

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, December 13, 2015)

Texts:

Luke 3:7-18 (NRSV)

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: "How Simple, How Powerful"

This can be such an overwhelming time of year for many if not all of us. As a church musician and now also a pastor, I often find myself working to not dread the holidays. That's hard to admit since it seems so counter to what the holidays should be about and what I believe God wants for us in our lives and especially during this time in which we are to rejoice loudly.

Before I came to this church as a section leader in your choir I was the director of music at another church where the Christmas Eve candle light service was pretty much the most important service of the year, or at least that's how I took it on. The choir was always a big part of the service and I worked with the pastor to create a spectacle of Biblical proportions so that everyone would feel the beauty and joy of the season. What I remember most about all those spectacular services, however, is hobbling around on most of those nights of all nights as my back would invariably have given out and I'd have to hitch up my choir robe and lay flat on one of the wooden pews to try and get some relief before the choir got there!

Although I've managed to keep my back from going out as often now, this year I still managed to catch a cold and I had to come to terms once again with how much I push myself to do, do, do especially at this time of year.

As I lived with our text these last couple of weeks and wondered over the wild John and his wild and powerful message, I was most impressed with how simple his directives are for living in the kingdom of God and how complicated we can make the message and take on the tasks of God, creating chaos where there doesn't need to be any and wearing ourselves down in the process. Perhaps it's a

way to keep from following the simple yet challenging directives John prescribes such as giving away one of our two coats when we really want them both. Or maybe it's a way of avoiding the self-reflection necessary to see where our thoughts and actions are clouded and need the Christ to redeem them.

Our UCC theologian Kate Huey pondered this idea in her heart as well as she reflected on Richard Swanson's ideas in his book, "Provoking the Gospel of Luke": "It seems to me that the One who chose to come into the world as a little baby in a humble manger, mothered by a young girl perplexed by, but cooperative with, the Spirit at work in her life, calls us to those same basic goodnesses and justices that John exhorts the people to exercise in their everyday lives: "'Do not use your power to injure,' he says. How simple, how powerful."

Think of how incredibly complicated God could have chosen to enter the world – surrounded by the trappings of power and politics and the massive majesty provided by wealth and power – all those things the devil will later tempt Jesus with in the desert. But instead the counselor the Prince of Peace, the almighty God comes to us in the simplest of places, showing us from the very beginning that the greatest things and the most profound ideas are born in the humblest of circumstances. By humbling our hearts and ridding ourselves of all the oppressive "shoulds" and "oughts" we create there we make a place for the Christ to be born and show us again and again how to live lives of meaning and worth through sharing what we've been given and following the simple laws of justice like not being greedy or extorting money from others.

And here's another important point from John as he addresses all those who come to him at the river full of expectation and questions from so many different walks of life. It's not really about who you are or what you do or even where you came from. It's about how you live your life in the very present moment and in every moment of every day. It's about separating the wheat from the chaff and finding the rich healthy kernels of truth God presents to you every day.

These are the kernels of wheat that will feed us daily and nourish our spirits that we may know the true and kind and forceful Word of our God. Bear the fruit of God that others may feast upon what God is providing and you will help them to know the ways to be fruit bearers themselves. In that way God's rich garden grows until it takes over the kin-dom and provides for every living creature.

"This life, our lives and communities and the world as we experience it, right here, is where that long "church-y" word, "Incarnation," happens," Rev. Huey writes. "Maybe it's a word that we don't use very often in our day-to-day lives, but we experience the Incarnation every moment of our lives in our relationship with Jesus, that "Word made flesh" that dwells among us. Or, as Eugene Peterson translates it, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14, The Message). Right here, in our midst, day in and day out, not just at Christmastime."

"What strikes me about this preacher [John]," she says, "is that his rhetoric combines grand anticipation and dramatic warning with an exhortation, a simple instruction, that is so down-to-earth, so everyday life, so...doable. He doesn't tell the people to get back to church, to overthrow the Romans, to transform the world in some sudden, drastic revolution. No, he tells them the same things that my parents told their nine children: "Share with one another. Be kind to one another. Don't fight. Be fair. Don't hoard, or lord it over one another."

Hear how simple that is? Obviously we can't reduce John's and, subsequently, Christ's message to just those things we learned in kindergarten, well, preschool really. But at the heart of the message during this time of year especially are these primary precepts that I have to wonder whether so many of us in this war weary world have either forgotten or never learned. How, I wonder, can anyone find justification in his heart or her head to kill those who have befriended them and have worked side by side with them day in and day out? What has to become so distorted as to lead to such a decision?

Are we a world becoming so disconnected from one another that we forget those simple truths that lead us to love one another and help create a world where we think first about how to care for each other instead of how to hurt each other and shut out the very ones who need our hearts and our help the most?

In his reflections on our lectionary texts for today, Dr. Bruce Epperly asserts that, "In this time of polarization and spiritual superficiality, we need spiritual soul food not fast food. We need to live affirmatively focusing on what unites us, what leads to fulfillment, and what is transformative, not what separates us and minimizes the stature of others. As scripture says time and time again, there is a deeper realism that takes us beyond the bottom line to experience abundance in a world of scarcity....John the Baptist unites realism with the possibility of transformation. His harsh words are a call to changed priorities and lifestyles. What is central to John's speech is not the harshness of his language – indeed, his inflammatory rhetoric – but the possibility that we can change our lives. We can let go of injustice, materialism, consumerism, and inequality to become citizens of a realm of freedom, love, and abundance...The good news," Dr. Epperly writes, "is that when we change our lives, we open to a wellspring of new possibilities for ourselves and our communities."

This is the hope of Christmas, this is what we prepare ourselves for during this season of Advent. What does it mean to repent as John calls to us across the waters? I think it means we are called to take stock of what's not been working in our lives and to acknowledge where we've been remiss in our relationship with God or paying too much heed to this world's wacked out wisdom instead of the Christ's ultimate wisdom.

"The real authority that changes the world is an inner authority that comes from people who have lost, let go, and are re-found on a new level," one of my spiritual mentors, Father Richard Rohr wrote in one of his recent essays. "These are the people who can heal, reconcile, understand, and change others."

This is what it means to have the mind of Christ. This is what it means to steep ourselves in the ways of wisdom presented to us in every season, and especially now as we prepare our hearts and direct our lives to show forth the rose blooming for us that can fill the world with love and, yes, even with joy. For when we turn our hearts towards Christ and work towards God's love filled kin-dom we heal the world and bring understanding to hearts and souls who have never known such love before. This is the joy that comes to the world when the Lord has come. This is the rejoicing Paul is exhorting to the Philippians as he tells them and thereby, all of us, to Let our gentleness be known to everyone.

One of my favorite spiritual artists and poets is a woman by the name of Jan Richardson. I find her work quite profound and it has often touched me deeply as I've read her poetry over the last few years and have even shared some of it with you. Jan often wrote about the deep love she had for her husband Gary with whom she often worked. When he died a couple of years ago she was, of course, overcome with grief and took a hiatus from her brilliant blog called "The Painted Door."

She returned to writing recently and her new blog is called "The Advent Door." I wanted to share a piece of what she wrote this week with you because it harkens so beautifully to what we've been exploring here ourselves this Advent in terms of preparing our hearts and opening ourselves to God's wisdom. Even during the darkest of times when it seems our hearts can only know the pain of grief, God brings joy into our hearts and to the world.

Jan is talking here about giving a reading for the first time in public since Gary's death. "During the reading," she writes, "I found myself speaking of one of the mysteries of grief: how, if we let it, grief can widen our hearts beyond anything we ever imagined. I talked about how I had recently commented to a friend that I never knew the human heart could hold so many things at one time. And not just at one time, but in one place. It is wondrously strange, how in the deepest, sharpest grief, joy can come and inhabit the very same space. One does not negate the other. But in the mysterious

physics of mourning, they abide together. Joy allows sorrow to have its say, but it does not let despair have the final word.”

“Advent,” she asserts, “is a season for remembering that the joy that makes its way toward us does not depend on mere happiness. Joy is made of stronger stuff than this. Joy is what comes when, in days that tempt us toward despair, we choose to celebrate—not in denial of the causes of despair, but in defiance. In hope. In delight. In gladness for the One who comes to sing for us and with us, ever renewing us in his love.”

“As on a Day of Festival”

by Jan Richardson (from Circle of Grace)

Call it
the waters of salvation
or the garlands of gladness.

Call it
the grave-clothes
falling away
or call it the loosing
of the chains.

Call it
what binds us together:
fierce but
fragile but
fierce.

Call it
he will rejoice over you
with gladness;
call it
he will renew you
in his love;
call it
he will exult over you
with loud singing
as on a day
of festival.

Call it
the thin, thin place
where the veil
gives way.

Or call it this:
the path we make
when we go deep
and deeper still
into the dark
and look behind to see
the way has been lit
by our rejoicing.

Amen.