

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**

(Delivered on Sunday, April 8, 2018)

Text: **John 20:19-23 (NRSV)**

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Text: **Acts 4:32-35 (NRSV)**

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Text: **Psalms 133 (The Inclusive Bible)**

See how good, how pleasant it is  
for God's people to live together as one!  
It is like precious oil on Aaron's head  
running down on his beard,  
running down to the collar of his robes.  
It is like the dew of Mount Hermon,  
falling on the hills of Zion.  
For that is where Yahweh bestows the blessing—  
life that never ends.

**Pastor Pastor's Reflections: "How Good and How Pleasant"**

Please pray with me...

You pour out upon us the oil of gladness, gracious God, as we gather today in the name of our risen Christ. You have given us the Word of Life; we have heard and seen your greatest of all gifts and testify to that experience by our presence here. We ask in this time together that the spirit of the Christ be known among us in our conversation and in our prayers. May our thoughts center on the message that light has come to chase away the shadows, that community has been born to remove our isolation and that joy has been heaped upon us that we might share it with the world. Amen.

Have you ever been part of a group - of your friends or maybe your co-workers or your immediate or extended family – that just did NOT get along? It's pretty much a rhetorical question, I think, since I'm quite sure that anybody that's part of any group, and especially a church body as we are here can remember at least one time when the group they were in fractured or broke down completely.

Perhaps it started with a misunderstanding or a miscommunication or maybe it was a deliberate snub or a particularly pernicious power play. It doesn't really matter how it started, what does matter is that the group broke apart, feelings were hurt and, sometimes, the rift in the group seemed irreparable.

Certainly, we see this kind of thing happening often throughout the Bible. When I started contemplating this, I realized that even the very first family couldn't keep it together! All it took was the second brother wanting what the first brother had and our first instance of kindred definitely NOT living in unity brought about a decidedly not good and extremely unpleasant reality for all concerned.

Throughout the Greek testament we have letter after letter from Paul and others to the new churches forming trying to keep them together as rift after rift occurred and conflict upon conflict piled up and threatened to rip apart the fragile fabric of the newly constructed church of Christ, quite decidedly NOT united at this point.

In his wonderful article on the earliest days of the Roman Christian Church published in January, Sam O'Neal notes that along with being persecuted by outside sources, especially that old sick fiddler Nero, "there is ample evidence that specific groups of Christians within Rome experienced conflict...much of Paul's letter to the Romans [for instance] includes instructions for Jewish and Gentile Christians on how to live in harmony and properly worship God as a new culture – a new church. For example, Romans 14 offers strong advice on settling disagreements between Jewish and Gentile Christians in connection with eating meat sacrificed to idols and observing the different holy days of the Old Testament law."

Whew, thank God we don't have any differences like those these days to pull us apart, right?! (ha!)

The Bible provides many historical accounts of people and groups not getting along and the chaos and dissension and even war that often occurs as a result.

No wonder the psalmist declares how "VERY Good and Pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!"

And I know you and I can feel that, can't we? Studying the histories of this church we are a part of right now as well as those you and I may have grown up in, we can see that no Christian institution is without its conflicts and quarrels. Just as no family or group on earth can ever be without its challenges and problems.

But I'm here to tell you that through the grace and love of God and working the principles of kindness and understanding that Christ teaches and exemplifies for us, it is possible to live in peace and in unity one with another.

I love the account of Jesus appearing to the disciples that Scott read for us today from John's gospel. They had locked their physical doors as a representation of the doors to their hearts in fear of what was to come next. And in the midst of their fears, who makes it through all those closed doors, but Jesus, the risen Christ. And the first thing he says is "Peace be with you."

I love this phrase as the first thing He says to them. For, as Dr. Bruce Epperly writes, "Peace occurs in times of crisis as well as placid days. Peace involves a sense of God's presence amid our pain, uncertainty, fallibility and fear. Peace is the recognition that God is with us in all the seasons of life and will provide a way to the future when we see no way ahead...[When] Jesus breathes on them and says, 'receive the Holy Spirit,' His breath gives them new life, The Spirit will give them power and the authority to forgive and withhold forgiveness, [and] although [they] are given [this power], the implication is that after the desertion of Jesus, their self-awareness will inspire them to forgive and accept those who, like themselves, have sinned and fallen short of God's vision for their lives."

What a treasure trove of beauty in that one little phrase. For in offering peace and encouraging peace, the Christ exhorts His followers to get along, to be in unity with one another and to encourage and help each other as they can't physically hold on to Him anymore or look to his physical presence to keep them together.

Here, I think, is Jesus prompting his followers and all of us to come to be a true church together, exemplified by the one described in Acts 4 that Scott also read for us today – as a church of "one heart and soul" with "not a needy person among them" as they shared what they had and helped each other out.

You can imagine there had to be a lot of forgiveness and understanding and working through conflict and jealousy in that early church, but with their focus on the way of the Christ, they were able to come together and live as one.

Just as one partner marries another and puts their trust and love in each other so is the church to be to God. "When we are as one in love of [our God], we receive and carry out to the world a wondrous blessing," writes John Eaton in his beautiful book, "Psalms for Life." "God's holy and healing ointment will flow to all we hold in our hearts."

Working to be as one means that we see the mirror of ourselves in each other. Before we make some criticism or hold some judgment against a brother or sister, look deeply into your own soul and see what's causing you to make such a critique. Is there something you are dealing with that's prompting such a verdict against another?

The scriptures provide us with many ways to be in harmony and to stay in harmony with one another. Along with his commandment taken as the foundation of this denomination, "that they may all be one," in the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, Jesus, in the sermon-on-the-mount gives us ways to make it happen. "This is how I want you to conduct yourself..." He says as translated in *The Message*, "If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has

against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God. Or say you're out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don't lose a minute. Make the first move; make things right with him."

So reasonable and yet so difficult. Only with the grace of God and the support of your community can we create such a grace-filled church.

Do we have such a community here? Do you feel the love and support of your brothers and sisters at San Marino UCC? I certainly hope and pray so. But there are always ways we can be closer, more helpful, more caring. I urge you to be fearless in the face of love and truth. Speak kindly and openly with each other and with me. Ask for what you need and let your family of God be there for you so that the precious oil and the dew of the mountains may cascade upon this church and let all who enter herein know that God's love is in full and ready abundance.

"Bind us together, Lord, bind us together with cords that cannot be broken.

Bind us together, Lord, bind us together, Lord, bind us together in love."

Amen.