

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk

(Delivered on Sunday, May 14, 2017)

Text: **John 14:1-14** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

[Jesus said:] “Don’t let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith in me as well.

In God’s house there are many dwelling places; otherwise, how could I have told you that I was going to prepare a place for you? I am indeed going to prepare a place for you, and then I will come back to take you with me, that where I am there you may be as well. You know the way that leads to where I am going.”

Thomas replied, “But we don’t know where you’re going. How can we know the way?”

Jesus told him, “I myself am the Way—I am Truth, and I am Life. No one comes to Abba God but through me. If you really knew me, you would know Abba God also. From this point on, you know Abba God and you have seen God.”

“Rabbi,” Philip said, “show us Abba God, and that will be enough for us.”

Jesus replied, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and still you don’t know me?”

“Whoever has seen me has seen Abba God. How can you say, ‘Show us your Abba’? Don’t you believe that I am in Abba God and God is in me? The words I speak are not spoken of myself, it is Abba God, living in me, who is accomplishing the works of God. Believe me that I am in God and God is in me, or else believe because of the works I do. The truth of the matter is, anyone who has faith in me will do the works I do—and greater works besides.

Why? Because I go to Abba God, and whatever you ask in my name I will do, so that God may be glorified in me. Anything you ask in my name I will do.”

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **“The Mothering Way”**

As I read through our fascinating and dense text for today, and pondered it’s meaning for us in the 21st century, especially on a day such as today, I couldn’t help but think how much like a mother Jesus is being with his disciples as he prepares them for what is to come and chides them for not picking up on who he is, and still being filled with questions over where he is going and what his relationship is to God. And, just like a very good mother, Jesus makes sure they know that there will be a place for them and that he will, in fact, be there shaking out the sheets and sweeping out the corners as he prepares the many rooms that await their arrival.

Most of all, though, he assures them that they are absolutely and completely loved and instills in them the confidence they need to know that they will not only do all that he has done but go on to do even greater things than He as they live out their lives on this planet as his disciples. Doesn’t that just sound like a loving mother living out the roles of caregiver, comforter and coach?

On my way to the dentist this week – a time when I really wish my mother was around to give me confidence and good cheer, I happened to catch a bit of KPCC’s Air Talk as Larry Mantle was posing the question to his listeners as to who their mothers are or were and what their mothers mean or meant to them. I was a bit surprised to hear how many people calling in were talking about the people in their lives that acted as mothers to them. There were a few stories about birth mothers, of

course, but during the time I was listening I heard caller after caller relating their experience of finding a mother outside of their home, embodied in the people that approached them with care and concern and lent a listening ear or even provided another home for them when theirs was no longer livable.

This is truly the way of the Christ, I thought, as I listened to the ways in which people were cared for and comforted. This is the way we show each other the way and let them know how much they are loved.

For here in our text today, is Jesus, facing his ultimate test and the way that he knows will lead to his very early and horrible death, still caring deeply for those he's taken under his wing and taught how to be their very best selves, even while they continue to question and doubt. Thomas even goes so far as to ask for physical proof of Jesus' parentage like some early version of "birtherism": just show us your birth certificate naming God as your parent and Heaven as your birthplace and we'll believe, no problem!

"...as is often the case in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus' conversation partners -- in this case the disciples -- do not understand what he is saying and mistake his metaphorical reference to a place -- his Abba's house -- for a geographical space," Dr. David Lose notes in his commentary on our text. "And so Thomas asks for directions to plug into his GPS. Jesus then responds, 'I am the way and the truth and the life' ... telling Thomas that he already knows the way. Precisely because Thomas knows Jesus, he can't get lost."

How like a mother, yes? Just trust me to get you there and know that your life will be better and that you'll understand how to help others get where they're going as well. Don't take everything so literally, let the mystery be and live into the love that I have for you which will see you through every challenge in your life. You're already in my care, you're already a part of the family and you don't need to create such struggle and separation for yourself.

"I myself am the Way-I am Truth, and I am Life." "Jesus' words...are less meant to keep people out than they are to assure his followers that they are in, really in," Dr. Lose writes. "In case we have any doubt, Jesus then spells it out in further detail: 'And from now on you actually do know God and already have seen God.'"

For centuries Christians have used these beautiful words of Christ as John recorded them to create barriers and walls to keep others out of the beautiful place God has created for all Her children. Why, I wonder, are many so eager to make Christianity so exclusive? Why would the One who makes the lame walk, and the blind to see; who takes in the lowest and the least build a high wall to keep people out of the mansion being prepared for them with enough rooms for all? Doesn't that sound more like what Christ is teaching against – the high and mighty leaders of the church at his time who criticized and demeaned him for breaking the rules and tearing down the walls of God's law as they interpreted it?

"As Jesus has pointed out in this passage if we don't see the unity in all this, we really don't get it. 'How can you say, show us the Father?'" writes Dr. Peter Woods in his rollicking essay, "If You Lived Here You'd Be Home Now!"

"Perhaps the best rejoinder to those who use the words of Jesus in this passage to be judgmental and exclusive," he says, "comes from that master of the one-liner and the succinct, snappy answer, Richard Rohr.

"When Richard has spoken inclusively, and people throw at him, 'But Jesus said 'I am the way, the truth and the life...NO ONE...' Richard replies in his lovely gentle manner, 'When Jesus said 'I am the way the truth and the life', it means that you are NOT.'" A sobering reminder if you get it, that none of this is our business. This is mystery of the highest order and our best response is awe and wonder, rather than bigotry and belligerence."

“This passage can be destructive if taken out of the context of John’s Gospel and a holistic understanding of Jesus’ life and message,” Dr. Bruce Epperly writes in his commentary on this piece of the text. “Jesus’ ministry was grounded in relationship, rather than creed or theological litmus test... Jesus is the way to salvation in an inclusive way. All paths of salvation and enlightenment are grounded in the graceful energy of God. We walk the pathway to many mansions in many diverse ways, lured forward by God’s moment-to-moment inspiration. We can still speak of Jesus as supreme without denigrating other faiths and casting doubt on peoples’ eternal destinies. We can understand Jesus’ pathway as an embracing grace that animates and empowers all authentic paths. We can be confessional pluralists, recognizing that the diversity of spiritual paths is not a fall from grace, but a reflection of God’s personal relationship with every culture and person. Christ is the way that includes all authentic ways, enabling all ways to be fruitful.”

How like a mother God is seen to be here – welcoming each child to be enfolded in her care. Our mothering God looks to provide a safe space and give sustenance to ALL Her children. She is grounded in relationship, asking us to live as Christ did, caring for anyone in need and opening our arms wider and wider to let every person born know they are loved and have a place at Her table and in Her home.

I wonder how a mother’s love has been exemplified for you? What did you receive or learn from your mother that you have carried with you to this day? Is there someone in your life that acted as or became a mother for you that touched you deeply? I’d like to wrap up this exploring time by giving you a chance to share if anyone would like to...

(After the sharing time, Pastor Donald read the following poem.)

“What I Learned From My Mother”

by Julia Kasdorf

I learned from my mother how to love
the living, to have plenty of vases on hand
in case you have to rush to the hospital
with peonies cut from the lawn, black ants
still stuck to the buds. I learned to save jars
large enough to hold fruit salad for a whole
grieving household,
to cube home-canned pears
and peaches,
to slice through maroon grape skins
and flick out the sexual seeds
with a knife point.
I learned to attend viewings
even if I didn’t know
the deceased, to press the moist hands
of the living, to look in their eyes and offer
sympathy, as though I understood loss
even then.

I learned that whatever we say
means nothing,
what anyone will remember
is that we came.

I learned to believe I had the power to ease
awful pains materially like an angel.

Like a doctor, I learned to create
from another's suffering
my own usefulness,
and once

you know how to do this,
you can never refuse.

To every house you enter, you must offer
healing: a chocolate cake
you baked yourself,
the blessing of your voice,
your chaste touch.

Amen.