

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**

(Delivered on March 15, 2015)

Text: **Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22** (*NRSV*)

O give thanks to God, for God is good;  
for God's steadfast love endures forever.  
Let the redeemed of God say so,  
those whom God redeemed from trouble  
and gathered in from the lands,  
from the east and from the west,  
from the north and from the south.  
Some were sick through their sinful ways,  
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;  
they loathed any kind of food,  
and they drew near to the gates of death.  
Then they cried to God in their trouble,  
and God saved them from their distress;  
God sent out God's word and healed them,  
and delivered them from destruction.  
Let them thank God for God's steadfast love,  
for God's wonderful works to humankind.  
And let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving,  
and tell of God's deeds with songs of joy.

Text: **John 3:14-21** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Chosen One must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in the Chosen One might have eternal life. Yes, God so loved the world as to give the Only Begotten One, that whoever believes may not die, but have eternal life.

God sent the Only Begotten into the world not to condemn the world, but that through the Only Begotten the world might be saved.

Whoever believes in the Only Begotten avoids judgment, but whoever doesn't believe is judged already for not believing in the name of the Only Begotten of God.

On these grounds is sentence pronounced that though the light came into the world, people showed they preferred darkness to the light because their deeds were evil.

Indeed, people who do wrong hate the light and avoid it, for fear their actions will be exposed; but people who live by the truth come out into the light, so that it may be plainly seen that what they do is done in God."

## Reflections by Pastor Donald: **“The WHOLE World: Nowhere to Run, Nowhere to Hide”**

I've been struggling recently with my work here with you. Should I tell you that? I think so. I do believe transparency to be an essential element in ministry. There's a balance to be sure, of course. Not so much personal information that you're squirming, but certainly enough that you know you can trust me with whatever you're going through since you know I'm going through the stuff of this life myself.

The church, you see, is a two way street and too often in my own life I've seen ministers put so high on pedestals that their fall is inevitable. "What goes up must come down," you know. So I plan to stay off that pedestal as a practice!

Don't worry, it's nothing "MAJOR" as we like to say; just another step along the journey. Just another jolt to the ego, appropriately timed, actually, as we journey together through this Lenten time of soul searching, self reflection and atonement.

I don't know if you can tell or not, but I put a lot of time and effort into these Sunday services each week. For the most part, it's something I truly enjoy and feel called to. Each week I pray earnestly and often that God will give me whatever I need to convey the love and the care of God and of this church as God's caring people to whomever is here to receive it. And week after week I am truly amazed that the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart do seem to be acceptable and do reach out to touch the ears and hearts that are present. I never know this for sure, of course, but the feedback I receive and the Spirit of God that pervades this space reassures me and keeps moving me forward.

And then there are weeks like this last one. For some reason, it was a tough one. I can't really put my finger on what made it so, but I know that I felt worn out and wrung dry and really not too inspired. And instead of trusting God to take me through it and speak through me, I knowingly took a short cut. Have you ever realized that short cuts usually make for a longer more difficult trip in the long run?

It probably wasn't all that obvious, but I knew it and I know some of you could certainly feel it whether you realized it or not. The attendance was sparse to say the least, and everything pretty much felt off to me. I wanted to blame it on the time change, but I knew in my heart it was deeper than that. Something wasn't working and when somebody asked me after the service how it felt to write that particular sermon, I knew the jig was up. I stammered around about how it was easier than some, and offered some other flaccid platitudes, but what was really going on in my heart and head was a storm of being found out in some way and not very happy about it at all.

As I made my way through the rest of the day and on into my days off, the Spirit continued to make what my mom would have called little "schnellers" up side my head. I still prayed, of course, and had my "moments" with God, but I wasn't leaving any time for that still small voice to say anything. My times of meditation and prayer were more about sitting down with a "here's the list and now I'm done" and then jumping up with a "thanks and I must be going" attitude than anything else. I kept wondering what was going on with me and why I was feeling off, but it wasn't until Wednesday when the schneller turned into a big AHA whack upside the head that I realized it was all about my ego and nothing else.

Even writing this sermon and admitting this to myself, my ego kept wanting me to go back and erase everything and just talk about how much God loves the world. Which is true, and I will actually be getting to that, believe it or not. But I think this part is important, too.

In our spiritual journeys, we will often encounter situations and people that will seem to appear as barriers or stumbling blocks for us. During HIS Lenten journey, Jesus met an especially big barrier the Bible calls "the Devil" who threw stumbling block after stumbling block into His path to see whether he would follow his human ego or his divine Spirit.

Jesus, of course, managed to follow His divine Spirit, relying on His relationship with God rather than on his earthly flesh and reason to guide Him and provide Him with the answers he needed.

I think it is precisely during these times of temptation, when barriers arise and stumbling blocks appear that we are called to go even deeper into our relationship with God.

Our natural human response seems to be avoidance or negation. Feeling uncomfortable with what was going on with me this last week, I prayed less instead of more and I ran from the quiet moments, afraid of what God was going to tell me instead of trusting that whatever I got would lead me to freedom and enlightenment.

In those moments I forgot that God did not come to judge us and condemn us but to love us and to save us.

The scriptures have so often been used to hurt people, to make us afraid, to condemn us for being human, and I truly do not believe that this is what God is about.

In our very familiar Gospel passage today from John, the truth of God's love for the whole world has been twisted into a judgment that bestows God's love only upon those who believe in a certain way. And even as Jesus tells us elsewhere not to judge lest we be judged ourselves, we separate one another into groups and call down retribution upon those who haven't seen the light through the same lenses we have. Or we hold ourselves up to that same judgment and wonder if we can possibly measure up.

"There sure have been a lot of Christians across the last two millennia who seem to think that condemnation is where it's at when it comes to preaching, teaching, and evangelizing," Rev. Scott Hoezee, a Director at Calvin Theological Seminary, wrote in his essay on this passage this week. "Not a few Christians in North America seem convinced that a major part of their vocation as believers is to wag judgmental fingers in the faces of all kinds of people... But the message that is to be both proclaimed and lived is one of Life and Light and Truth."

I think we jump into condemning others more quickly when we're so used to condemning ourselves on a regular basis. When's the last time you paid attention to your inner monologue? Do you have a voice of life and light and truth going on in there, assuring you of God's love and care or do you hear a voice of judgment and condemnation berating you throughout the day and night and wondering if you truly are one of God's children? Do you judge your shadow self so harshly that you can't imagine that God loves every part of you?

"The shadow is that part of the self that we don't want to see, that we're always afraid of and don't want others to see either," Father Richard Rohr wrote in his essay, "Seeing our Shadow" last week. "Our tendency is to hide or deny it, even and most especially from ourselves. Our problem is not our shadow self nearly as much as our over-defended ego," he posits, "which always projects its own faults onto other people and hates them there, and thus avoids its own conversion."

Is your own personal religion one of putting down both yourself and others or building up others and yourself? Do you believe God is just for a few or do you believe that God is for all?

IN his commentary for the EKKLSIA PROJECT this week called, "Loving the World" Kyle Childress writes that author "Wendell Berry suggests that a starting place for us to counter such an abstract, disembodied religion might be to remember that important first phrase...: God so loved the world. Jesus did not limit God's love and say that God so loved our souls, or our minds, or our hearts," he writes. "He didn't even say that God so loved people. But God so loved the world – the whole thing."

"Salvation," he says, "is about much more than just me getting saved and going to heaven someday. Biblical salvation is holistic. The whole cosmos is saved and made whole: ecosystems and earthworms, rocks and trees and climates and healing relationships among people black, white, and brown, gay and straight, while those people impoverished will receive justice, and wars will cease and AR-15's will be turned into gardening tools. In the midst of all that, we personally will discover ourselves being made whole and reconciled with God, with others, and with the world that God loves."

"Until we are willing to acknowledge our darkness, we can never find our way to the light," the brilliant John van de Laar wrote in his essay, "Finding the Light" on Sacredise a few years ago.

“This is a truth as ancient as the human race, and it is strikingly highlighted in [our passage for today]. The Gospel reading from John 3 flows out [of] Jesus’ nighttime conversation with Nicodemus, and the hidden setting creates a visual parable of Jesus’ teaching. While we love to focus on John 3:16, it is really verses 18-21 that carry the “weight” of this discourse. Here Jesus speaks about judgment, light and darkness. The essence of the message is this: when we love darkness, we refuse to come into the light and so we are “judged” in that we are unable to find the healing, forgiveness and restoration that would bring us life and connection.”

Being willing to go within, to face the truth of our selves and discover the voice of our egos, we open ourselves to the light of God’s love and healing for our whole lives, and, consequently, the whole world. There’s no need to run, no need to hide. God’s truth and love sets us free to live our very best lives and to discover the joy and grace that is there in abundance for us.

“Give thanks to God, for God is good; for God’s steadfast love endures forever,” the psalmist sang out for us today.

“Lent, of course, is a time to repent, to turn away, to begin again,” Rev. Kathleen Huey wrote in her reflections on our Psalm this week. “Time in the wilderness, metaphorically or literally, and time in quiet prayer and reflection... help us to focus our thoughts and expand our awareness of God at work in our lives. Time in worship and learning, in hearing the story and joining in the song of praise and thanksgiving, increases our awareness of God at work in the lives of the people in every age, the God, as Eugene Peterson translates this in *The Message*, who “rounded you up from all over the place, from the four winds, from the seven seas.”

“My love reaches so high, you can’t get over it. So wide, you can’t get around, no - Nowhere to run, baby nowhere to hide. Got nowhere to run, baby nowhere to hide!” Who knew Martha and the Vandellas were so tuned in to God’s spirit?

Let me leave you with some verses from Ted Loder’s poem,

“I Am in Need of...of What?”

Well, God,  
I made it through another sweet-sour time,  
and here I am,  
nibbled, frazzled, puzzled, awed,  
and in need of...of what?  
A chuckle, maybe,  
a revolution begun with a belly laugh,  
a Bronx cheer in the face of the onslaughts of disaster and death itself.  
...Lord of laughter, as of tears,  
shake me awake  
and teach me to laugh at myself,  
at my black-draped solemnity,  
over my petty preoccupation with success and failure,  
  
through all the hurt and adversity  
until my laughter lures me deep  
beneath the terrors without names,  
beneath the questions without answers,  
beneath the pain without relief;  
lures me deep  
to the love in me unused,  
to the strength unspent,  
to the courage untapped,

to the dream unrisken,  
to the beauty unexpressed;

all the way down

to the inescapable bottom,  
to the awareness that I must get on  
with being who I am  
as fully as I can,  
as unflinchingly as I can,  
as accurately as I can,

which is to say,

as gracefully,  
as powerfully,  
as faithfully

as you have created me to be.

Amen.