

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**  
(Delivered on Sunday, August 2, 2015)

**Text: Ephesians 4:1-16 (The Inclusive Bible)**

I plead with you, then, in the name of our Redeemer, to lead a life worthy of your calling. Treat one another charitably, in complete selflessness, gentleness and patience. Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the peace that binds you together. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called into one hope when you were called. There is one Savior, one faith, one baptism, one God and Creator of all, who is over all, who works through all and is within all.

Each of us has received God's grace in the measure in which Christ has bestowed it. Thus you find scriptures saying,

"You ascended on high, leading captives in your train, and giving gifts to people."

"You ascended"—what does this mean but that Christ first descended into the lower regions of the earth? The One who descended is the very One who ascended high above the heavens in order to fill the whole universe.

And to some, the gift they were given is that they should be apostles; to some, prophets; to some, evangelists, to some, pastors and teachers. These gifts were given to equip fully the holy ones for the work of service, and to build up the body of Christ.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Growing Up In God"**

At some point in your life, I would imagine you've heard the phrase attributed to Socrates, "the unexamined life is not worth living." It would seem that Paul, or whoever was writing to the Ephesians with a similar voice (as Carol alluded to last week, Biblical authorship is difficult to pin down, which is especially the case with this letter for which there is only some support for Paul's authorship), but, at any rate, that our writer would greatly support this Socratic assertion as we note the writer's exhortation to the people of Ephesus to "live a life worthy of your calling" and then listing the qualities that should emanate from such a worthy life.

As we note from another letter, the one written to the Galatians, these qualities are what we hear described there as the "Fruits of the Spirit." In the letter before us today they include selflessness, gentleness, patience and treating one another charitably, which could also be described as treating others generously and with sympathy.

Now, if you're anything like me, I would imagine these are not necessarily things that just come naturally to you in every moment of your life, although I do know that some of you seem to be born with those very traits. Let's just say if I wasn't supposed to be envious, I would be!

But here's the thing, God still loves me and God still loves you.

I remember growing up I was often thinking that these fruits of the spirit seemed quite perilously out of reach for me. Almost as if they were hung from a very high tree so that I had very little chance of picking them and tasting of their heavenly sweetness. For with every instance of losing my patience or being selfish or feeling greedy, I felt like I just sunk a few inches lower into the muck surrounding that heavenly tree and felt its fruit receding even further from my grasp.

But then you know what happened? Somebody would come along and help me reach. Some teacher or pastor or friend would give me a glimpse of God's love, embodied in the loving community

of which I was a part, (and there were many) and let me know that I had received a measure of God's grace and could perhaps examine my life without condemnation, in the same way God was examining me.

This realization, however, was a long time in coming, you understand. It was as if I needed to continue to grow in my understanding and awareness of God and God's people who surrounded me throughout my life before I could be tall enough in my own spirit to appreciate the worth of the fruit and decide to pick it, consume it and make it part of my life and the way in which I lived it.

"The discipleship life is organic and must be treated as such," the Rev. Sharron R. Blezard writes in her article "Cultivating Spiritual Growth." "All aspects of growth and maturity must be addressed regularly, and we are exhorted to speak the truth in love for the good of unity and growth. It sounds like a daunting task when you think about it, but when attended to daily the work is manageable and rewarding, promising an abundant harvest in due season."

This is the "one day at a time" approach as espoused in thousands upon thousands of 12-step groups around the world where they will often pledge to, "Live through just one day and not try to deal with all of life's problems at once" claiming that the person at an AA meeting with the longest sobriety is the one who got up earliest that morning.

What if we claimed that same approach for the whole of our lives? Sometimes the Bible, and especially these letters to the various early churches can seem overwhelming with their commands and precepts calling us to the highest version of ourselves or, perhaps, a life we feel is wholly unattainable. And, in reality, on our own, it is. That's why we must claim again and again, morning by morning, that there is one God and Creator of all, who is over all, who works through all and is within all. For it is by God's grace that we are able to live into our calling, filled with the holy spirit who renews our faith each day and helps us get back on that ladder and keep on climbing and reaching higher and higher.

Growing in God means we take a look at our lives moment by moment and day by day, examining our lives with Christ's flashlight shining bright. Not as a way of producing guilt, mind you, or making ourselves feel unworthy or bad in some way, but rather to see ourselves as God sees us, filled with light and each day able to make the best choices and live into our individual callings. Be honest with yourself, invite the challenge of living into your highest self.

As I heard a colleague say during a class I took this week, "if you're just coasting, it means you're going downhill."

"Our passage today is a moving reminder to us in the United Church of Christ of who we are, and who we are called to be as followers of Jesus, to understand "what we are living for," writes Kate Huey, Dean of our Amistad Chapel in Cleveland. "Within our own congregations and within our denomination, we are called to be one, to be reconciled, to be strong, to strive to be worthy of our calling. And yet we are called to seek that same unity across congregational and denominational lines, too, to reach out to our Christian sisters and brothers and to find common ground, common hope, common calling. All of this is to bear witness to the loving God who "laid down the earth's foundations," thinking of us, focusing an immeasurable love on us, intending for us to be whole and holy through the power of that love."

Growing in God doesn't happen by our own power and might, but by the love that surrounds us and those who are growing along with us. By reaching out to one another with our cares and concerns, our challenges and our triumphs, we build up the ground upon which we all stand and provide the nutrients and support we need to grow stronger in our faith and more fruitful in our love.

How many people can you point to in your life that have showed you what it means to embody the fruits of the spirit? How many people right here in this room or in whatever environment you find

yourself have given you encouragement and strength, empowering you to make the most of your life and helping you make the best choices for building up not only yourself but those around you?

We are a cloth of diverse colors  
made from many gifts and graces.

We are the people flowing forth from Creator God,  
surprising ourselves  
with the things which can be done.

We are raw material for  
rewarding relationships  
as our lives interweave,  
contributing one to the other,  
holding each other firm

when one is weak or breaking.

We are each worthy of being respected  
and cared for  
essential to the pattern,  
skilled in our appointed tasks,  
sources of laughter and sharers of tears.

Let us commit ourselves to growing in God, and to working together, that one day, this world may be a place where all people live in justice, freedom and peace.

Amen!