

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, May 21, 2017)

Text: **John 14:15-21** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

If you love me and obey the command I give you, I will ask the One who sent me to give you another Paraclete, another Helper to be with you always—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept since the world neither sees her nor recognizes her; but you can recognize the Spirit because she remains with you and will be within you.

I won't leave you orphaned; I will come back to you. A little while now and the world will see me no more; but you'll see me; because I live and you will live as well. On that day you'll know that I am in God, and you are in me, and I am in you. Those who obey the commandments are the ones who love me, and those who love me will be loved by Abba God. I, too, will love them and will reveal myself to them."

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **“Abandoning Abandonment”**

How fascinating that right on the heels of last week's text wherein Jesus assured his disciples and, thereby, all of us, that he was going to prepare a place for them like a good mother would, we have today's text showing Jesus reassuring his disciples that they would never be alone as his Abba God would be sending them an advocate, a partner, a paraclete even to be with them and abide within them. (More on that paraclete word a little later.)

"I will not leave you orphaned," he says, sensing their desperation at losing him as their guide, their brother and, in some very real ways, their parent as they toddle along in this new way he's giving them of understanding everything about their lives, their world and their God.

I was rather overwhelmed this week as I realized anew the enormity of this promise Jesus gave us and the very real presence of the Holy Spirit in my own life and in the life of this church. There have been so many times in the last months that I've been tempted to discouragement and whispered to by despair. I will confess to you that I have even emerged from my daily morning prayer time with a feeling of sadness, unrest and wonderment at what is happening in the world and in these times. I've continually asked God to reveal to me what is at work in my head and my heart and this week I received an answer.

It came through the contemplation of the Holy Spirit as our comforter and the words of Christ from last week, "Let not your hearts be troubled." For what I realized is that in my prayer times and throughout my day, I was beseeching God, troubling God, worrying God and myself with anxious thoughts and negative questions. What became clear to me is that I was not leaving any time or space for God to actually respond. And so, I stopped. Well, I didn't just stop right away, of course. I still had my prayers, my requests, my pleas and my thanks to express, but then I took a deep breath and stopped all my chatter and let there be space for God.

And you know what happened? Such peace. The first thing that came to me was those very words of Christ I had been contemplating – "Let not your hearts be troubled." All is being worked out, my child. You're doing the work you're supposed to be doing. You are in me and I am in you and the struggle you feel is created by you. Rest in me and lean not on your own understanding.

It's all right there for us. I've learned it before. I've heard it before. I've known it and felt it before, but this world and all its ways can lead us to forgetting that the comforter truly has come. That God is right here with us and that resting in those arms and in that truth is always and forever available to us.

“Sing a joyful song to the Beloved all the earth, and praise Love's name; Sing in glorious exultation! We say to You, “How magnificent are your ways: So great is your power that fear and doubt vanish before You; You are our Teacher for all ages: We, who choose to listen and learn, sing songs of gratitude and joy...

You have brought us through our pain and into your dwelling place. I enter your Heart surrendered to Love;

I commend my soul into your keeping; all that my lips uttered, all that my mouth promised when I was in trouble and pain, I offer up to You; I abandon myself into your hands.

Abandon...

to leave completely and finally; forsake utterly;

to give up; discontinue; withdraw from:

to yield (oneself) without restraint or moderation; give (oneself) over to...

In the modified passage I just read to you from Psalm 66, our lectionary Psalm for today as found in Nan Merrill's beautiful book, “Psalms for Praying,” we hear the psalmist abandoning herself into God's hands. Giving everything she is and everything she holds in her heart, be it fear, trouble, pain or love to God.

How interesting then, that when most of us think of abandonment, I believe we go with that first meaning: to be left completely, to be forsaken.

I guess it's only human, isn't it? To think first of how far we are from God, lost and alone, rather than to realize that it is only in abandoning that very feeling and trusting fully and wholly in God, yielding ourselves without restraint or moderation to our Creator that we truly FIND ourselves and realize our life's purpose to be one with God and all that is. For, truly, nothing IS that is not God.

In our Gospel reading for today, we hear Jesus once again offering assurance to His disciples that he will always be with them and will not forsake them, even as He knows that his earthly death is imminent.

Throughout this 14th chapter of John we hear Jesus readying His disciples for what they are about to experience. Letting them know that He is preparing a place for them; that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life; and that by seeing Him they have seen God.

And now, in our verses for today, Christ gives them and us the greatest assurance that the One who sent Him is sending another, a helper, or from the Greek, a Paraclete (not to be confused with a little bird), but rather an advocate and intercessor for us who will live within us always.

This is what Jesus has been teaching his disciples throughout his ministry and constantly offers even now to each one of us.

God is with us.

God is within us.

The Holy Spirit of God is present in every cell of our bodies and every scintilla of our souls offering comfort and advocating on our behalf.

AND, that WITH this realization and gift of faith we can do the works Jesus did and even greater works besides.

Now THAT'S a leap of faith if I ever heard of one. You might need wings like those of a dove to help you make that big of a leap, mightn't you?

It seems as though Jesus truly understood the sense of abandonment the disciples would feel when his physical presence was no longer with them. Leap ahead just a little in time from when he spoke these words and we know Jesus knew what abandonment felt like as he hung there on the cross speaking the words, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me..."

This is the beauty of the Christian life, folks. For me, the idea that God absolutely and fully knows what it feels like to be abandoned through Christ's incarnation, and at the same time assures us with God's omniscient and omnipotent glory that we are never abandoned fills me to the brim with the mystery and the beauty that is present in all creation and surely within our very souls.

Holding onto that great paradox of love and caring in the midst of what seems like such suffering and abandonment can be as slippery as mercury for most if not all of us.

How do we keep our hope alive? How do we affirm that God, Christ and the Spirit are truly with us? ...

Perhaps by realizing that WE are truly with God, with Christ and with the Spirit; That there is no separation.

"What is not often emphasized, except among the mystical theologians, is that Jesus may have been teaching that each one of us is both fully human and fully divine," Susan McCaslin writes in her book, *Arousing the Spirit*. "If we are all made in the image of God, as Genesis implies, then we are all in a sense potential incarnations of the I Am, chips off the old star block, divine scintillations. While our temporal selves may be partially identified with civilization's corrupt power systems, Jesus may be trying to point out that our center of Being is essentially pure."

Commentator Dianne Bergant remarks that the Spirit of God, "strengthens us, comforts us, guides us, and inspires us. It is the Spirit," she writes, "who enables us to interpret the signs of the times in ways very different from the ways of the world. It is the Spirit who works through us for the transformation of the world. Because of the gift of the Spirit, we can live as people of hope and trust: ...considered foolish by those who live without this hope, but [realizing] it is the foolishness of the Spirit of God."

And from our *Seasons of the Spirit*, "God seeks to create community by the gift of the Spirit and the exercise of love. We, in turn, find the means to live in community by Spirit's gift and through love's call."

By recognizing the Spirit of God not only in ourselves but in one another we can transform ourselves and this world into the kin-dom that God dreams for us and we dream for God.

Through the sharing of our gifts and resources, through our listening to the pains and burdens of others and rejoicing in one another's challenges and triumphs we build the kin-dom block by block, establishing a true spirit of love that can infect the entire world, abandoning ourselves into God's hands knowing that we will never be abandoned.

"Turn Your Spirit Loose" by Ted Loder (edited)

O God, turn your Spirit loose here,
and me with it,
that I may go to where the silence is to face with you the utter mystery of questions without answers,
pain without balm,
sorrow without comfort,
and fears without relief,
which hound my days and haunt my sleep.

Facing the mystery, Lord,
grant me grace to wrestle with it until I name the fears
and force them to set me free to move on with whatever limp I'm left with;

to wrestle with it
until the pain teach me and I befriend it,
until the silence subdues me into an awareness that it is holy
and I am healed by it;
to wrestle with it
until I go deeper in it to gratitude
for all the shapes of wholeness
and of hope that bless me.

Amen.