

As we gather together there is some technical information that most of you already know, but just in case someone doesn't:

The service will be in voice and text.

There is a copy of the service in the red book by the door to the sanctuary. You'll want to grab one of those if you need the YouTube links or want the lyrics for today's worship music.

Speaking of which, worship music will be in the media player.

Frequently in my worship service, folk end up dancing right here in the aisles or in the back of the sanctuary, so if the mood strikes you—I say go for it!

GATHERING:

In today's sermon I reference the recent backlash against Ye (Kanye West) which is explained in this video:

<https://youtu.be/pIJngssxU1U>, "Ye's antisemitic comments spark outrage, fear" ~ABC News

WELCOME

Welcome to First United Church of Christ and Conference Center, Second Life.

We have official standing with the Eastern Association of the Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ as a Real Life church located in Second Life.

And I still think that's pretty cool, because I have sat in South Central Pennsylvania—I have sat in Northern Maine—

and I am currently sitting in Central Connecticut—

and I still think it's pretty cool that we can partner with my brothers and sisters and non-binary siblings all across the country and all of you wherever you are!

Speaking of wherever you are:

"No matter who you are,
or where you are on life's journey,
you are welcome here."

Most churches have a time of offering.

Making an offering, sharing what you can in God's name, is a spiritual practice.

You can find out more about how you can engage in that practice below:

That offering can be one of prayer or of presence,

of work on behalf of the church doing things like reading scripture or serving on the board of directors,

of helping with any of the many things that are needed for the church to function, and/or, that offering can be one of money.

As a UCC church, we support the work of the wider church both with prayer and with donations.

And it's true that we don't have a physical building, but there are monetary costs for this ministry to function.

So if you would like to make an offering by participating in leading worship or social events,

or if you would like to become a member of this church,
let any clergy or staff member know.

If you would like to make a financial offering to support this ministry there is a donation bowl by the door to the sanctuary,

or if you prefer you can make a donation in RL currency on our website:

www.firstuccsl.org

And since we are a 501(c)(3) public charity, monetary donations are tax deductible in the U.S.

We thank you for the blessing of your presence and your offering of support.

SCRIPTURE

Galatians 5:22-23

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

There is no law against such things.

Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector.

The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus,

“God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”

But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’

John 15:18-19

‘If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.

If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own.

Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you.

SERMON "The Phoenix Affirmations (Affirmation 8)"

This is the eighth sermon in a series about what it means when I say that I am a Progressive Christian, and today’s sermon is about one piece of what it means to be a Progressive Christian as it is described in the Phoenix Affirmations.

The Phoenix Affirmations are twelve principles “...originally penned by a group of clergy and laypeople from Phoenix, Arizona...”

But it didn’t stop there:

“Word spread, and soon pastors, theologians, and biblical scholars from every mainline denomination, with degrees from seminaries and divinity schools... added input.

They were joined by laypeople and progressive Christian leaders from around the country.” (Elnes)

The first four affirmations were about how Progressive Christians love God.

The next four affirmations are about how we love our neighbor, including this one:

Affirmation 8

[Loving our Neighbor includes] Walking humbly with God, acknowledging our own shortcomings while honestly seeking to understand and call forth the best in others, including those who consider us their enemies;

Luke 18:9-14; Luke 6:27-29; Galatians 5:22-23; John 15:18-19

As Christians, we recognize that we are misfits both with respect to God's Realm and the world.

We are misfits with respect to God's Realm in that we rarely live up to the principles and ideals we espouse.

We are misfits with respect to the world in that the ideals for which we strive frequently do not conform to the ways of the world.

We affirm that the Path of Jesus is found where Christ's followers love those who consider them their enemies as much as they love themselves, striving humbly to embody the "fruits of the Spirit":

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

We confess that we have moved away from this Path when we have promoted a notion that people of faith are morally or ethically superior to those without faith.

Further, we have moved away when we have supported any cause, no matter how just or righteous, without reflecting the "fruits of the Spirit" toward all.

This Affirmation stands at the heart of who I am as a moral and ethical Christian—many of you have heard me preach over these concepts many times over the years.

In point of fact, you have heard me preach with real anger against actions and rhetoric that dehumanize people.

And it is no secret that when I think of "those who consider me their enemy," my first thought is of Tucker Carlson, the politicians who are intent on enshrining his vitriolic rhetoric into law, and—ultimately—the voters who support them.

The Rev. Eric Elnes begins his commentary on this Affirmation this way:

"Have you ever noticed that Christians who tend to be most insistent about the need for tolerance, unconditional love, and open-mindedness are often some of the most close-minded, intolerant, and unloving people?"

They are equaled in vitriol and prejudice only by Christians who stand against tolerance as a "concession to evil," who preach salvation only for the "righteous" (read "self-righteous"), and believe there is no need to be open-minded when one is right to begin with."

I don't know about you, but I felt humbled by that opening. I do not stand against tolerance, I do not preach salvation only for the righteous, and I believe that we do need to be open-minded—

But that's not where he started.

He started with "Have you ever noticed that Christians who tend to be most insistent about the need for tolerance, unconditional love, and open-mindedness are often some of the most close-minded, intolerant, and unloving people?"

Holy crap! Is that me?

Am I one of those people?

He goes on:

"How do people supposedly following the same teachings become so polarized?"

As different as they are, the extreme Right and Left within Christianity frequently seem quite similar.

Both sides may believe they are standing up for Jesus or for love and justice, but on a deeper level, they are united by a fear and loathing of their enemies that often trumps the good they believe they represent."

That's fair. I admit it.

I confess that I am scared.

The things that Mr. Carlson and his friends at Fox News say about people like me are terrifying—especially when I hear them repeated not only by lawmakers but also by their voting base.

It's really hard not be defensive when you're under attack.

Elnes says it this way, "We stumble when we realize that if we strongly commit to loving our neighbor while our neighbor is actively working against our own or others' well-being, we or those we love are not going to be long for this world."

And then he goes on to argue that this teaching from Jesus is still correct—that it is even more important today than it was in the time and place that Jesus taught: "...it does not take much more than a little fertilizer, a few handguns, or control of an airplane cockpit to unleash unspeakable evil.

Indeed, since the beginning of human history, it has never been easier than it is now to convert personal hatred into mass destruction.

Can we assume that our enemies will learn to love us if we do not find ways to extend love to them?

...Though loving our neighbor puts us at distinct risk if our neighbor does not love us back, is it really any less risky not to love our neighbor?"

I don't know if any of you are into comedy, but there's something of what we're trying to get at here that comedians in my beloved homeland have been trying to get at for a long time.

I could talk about Gilbert Gottfried (God rest his soul), or Sarah Silverman, or Kevin Hart, or Gabriel Iglesias, or—

Jeepers, there's practically a book in this, huh?

Let me focus down—most recently I have seen Jon Stewart and Dave Chapelle speak most eloquently about it.

(You can find Stewart talking about it here: https://youtu.be/6V_sEqfIL9Q and Chapelle here: https://youtu.be/_m-g00HSCYk)

And they were both speaking to the public response Ye's (Kanye West) recent antisemitic comments.

Both touched on the idea that Free Speech is a very important Democratic ideal—and a Constitutionally protected Right in the United States—but that Free Speech does not mean "without consequence."

On the other hand, public outcry can and frequently does reach such a fevered pitch that it shuts down dialogue.

John Stewart says, "I think reflectively naming things as antisemitism is as reductive as some of the things they might be saying. It immediately shuts down a conversation."

Dave Chapelle simply says, "It shouldn't be this scary to talk about anything." And they're right.

If I can borrow a concept from improve, "Yes, and..." there is a balance to be had. Rev. Elnes puts it this way:

"No matter how right or righteous we may believe our cause to be, we can destroy ourselves just as easily as we can save ourselves, particularly when we encounter dangerous intersections in life.

If we do not learn to see the humanity in our neighbors even as we struggle with them over issues of justice and righteousness, we will surely lose the very things we hold most dear.

If we cannot perceive that at base we are more the same than different, we will not gain what we seek most urgently."

Which is not to say that any of this is easy. It's not. It's really, really hard. Especially if you are scared and upset. And especially if the person "across the aisle" from you is also scared and upset. In fact, I think we have to realize that everyone involved in such conversations are going to be having some big feelings—that's why the image of everyone holding hands in a circle and singing "Kumbaya" has become such a joke in our culture; It's an unreasonable expectation for people of such polarized ideologies to get to the point of holding hands and singing sweet songs together. But as good Christians, we need to be having these conversations. And here's the secret: the point of the conversation is not to "convert" the other person. Rather, it is to listen: "Your goal is to listen deeply enough that you can start to see how, if you believed all the same things, you could hold the same point of view. It could well be that after seeing things the way the other person does, you will see the error of your own ways. In any case, it is unlikely that you will be able to offer your point of view in the way it needs to be expressed until you have listened intently to the other person. If you do this well, the other person will likely walk away from the encounter more open to your point of view than when you started. Not convinced, perhaps, but more open than before." (Elnes) And that is a very good start. What do you say? Amen?

PRAYER PREPARATION:

This song pretty accurately depicts the struggle that we've been talking about today: How do we continue to affirm the humanity of our neighbor, even as we struggle with them concerning issues of justice.

https://youtu.be/ifrcP_ALY0Q, "Become You" ~Indigo Girls

I heard you sing a rebel song
Sung it loud and all alone
We can't afford the things you save
We can't afford the warranty
Well I see you walking in the glare
Down the county road we share
Our southern blood my heresy
Damn that ol' confederacy
It took a, long time to
Become the thing, I am to you
And you won't, tear it apart
Without a fight, without a heart
I'm sorry for what you've learned
When you feel the tables turn
To run so hard in your race
Now you found who set the pace
The landed aristocracy
Exploiting all your enmity
All your daddies fought in vain
Leave you with the mark of Cain
It took a, long time to

Become the thing, I am to you
And you won't, tear it apart
Without a fight, without a heart
It took a, long time to
Become you, become you
The center holds so they say
(It never held too well for me)
It never held too well for me
(The center holds so they say)
I won't stop short for common ground
(That vilifies the trodden down)
That vilifies the trodden down
(I won't stop)
The center held the bonded slave
For the sake of industry
The center held the bloody hand
Of the executioner man
It took a, long time to
Become the thing, I am to you
And you won't, tear it apart
Without a fight, without a heart
It took a
Long time to
Become you
Become you
It took a
Long time to
Become you
Become you

We have come to our time in worship that I really do believe is the core of what we do here together, and that is where we uplift our joys and concerns with one another in prayer.

And so I would like to invite you to enter this time of prayer with a sense of reverence.

We're about to enter into a conversation with God, and that shouldn't be done lightly,

but rather "... with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,

making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"
(Ephesians 4:2-3)

Please type your prayers into chat, or if you need to use voice simply emote raising your hand so everybody can have a voice.

And as we pray together, you may wish to respond to others with words like, "God hear our prayer," or with any other words the Spirit leads to you use.

COMMUNITY PRAYER

If there was a prayer inside of you that you couldn't quite get out, it's ok.

Because the Psalmist tells us that God knows what we are going to say before the words can even form on our tongues.

And so we know.

We _ know _ that God has heard our prayers. Those spoken out loud, those typed into SL chat, and those spoken only in the silence of our hearts.

And that we pray them in the name of the Son, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

LISTEN!

We have done a lot of talking. Let us take a moment of silence to listen to what God might be saying.

Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening...

PASTORAL PRAYER

"Stay here, and keep watch with me." O Lord, You asked Your disciples long ago to remain awake and they could not.

We know that we have been caught in the ways of this world and not simply in worldly measures of success, but the desire to make a better future for our children, to make things easier for our loved ones.

Sometimes we sacrifice our ideals for a better world for others to focus on the here and now.

Sometimes that is all we can do for the time being.

Help us, O God, to wake up, and recognize where You are calling us in this world.

Help us to wake up and be alert, when the world drags us down.

Help us not to daydream for a better world but to build it, to live into it, for the sake of the most vulnerable among us.

We pray all things in Christ, who calls us to wake up.

Amen. (Rev-o-lution Resources by Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell

<http://rev-o-lution.org>, (c) 2021. Used by permission.)

BENEDICTION:

And now it really is just this simple:

God loves you.

So, don't forget to love each other.

Go with God.

Go in Peace.

And Amen!

CLOSING:

So, it is officially Advent—the liturgical season of the Church year where we prepare for the holy day of Christmas.

I know that you've been hearing Christmas music since the middle of October, and I do want to save the Christmas carols for the liturgical Christmas season, which spans the time from Christmas Day to Epiphany—

That would be 12 days total, of course!

Many of the songs intended for advent are haunting and beautiful, but today's sermon felt so serious to me that I wanted to end on a more joyous note!

So. We're not there yet. But we have joy to look forward to—

After all...

Christmas is Coming.

<https://youtu.be/-TW7NiFZlhI>, "Christmas is Coming" ~Miss Piggy, Scooter, Gonzo, and Robin

Scooter? (Yes Ma'am)
Gonzo? (Check)
Robin? (Yes, Miss Piggy)
This is what we're going to sing
Christmas is coming, the goose is getting fat (nice)
Please do put a penny in the old man's hat
If you haven't got a penny, a ha-penny will do
If you haven't got a ha-penny then God bless you (good)
Now Scooter, you come in after my first line
And you two boys follow
Christmas is coming, the goose is getting fat
Please do put a penny in the old man's hat
If you haven't got a penny, a ha-penny will do
If you haven't got a ha-penny than God bless you
Christmas is coming, the goose is getting fat
Please do put a penny in the old man's hat
If you haven't got a penny, a ha-penny will do
If you haven't got a ha-penny than God bless you
Christmas is coming, the goose is getting fat
Please do put a penny in the old man's hat
If you haven't got a penny, a ha-penny will do
If you haven't got a ha-penny than God bless you
If you haven't got a ha-penny-
Uh, Miss Piggy? We're finished
Oh, I knew that

end