

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, April 19, 2015)

Text: 1 John 3:1-7 (The Inclusive Bible)

In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the doors were locked in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Temple authorities.

See what love Abba God has lavished on us in letting us be called God's children!

Yet that in fact is what we are. The reason the world does not recognize us is that it never recognized God. My dear friends, now we are God's children, but it has not been revealed what we are to become in the future. We know that when it comes to light we will be like God, for we will see God as God really is.

All who keep this hope keep themselves pure, just as Christ is pure.

Anyone who sins at all breaks the Law, because to sin is to break the Law. Now, you know that Christ, who is sinless, appeared to abolish sin. So everyone who lives in union with Christ does not continue to sin, but whoever continues to sin has never seen or known Christ.

Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray; to live a holy life is to be holy, just as Christ is holy.

Text: Psalm 4 (NRSV, adapted)

Answer me when I call,

O God of my right!

You gave me room

when I was in distress.

Be gracious to me,

and hear my prayer.

How long, you people,

shall my honor suffer shame?

How long will you love vain words,

and seek after lies?

But know that God has set apart

the faithful for God;

God hears when I call.

When you are disturbed,

do not sin;

ponder it on your beds,

and be silent.

Offer right sacrifices,

and put your trust in God.

There are many who say,
"O that we might see some good!
Let the light of your face
shine on us, O God!"
You have put gladness in my heart
more than when their grain and wine abound.
I will both lie down
and sleep in peace;
for you alone, O God,
make me lie down in safety.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Growing as God's Beloved Children"**

What does it mean to be a child of God? I imagine it means very different things to different people. Searching around on the web for images for your bulletin today, I was surprised to find such diversity in terms of how the idea of being a child of God is expressed. There were beautiful pictures of chronologically aged children, of course, being led across green fields by a beatific looking woman, who, I'm assuming was singing about how beautiful it was to be a child of God.

But there were also sardonic takes on the phrase, such as "if we're all children of God what makes Jesus so special?" Obviously, they haven't looked very deeply into the life of Jesus!

The one that really bothered me, though, was the one quite professionally emblazoned on an attractively abstract background, sitting in a deep red field that said, "We are not all God's children." And then goes on to quote their interpretation of part of our passage today, "Anyone who does not live righteously and does not love other believers does not belong to GOD. – 1 John 3:10"

Always be alert to anything that comes on a poster or a T-shirt or a bumper sticker, and quotes scripture. You can almost always be assured it's a piece of propaganda promoted by people who think they speak for God.

Is it any wonder that our churches are emptying out and that people from all walks of life are questioning the validity of religion when they receive such harsh messages as this? I truly believe it is up to us in the progressive Christian movement to bring to life the true message of Christ and the radically hospitable message that God truly does consider all of us as children and created not one of us apart from God's self.

In studying this challenging scripture passage from First John, I was intrigued to find that most scholars believe that, although it is most likely written by the same John that wrote the fourth gospel we find in the Greek testament, it is also likely that it was written as a sermon rather than as a letter or epistle by which it is called in the new testament. "It has all the marks of a sermon," after all, David Bartlett, Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia tell us. It "does not begin with a salutation or end with a farewell as traditional letters do..."

"A reasonable guess," he goes on to say, "is that first, second and third John emerge from the same community as the Fourth Gospel does, and they reflect theological and ecclesiological developments in that community."

I think this is an important thing to keep in mind when reading any part of scripture. We must see it in its historical context and interpret it with as much knowledge we can gain on who was writing it, who they were writing it to, and the purpose for which they were writing. In other words, I don't believe a literal interpretation of the scriptures is possible because all words are influenced by those who spoke them and by those who have interpreted them down through the ages and the context in which they were writing those words.

This isn't to say that God doesn't inspire the scriptures or those who wrote and interpreted them, but rather to affirm the freedom God gives us in every aspect of our lives and especially in terms of using our own brains and mouths to interpret that which has been given to us not only in the Bible but in everything that comes to us from those who would purport to illuminate the scriptures and God's intentions for us. (That includes ME, by the way!)

In today's passage, Professor Bartlett tells us that, "it seems quite possible that the theological debates in the community of first John are debates about how they were [to] interpret the Gospel of John, which was likely their central scriptural guide." Wow. Can you imagine just having one book to guide you?

I've often thought during these first years of my ministry with you about my father who began the first years of HIS ministry at a large Mennonite church in Sarasota, Florida.

He had been called from his work as a farmer in Virginia, and most of his experience preaching consisted of the sermons he gave himself in the mirror over the sink in his childhood home. I used to love hearing my many aunts tell about how they had to bang on the door on Sunday mornings to get him to wrap it up so the rest of them could get ready for church!

When Daddy started preaching he told me he only had one literary source besides the Bible to guide him, which I believe was Matthew Henry's commentary on the scriptures. It was written between 1709 and 1710 and explains a lot of what I heard in my father's sermons growing up.

This is all to support, rather colloquially, my assertion, along with the Bard and his dear Hamlet, that, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Whenever we think we know exactly what God is saying or assert unequivocally that we know what God intends by a certain scripture reference, we can be assured that we are far from our God who is still speaking and shining new light and new truth through all of God's children.

We all know what it means to want to belong to something or someone, don't we? Isn't that what high school is all about? Wanting to be considered "in" somehow?

For this small band of new Christians receiving this letter or sermon, we can imagine how "out" they must have felt. Having only one gospel to supposedly rely on, their faith must have been stretched long and hard – especially in a time and place where they were most certainly not with the "in" crowd in terms of their beliefs and practices.

"In 1 John the early Christians are grappling with their experience of the love of God breaking into the world" Rev. Susan Miller, a minister in the Church of Scotland writes. "They have received a new identity as children of God but they live in a world in which their identity is unrecognised by those around them. What does their experience of the love of God have for the way in which they live their lives in the present?" she asks. "What impact does their identity as children of God have for their relationships in the world around them?"

And here is where I think we can step into the sermon or epistle before us and discover meaning for our lives today. If we see ourselves as children of God, what difference does that make to our lives and the way in which we live in the places we find ourselves right now?

I know for me, being a child of God helps me to understand myself and my calling in this world because my greatest desire is to bring the same joy, light and hope I feel as a child of God to anyone who desires to feast on those fruits of the spirit as well. Being a child of God for me means I have been given the gift to be in a constant stream of love outpoured for me where I am growing, learning and expanding my consciousness under the guidance of the most loving and gracious parent I could have.

Perhaps for you, being a child of God means something else. Maybe your earthly experience as a child wasn't such a great one and you resist the image of a parental God because the parenting you did or did not receive left you wanting for a hand that would guide you and show you unconditional love.

Perhaps you, like the early Christians first receiving these words, have felt abandoned or abused and need to embrace the all encompassing love of your creator who stands with hands outstretched ready to embrace you and comfort you.

“The reading begins with a sense of wonder at the abundant love of God which is given to human beings” the Rev. Miller writes. “The author is writing to people who feel like strangers in the world. The people around them do not share their beliefs. Their values and way of life are not understood by those who live around them. Their lives find their only meaning in their relationship with God.”

I have the opportunity in my work and life to meet with people who have not had loving and generous parents all their lives. And let’s remember that parents are human, too, right? Can we agree on that? There is no parent that can provide all we need in our lives. And even if they could, we’d probably reject half of it during our teenage years anyway. Even the very best parent can only offer what they have. It’s still up to us to accept it or reject it.

But, as so many studies have shown, our early formative years and even those things we experienced in the womb have a long and lasting affect on us. Those who didn’t feel wanted or suffered abuse deal with the ramifications of their childhood experiences throughout their lives. Learning to love and feel loved can be a challenge. God’s hand is open, but can we feel safe in reaching for it and do the work of the soul that allows us to grab hold?

“The text [of first John] begins with what we must always begin,” Brian Peterson, Professor of New Testament at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in South Carolina writes, that is, “with the love of God given to us.”

“The content of that love (or perhaps its result) is that we are called "God's children". This is not just wishing or pretending; we are what God declares us to be. The implicit imagery here is one of adoption. God lovingly calls us God's children, and that declaration makes it so. We are God's children not by our choice or by our accomplishment, but by [our God's] love.”

In our Psalm for today, we hear what some of the aspects of this extraordinary love are for us. “You gave me room when I was in distress,” the Psalmist sings. “You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound...I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O God, make me lie down in safety.”

As much as I would like to end these explorations here in the peace and safety of our great parent God, I feel like I must also address that other word that crops up in both of our readings for today. You know what it is? Yes... sin.

“Anyone who sins at all breaks the Law, because to sin is to break the Law” we read in the First John passage.

“When you are disturbed, do not sin;” the Psalmist sings, “ponder it on your beds and be silent.”

Sin for most of us has meant doing something wrong, I think. Yes? I know for me growing up, sin was what you wanted to avoid most in life, and it was usually presented as something that was completely bad to do, say or think.

However, I think there is a different way to look at sin that doesn’t drive us down, but works to lift us up and shed light on our way rather than keep us feeling guilty and in the dark.

Rev. Peter Lockhart, a minister at the St. Lucia Uniting Church in Brisbane, Australia, agrees, writing that, “The word sin is another of those inaccessible jargon terms that can evoke all sorts of responses. For me,” he states, “sin is about being in discord with how we are meant to live in God’s creation with one another. Often we reduce sin to the things we do wrong but this glosses over the depth of the problem. The things we do wrong are more like the symptom of the bigger problem.”

And that bigger problem, I think, is about being out of step and out of touch with God. Feeling that we are separate from God and not one of God’s children is what sin is all about to me.

“This is what sin is,” Rev. Lockhart writes. “It is about living in ways which deceive us to what our lives are about. It is always easier to talk about sin as those gross things that other people commit, like theft and murder, than deal with the complexity of our lives which are almost constantly out of kilter with God.”

I believe God is always reaching out to us. Always offering us adoption papers. God longs to be in touch with us and to be acknowledged as our parent and the one who loves us always. To turn from sin is to turn TO God. To turn to God is to count oneself as God’s child and know that you are covered by God’s infinite love and forgiveness.

“None can put parameters on the extent of God’s grace,” Rev. Lockhart concludes. “All we can do is proclaim this good news as we have been called to proclaim it and place our trust in God.”

One of my earliest and most profound encounters on my Christian journey, involved the discovery of the great spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen. If you haven’t read any of his work, or even if you have, I highly recommend him to you for an uplift of your soul, and for a deeper understanding of yourself as one of God’s beloved children.

I’d like to leave you today with words from his book, “Life of the Beloved,” and a brief meditation on those words from his student and subsequent friend, Chris Glaser.

Henri writes: “I kept refusing to hear the voice that speaks from the very depth of my being and says: “You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests.” That voice has always been there, but it seems that I was much more eager to listen to other, louder voices saying: “Prove that you are worth something; do something relevant, spectacular or powerful, and then you will earn the love you so desire.”

Christ writes: “Henri wrote these words in a book written at the suggestion of a young friend who told him that a kind of “generic” book on spirituality was needed for those who didn’t speak the “in” language of any faith tradition. Henri always felt a burden for outsiders because he himself felt like an outsider. He distilled the essence of Christianity in “Life of the Beloved” that, with Jesus, we must hear God’s affirmation, “You are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased.”

Can you hear it? I hope you can!

Amen.