

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk

(Delivered on Sunday, July 5, 2015)

Text: Mark 6:1-13 (*The Message*, adapted for dramatic reading)

Liturgist: ...[Jesus] returned to his hometown. His disciples came along. On the Sabbath, he gave a lecture in the meeting place. He made a real hit, impressing everyone.

Pastor: We had no idea he was this good! ...How did he get so wise all of a sudden, get such ability?

Liturgist: But in the next breath they were cutting him down.

Pastor: He's just a carpenter – Mary's boy. We've known him since he was a kid. We know his brothers, James, Justus, Jude, and Simon, and his sisters. Who does he think he is?

Liturgist: They tripped over what little they knew about him and fell, sprawling. And they never got any further.

Pastor: A prophet has little honor in his home- town, among his relatives, on the streets he played in as a child.

Liturgist: Jesus wasn't able to do much of anything there – he laid hands on a few sick people and healed them, that's all.

Pastor: He couldn't get over their stubbornness. He left and made a circuit of the other villages, teaching.

Liturgist: Jesus called the Twelve to him, and sent them out in pairs. He gave them authority and power to deal with the evil opposition. He sent them off with these instructions:

Pastor: Don't think you need a lot of extra equipment for this. You are the equipment. No special appeals for funds. Keep it simple. And no luxury inns. Get a modest place and be content there until you leave. If you're not welcomed, not listened to, quietly withdraw. Don't make a scene. Shrug your shoulders and be on your way.

Liturgist: Then they were on the road. They preached with joyful urgency that life can be radically different; right and left they sent the demons packing; they brought wellness to the sick, anointing their bodies, healing their spirits.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: "In Unexpected Places"

Where do you look for God? In the most expected places such as right here in our beautiful sanctuary or maybe on the top of a mountain surrounded by clouds or perhaps nestled down in the deep green of a forest?

Have you ever been surprised to find God in an unexpected place; in the eyes of a stranger or on the platform of the subway or even just standing in line at the grocery store?

I experienced many unexpected things during my time away to attend our Open and Affirming Conference and then our General Synod, not the least of which was Cleveland – I mean, hello... My colleagues, Marcia Hoffman, who you may know, and Erin Wyma, an associate minister at Manhattan Beach Community church, both of whom I hung around with for most of Synod, discussed often how Cleveland was just not at all what we expected it to be. Somehow, the city has gotten a bad rap over the years, but from what we experienced it is certainly undeserved at this point in time. The friendliness, the cleanliness, the exquisite food and the generous hospitality from so many in that city known variously as "The North Coast," "The Forest City" and "The Rock and Roll Capitol of the World" far exceeded our expectations and we found ourselves humbled by the way in which we had judged

this city and wondered why in the world we were having our biannual Synod there when there were so many other spectacular places to be in the world!

There's a number of lines in our hymns that speak to the unexpectedness that God loves: "In our search for sense and meaning, lest our hopes and humor fray, God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas Day." Or from a beautiful old hymn adapted with inclusive language, "Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while we sing – it is our God arising with healing in God's wings."

God, I think, likes to keep us a bit off balance, a little (or a lot) in the dark, calling to us to come out of our routines; to not be complacent, but to expect the unexpected and cultivate a spacious spirit which is open and receptive to wherever, whenever and in whomever the Holy Spirit is revealed.

I think that when we close ourselves off to new experiences or believe that we know what the outcome of a certain action we take will be, we deny God the opportunity to surprise us with an unexpected story, a new way of thinking or believing, or an astounding and fresh vision of how God can be at work in the world and in our lives.

In our gospel story for today, we see Jesus and his teachings being rejected by those who knew him as a child and as a young adult. Holding onto their expectations of who he was in their own understanding of his life, they miss out on the way God is working through Him and literally changing the world for all time.

Are there ways we do that to others or even to ourselves? Do you make decisions based on what has happened before in your life, letting your past be prologue or do you take a chance on something different happening?

For most of my life, my answer to the question people asked me again and again, "are you going to be a minister just like your Daddy?" was a resounding, "NO!" But when I opened myself to our Still-speaking God and realized that I was being called as a minister in my own way, a whole new life opened up for me and the wall of expectation I had erected began to crumble as God showed me the way in which I could be a minister like myself! Talk about living in unexpected ways...

We may also want to look at the ways in which we look upon others. Although it's easy to look back on the people of Jesus's hometown and think them small minded and set in their ways, how often do we reject the talents and gifts of others because we don't expect them to be conveyors of God's rich stream of righteousness and truth. Perhaps it's because we've always held them in our minds in a certain way, and so we don't allow them to express the fullness of the person they are becoming or maybe it has to do with our expectations of how a certain group of people act or move through this world.

This is one of the most insidious ways we can keep God's kin-dom from coming into fruition. When we judge others based on their race, their gender, their sexual orientation, their class, their education or any other number of judgments we not only keep the unexpected from happening, we shut the door on God's beloved children and deny the unexpected grace of God from having power in our lives as well as theirs.

God calls us to look deeply into our own prejudices and "-isms" and acknowledge their power in our lives and in how we view ourselves and others. This isn't a matter of guilt inducement or self-flagellation but a way of bringing to consciousness the way in which we truly feel about others and ourselves and where these judgments hold all of us back from creating a world of unexpected understanding and peace.

"...we are the church and claim Jesus as our own, but how faithful, how open, are we to his transformative power in our lives?" our UCC theologian Kate Huey wrote this week as she considered a sermon by the wonderful Barbara Brown Taylor who, she said, challenges us to consider our discomfort with being challenged, especially by the unexpected, unlikely people sent by God to do just that. Like the United Church of Christ," she continues, "Taylor believes that God is still speaking: "God is all around us, speaking to us through the most unlikely people."

As I hung around with my friends and colleagues at the Open and Affirming conference and then with the thousands attending our General Synod this past week, I must admit to being astounded

again and again at how easy it is to fall into what I would call an “entrenchment of expectation.” I can’t tell you how many times I was brought up in my own mind by having someone who I thought would act or speak or think in a certain way would do, say or enlighten me in a way I had certainly not expected. It reminded me once again, that I need to till my own garden and turn over the soil of my spirit not only in the spring but in the summer and the winter and even the fall as I engage with all of God’s children and keep the weeds of my own prejudices, “isms” and expectations to crowd out the unexpected possibilities God wants to surprise all of us with every day of our lives.

“Whether [people] are different in terms of their age or occupation or economic status or race or ethnicity or sexual orientation, we tend to have a construct about how people should be and when we meet someone who differs from that we often find it threatening” Dr. David Lose wrote in his essay on our scripture this week, “Independence and Interdependence.”

“In this case, it’s not that Jesus is different from [the people of his hometown] – he WAS one of them! – it’s that he’s different from what they think a prophet should be. And so rather than revise their expectations, they dismiss him...”

“All too often,” Dr. Lose writes, “we are tempted to do the same, reducing someone who challenges us to a single attribute about that person – whether skin color or age or orientation – in order to dismiss them and thereby fail to receive the totality of the person God has created and redeemed and offered to us as a gift.”

Allowing each person in God’s kingdom, including ourselves, to reveal in surprising and unexpected ways God’s gifts of understanding and openness, we, like the disciples, are able to go forth with as little baggage as possible, revealing the truth of God’s love and God’s grace to all we meet. Amen? Amen.