a full and complete knowingness of who our God is and that we are God's people.

"God's desire for the wholeness of creation runs too deep for human perversity to stop it," our Seasons of the Spirit curriculum told us this week. "This [covenant God makes with us] is a vision of restoration, when the external demands of the way of life become (in [the] language of our time) fully internalized. Like a river that runs to the sea, our way in creation will flow as it should, channeled in its proper direction, in harmony with all flesh."

But what is it that stops us from this knowingness? What is it that crowds our minds and pushes us off the path so that we find ourselves wandering in a desert, lost and alone and feeling like we have no where to turn?

"For I keep company with fear, and dwell in the house of ignorance," the Psalmist sings.

Yes, FEAR - that thing that pushes us off the rock, holds our heads under the water and sends a shade over our eyes. In our ignorance of God's care and God's love, we fall under the spell of fear and forget who we are as God's blameless child, grace-filled and loved unconditionally.

We forget that God has made love our birthright and allow our ego to be at the forefront of our minds, pushing forward every possibility of what might happen, of what could happen and what we're just sure will happen like some ugly drug pusher clouding our minds with terror and keeping the Truth at bay.

"Teach me the wisdom of the heart. Forgive all that binds me in fear, that I might radiate love..."

Here is the truth of our relationship with God. Here is the truth the voice of our Spirit is speaking always. Turn away from the lies of the ego, from those fears that bind you and cause you to forget the truth that you are God's child and were born for love.

This world does a spectacular job in keeping our fears alive. Just as we think we've conquered one fear, another pops up and we find ourselves in some sinister game of Whack-a-Mole, trying to slay every fear with reason or denial or some other worldly tactic until we're worn out and allow them all to emerge and overwhelm us.

But there's a different way to approach this Whack-a-Fear game we find ourselves in. It's called "Claiming the Covenant." "I will put my Law in their minds and on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." Turning to God and claiming God's covenant as written on our hearts, we conquer fear in a way nothing else in our human capacity can. "Teach me, that I may know my weaknesses, the shortcomings that bind me, the unloving ways that separate me, that keep me from recognizing your Life in me..."

"I have to know that I am a son of earth and a son of heaven," Richard Rohr said in a recent essay entitled, "At Peace with Paradox." "You have to know that you are a daughter of God and a daughter of earth at the same time, and they don't cancel one another out."

"Christians must start to believe in the God that Jesus presented," he exhorts in another article called, "Human and Divine Are One," "And Jesus presented an image of an entirely loving and merciful God... In Jesus, matter and spirit were presented as totally one. Human and Divine were put together in his ordinary body, just as in the rest of humanity. That's Christianity's core and central message! It's the only thing that fully differentiates the Christian religion from other world religions: Christians believe that God chose the human, the material, the physical, the earthly in which to reveal God's very Self. Two thousand years later this is still a scandal for most of the world. It just doesn't seem "spiritual" enough!"

Fascinating - this paradox we hold within ourselves as Christ showed it to us. We see Jesus, especially during these last couple of weeks of Lent, dealing very honestly and forthrightly with the very real and palpable fears of being killed, of being forsaken by His Abba. And yet what do we see him doing again and again? Turning to His Abba, praying to God, bringing the Spirit within Him and within all of us to the forefront and receiving the courage and the ability to walk the path He had to walk.

"We have to let go of our identification with being merely human--and all the humiliation of our human faults and limitations--which is a lot of letting go," Father Rohr says in yet another essay called, "Losing is Finding." "In letting go of your shame, guilt, and powerlessness, you do not lose yourself, but fall into your foundational and grounded self. This is your True Self, or divine self in God, which now stands revealed, substantial, and infinite--as you--your own unique amalgam of quite ordinary humanity and divine DNA."

Claiming the new covenant God offers us, releasing the fears that bind us into the arms of God, the radiant grace of God fills us with gladness and creates a new and right spirit within us which will take us through every journey in this life and beyond."

In working on these reflections today, I came across a new voice I hadn't discovered before. Her name is Kate McIlhagga and she resides in England. I thought her short and lovely poem, "Silence and Reflection" would be a perfect way to end our explorations today. Oh, and just in case you're not familiar – a pram is a baby carriage.

Make time to sit in comfort  
to breathe deeply  
to relax in the presence of God  
like a cat asleep on a chair  
or a rabbit sunnily on a path:

The loving one, who made you,  
who yearned over you in the womb,  
who cherished you as a baby,  
who tended you as a child,  
who gave you glimpses of glory  
from your pram;  
the One who moulded you,  
the One whose loving arm  
is always under your head,  
says:

'Have no fear for I have redeemed you,  
I call you by name and you are mine.'

I... am loved by God  
Keep silence in that thought.

Amen.