

**INSTALLATION OF DONALD SHENK  
SAN MARINO UCC  
November 1, 2015 \* 3:30 p.m.**

**Ephesians 3:5-13;19-21** (The Message – Eugene Peterson)

5-6 The mystery is that people who have never heard of God and those who have heard of him all their lives (what I've been calling outsiders and insiders) stand on the same ground before God. They get the same offer, same help, same promises in Christ Jesus. The Message is accessible and welcoming to everyone, across the board.

7-8 **This is my life work: helping people understand and respond to this Message. It came as a sheer gift to me, a real surprise,** God handling all the details. When it came to presenting the Message to people who had no background in God's way, I was the least qualified of any of the available Christians. God saw to it that I was equipped, but you can be sure that it had nothing to do with my natural abilities.

8-10 And **so here I am, preaching and writing about things that are way over my head,** the inexhaustible riches and generosity of Christ. My task is to bring out in the open and make plain what God, who created all this in the first place, has been doing in secret and behind the scenes all along. Through followers of Jesus like yourselves gathered in churches, this extraordinary plan of God is becoming known and talked about even among the angels!

11-13 All this is proceeding along lines planned all along by God and then executed in Christ Jesus. When we trust in him, we're free to say whatever needs to be said, bold to go wherever we need to go...

19 Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.

20-21 **God can do anything,** you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! **He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.**

*(Doxology)*

Glory to God in the church!

Glory to God in the Messiah, in Jesus!

**Glory down all the generations!**

Glory through all millennia! Oh, yes!

\*\*\*\*

## A Surprising Gift

Donald, you may not know this, but this occasion does not come as a surprise to any of us. This is SO NOT surprising that I have a hard time thinking about today as any sort of surprise at all. But I'll try. For you – anything.

Beyond the NOT surprise of your being installed as the minister of San Marino UCC – perhaps the biggest ACTUAL surprise for me is your choice of text for today. Ephesians is not my idea of a roadmap to Christian happiness. And it is a book that must be preached with the delicacy of a neurosurgeon if you want to stay in the U.C.C. So watch this, Grasshopper!

Ephesians was written at the end of the first century by someone purporting to be Paul but not Paul (probably a student of his). It originated as a letter intended for many churches – as indicated by the fact that there is no church location mentioned in verse 1 in the best of the original manuscripts. It was redirected to Ephesus later – probably because it was decided by church authorities that they needed it more than the other churches. This gives us all much to think about...

One reason scholars know that Paul didn't write this is the reassertion here of social and cultural patterns – reestablishing hierarchies, clarifying who is to be subject to whose will – and reducing, once again, the status of women. Women were not intended to preach on this text – so thank you Donald for the opportunity to defy our ancestors in faith. Now THAT is a gift!

And your other gift to me on this occasion was choosing The Message, an English translation that recognizes that, as a translation, it is also a ginormous interpretation. Peterson does a great job of spinning modern ideas out of tangled antique wool. In this interpretation the mystery in the message is somewhat demystified – giving us an actual chance of understanding said message in our own context. This is helpful. This is why these people want you as their minister. Good work, Grasshopper!

Scholars, having read the original in the original language, indicate that this letter is about Christian identity formation:

...because of their response to the gospel, the readers are experiencing a radical transformation of their personal and social identity. They are being re-socialized into G-d's purposes and family. Their new identity is in formation....

(p.2192 Harper Collins Study Bible)

I repeat, the readers of this epistle are “experiencing a radical transformation of their personal and social identity.” So as a text for your installation as a local church pastor – it is appropriate indeed. It is appropriate for all of us and all of our churches because the Christian journey is one of radical transformation.

Being a Christian goes against all of our natural creaturely instincts. We are made biologically to survive and compete for resources and stick with our own kinds and stand our ground against danger from all sources. But if we choose to join the Jesus Movement, we are choosing to risk life and limb on behalf of others – especially those unable to defend themselves. We are choosing to share our resources with people who are unlikely to return the favor. We are choosing to mingle with others who are seriously UNlike us – in looks and behaviors and beliefs and social status. We are choosing to place ourselves between danger and those who would be victimized – standing a different kind of ground than reason would dictate.

Calling oneself a Christian these days CREATES identity problems. There are all kinds of Christians out there – people purporting to be Jesus Followers but creating their own little personality cults – people claiming Christian values while using their power and privilege to marginalize the weak and withdraw any support the social contract might offer. There are people who “comb their hair with Christianity” – while dressing in the full regalia of hypocrisy and hierarchy. There are people who declare their humility while parading their hubris. There are people who would preach Ephesians as a tract on subjugation – rather than an invitation to mutual submission to the divine spark within each of us – regardless of social status or gender identity or age or whatever.

So to claim a Christian identity is to risk that the black and white thinking of immature minds will judge us to be THAT KIND of Christian – rather than something and someone entirely different.

So as a Church, as individuals, ministers all – if we are to claim to be Jesus Movement (aka Progressive) Christians rather than Purported Christians – we have difficult work to do and fast. We have social hierarchies to challenge and public halls of justice and government to occupy.

We have street people to be in conversation with and conspiracy theories to hear and affirm and debunk – and real conspiracies to tilt at like Don Quixote.

We have comrades who were born into bodies of the opposite gender who are seeking options and wholeness and a friend to lean on before and after identity surgery.

We have guns to convert into plowshares and jails to convert into schools and capitalism to convert into local gift economies.

We have a planet to rescue from ourselves and a climate to change back to its former balance and glory.

We have a message of radical inclusion and ridiculous hope to share with kids and the chronically ill and the elderly and the certifiably insane and anyone who has been treated like an expendable minority.

And we have a lot of explaining to do –

explaining how G-d got jammed into a tiny, judgmental, fearful box by many of our ancestors in faith –

and how we have an obligation to blow up the box with a secondary Big Bang – allowing new suns to spin out of cosmic clouds and new ideas about G-d to flourish –

images of a G-d that heals and creates and celebrates and holds onto us with fierce love –

even as we risk everything to become everything G-d hoped we might choose to become –

with some nudges and kicks along the way.

And look at you – Donald Grasshopper Shenk. Look at what has happened to your Identity Formation over the course of your lifetime.

To most of us in this room your role in life as pastor to others has been self-evident since birth – or at least since you could talk.

But you have gone through hell and back to come to terms with and claim this identity for yourself.

You battled the voices in your head – mine telling you to definitely go do something else – and others telling you to get a grip and go to seminary.

You fought mightily against this calling – caught in the strong currents of co-dependency and preacher's kid rebellion (we both resemble that remark) –

while moving inexorably toward this partnership with G-d through the polishing schools and ministries of music, theater, writing, and divine office management.

You have been the Assistant to the Minister by essential being The Other Minister.

You have chaired Ministerial Search Committees and chosen other candidates rather than be clear that you were the candidate everyone was looking for. You have been the stand-in, transitional interim, maybe just for now Minister by essentially being The Minister.

And this is why it is no surprise that we find ourselves here today.

As The Message explains in a voice I recognize as yours:

... The Message is accessible and welcoming to everyone, across the board. **This is my life work: helping people understand and respond to this Message. It came as a sheer gift to me, a real surprise...** [clarifying that this was a surprise to YOU, not to us.] I was the least qualified of any of the available Christians. God saw to it that I was equipped, but you can be sure that it had nothing to do with my natural abilities. [See, there you go again with the co-dependent humility thing!]

And **so here I am, preaching and writing about things that are way over my head...** [aren't we all!]. My task is to bring out in the open and make plain what God, who created all this in the first place, has been doing in secret and behind the scenes all along. [Definitely way over our heads.]

And then your voice transitions into a message about the Love of Christ that you preach in every sermon and embody in every action:

Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.

**God can do anything...G-d does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, G-d's Spirit deeply and gently within us.**

Okay – so there was a little bit of pushing around for you. But by pushing back, you got stronger and gained clarity. And you were able to accept (surprise, surprise) that being a Preacher's Kid may have been a gift after all.

**Glory down all the generations!**

I will bring this tirade to a close with words from Ephesians 1:8ff (NRSV):

8...With all wisdom and insight 9 [G-d] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, 10 **as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth...**

15 I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason 16 **I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.** 17 I pray that the G-d of...Jesus Christ, the Father [and Mother] of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know [G-d], 18 **so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the HOPE to which he has called you...**

Amen. And thanks be to G-d for all gifts –  
Surprising and not so surprising  
And especially, today, the gift of you.