

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, August 9, 2015)

Text: Ephesians 4: 25-5:2 (*The Message*)

What this adds up to, then, is this: no more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth. In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself.

Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry. Don't give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life.

Did you use to make ends meet by stealing? Well, no more! Get an honest job so that you can help others who can't work.

Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift.

Don't grieve God. Don't break [God's] heart. [God's] Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life, making you fit for God. Don't take such a gift for granted.

Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ forgave you.

Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with God and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **“Love Like That”**

Many centuries ago, somewhere between 580 and 662 BCE, Saint Maximos the Confessor wrote, "Blessed is the person who can love all people equally . . . always thinking good of everyone."

How high of a bar is that? How possible is that? How would we even think of being able to accomplish it? Perhaps our text for today has a clue for us: "Keep company with [God] and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that."

As our Seasons of the Spirit curriculum reflected this week, "Our text for today directs people of faith to live in ways that distinguish themselves from the rest of society. We might easily imagine that [the people of Ephesus] lived in a world of dishonesty, slander, frustration, and anger." Sounds pretty familiar, don't you think? And how, in this world we live in - beset by the same destructive qualities of our very human nature, do we rise above or work through the feelings that arise within us and love all people equally as Christ does, and try to think good of everyone?

As I mentioned last Sunday during our exploration of the early verses in this chapter 4 from Ephesians, it can sometimes feel too daunting and incredibly overwhelming to even attempt to live up to what might seem like such an impossible way of living. But the clue that comes through again and again in all of these verses is that only with God is any of it possible. Indeed, keeping company with God through prayer and meditation and communing regularly with others exploring their own spiritual paths is the daily prescription for making a life of love possible.

“Today's reading is a sketch (and a good one) of what it looks like... if we say yes to God,” our UCC theologian Kate Huey wrote this week. “If we claim our identity in Christ, if we know ourselves as members of a body, how can we be at war with one another, outwardly or underneath the surface and behind one another's back? If we truly belong to one another and to the Body of Christ, how can we hurt one another with angry words and actions?”

Being immersed in the Word of God and in the company of God's people, we have the opportunity to discover a way of living different from the way the world approaches life. Every day we see examples of the world's way of living – wars abounding, retribution resounding and hatred for self and others multiplying; lives overflowing with anger and doing others harm with the words, “I'm just looking out for number one” providing self-justification for a life filled with envy, greed and malice.

Christ calls us each day to imagine a different world, encouraging us to help build up the kingdom our God envisions where the lion lies down with the lamb and a little child leads the way to a future filled with gentleness, kindness and love.

You know the difference in your own life. Hatred begets hatred and lies beget more lies. But kindness begets peace and gentleness begets healing. Which way would you choose?

“If God has been generous and forgiving to us, how can we who belong to God be anything but generous and forgiving, anything but kind to one another?” Rev. Huey asks. “If we are truly given over to Christ, truly transformed, people will be able to see it. It will show. For example, it might be hard to “speak the truth in love,” but we will speak it, in love, nonetheless.”

One of the ways the writer of our Ephesians passage helps us today to live such a worthy life is to acknowledge the valid place our emotions and feelings hold in our lives as humans. We are not called to deny who we are or what we're feeling, but to examine the ways in which the expression of our emotions and feelings lead to building up or tearing down the fabric of our own lives and the community in which we live.

“Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry” as the Message interprets it for us today.

Indeed, “there are times when not being angry would be sin,” states Brian Peterson, a Professor of New Testament at Lutheran Theological Southern seminary in Columbia, South Carolina. “There should be anger against all the effects of injustice and oppression, both inside and outside the church. At other times, our anger is simply our last desperate attempt to defend ourselves against the new world that God is calling forth and against God's servants who are urging us into that new kingdom.”

I would propose that anger suppressed is as dangerous and harmful (and sometimes even more so) than anger expressed. I think it is in the way we deal with anger and find healthy ways for its expression that we are able to discover the reasons God blessed us with such a powerful emotion.

I have witnessed the destructive power of anger in my own life both from without and from within, and I wonder how it has manifested for you.

Being raised in a pacifistic household as part of a peace-loving faith that held the concept of non-resistance as primary to its creed, I absorbed the idea of how to deal with anger in a decidedly narrow way. For me, the idea of never going to bed angry translated into “never get up angry” and “don't be angry during the day either.” That pretty much delegated my angry feelings to my sleeping hours, which were often filled with nightmares of frustration and fear. I'm no psychologist mind you, but through my own work in therapy and other courses of study through the years, I have come to believe that anger is as natural an emotion to us as is love and that we must learn to embrace it and deal with it if we are to live the full and healthy lives God has called us to.

“...we need to examine more closely the ... times when anger may be quite justified, and how it might be connected to healing, on the part of victims of different forms of abuse,” Rev. Huey asserts. “Part of depression, it is said, can be anger suppressed, and healing is helped when the anger is expressed. And then there is anger as a stage of grieving, too. Anger, it seems, if it's a healthy human emotion, isn't always all bad. Do you think we can actually be too quick to forgive, too swift to excuse another's actions, especially if there has been no sorrow expressed, no repentance, and if there have been significant consequences of a person's actions? What if the person is still committing the offense - what then?”

It would seem that anger is as complicated an emotion, as is love if you think about it. For love can also be expressed in unhealthy ways and even as a form of control within a relationship. As much as love can be seen as life giving and nurturing so a co-dependent love or a controlling kind of love can be life destroying and soul wounding. Examining how we react in different situations and calling forth the wisdom of God when anger arises in our beings as it most surely will, we are given the gift of perspective and understanding and will continue to grow in all the aspects of this precious gift of life God has bestowed upon us.

The writer of Ephesians goes on throughout today's text to list some basic ethical ways to get along with each other in community that may seem elemental to us but always bear repeating no matter at what stage in life we find ourselves.

Don't steal, and watch the way you talk, remembering to see each word as a gift meant to build up and encourage. Don't break God's heart, but rather see God's Holy and gracious spirit as the greatest gift there is moving through you and making you fit for God – your highest self manifesting.

And, finally, be gentle with one another and forgive each other as quickly as God forgives us. You see, I don't think the quality of kindness can be overemphasized when thinking about how we live our lives. When we treat others in the same way we want to be treated – with kindness and gentleness and patience, we find those very fruits of the spirit being returned to us and filling us with such love that we treat others that way again and again and thereby create a cycle of kindness and peace that fills not only our lives but the lives of those we come into contact with whether strangers or family or friends. "The practice of kindness draws one away from 'hardness of heart' and into the 'life of God'," writes Richard Ward in his “Feasting on the Word” commentary.

Think about the ways you are encouraged to grow and flourish when you are shown kindness and the ways in which you shut down or feel defeated when you are treated rudely and maliciously. Treat others kindly whether you feel they deserve it or not and see what effect it has on them. Treat yourself with kindness and see how much more easily you are able to express kindness to others.

As a gesture of kindness and encouragement, let me leave you today with these words from a prayer called “Ground of Being” by Peter Colwell

God, ground of our being,
Life-giver and Love-maker;
we praise you for you give us
a law not written in stone or on paper,
but a law of love in our hearts.
May we trust that law of love;
may we not be afraid to hear its voice
and may we know of its liberating power.

God of our laughter and God of our loving,
God of our anger and God of our tears:
We look for you in the theatre
that we know as the church—
Whether it be Mad Scene or Love Scene
May your justice flow and
may your kingdom come.

Holy Spirit:
voice of Wisdom and energy of change.
May that energy flow through us;
giving us the pride of our proclamation,
and trust in the God who sets her people free.
Amen.