

WELCOME

Thank you for coming!

We're so glad you've chosen to worship with us today

This is a sacred time, as we gather in community to open our hearts to God.

I invite you to light a candle,

As our candles are lit here in our sanctuary,

to remind us of God's presence with us,

and to set aside this as a time of worship for you.

Our service will be in voice and text.

Music will be on the media viewer, so be sure that you have media turned on. .

There will be a link in Nearby Chat if you want to view the video in your own browser.

I'm going to start our Gathering Music and run the rest of the announcements underneath.

GATHERING MUSIC

"One Voice" - The Waillin' Jennys

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bc6HloRYZGc>

First United Church of Christ and Conference Center is
a church with full real life standing in the Eastern Association;
Southern California Nevada Conference of the
United Church of Christ (UCC).

And anyone you see with a "Minister" tag is an ordained UCC minister in real life.

As we like to say, it's good to be real in Second Life!

And as a UCC church, we'd like you to know that

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

If you would like a bulletin for today's service you can find it in the red binder
in the back.

If there are any other announcements about the life of the church, please type them
in Nearby Chat at this time.

Ash Wednesday service

Wednesday, Feb. 22nd, at 5pm SLT (in lieu of Psalter)

Pastor Jamie's Vespers service has moved to Fridays at 4pm SLT

If we weren't here last Sunday, or haven't filled out our survey yet, you can get
one from the red binder with the bulletins
and return it to me or any staff member when you can
thanks!

SHARING OUR GIFTS

Most churches have a time of offering.

Making an offering,

sharing what you can in God's name,

is a spiritual practice.

If you would like to make an financial offering to support this ministry

there is a donation bowl by the door to the sanctuary,

or you can go to our website:

firstuccsl.org

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

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

Our lectionary reading for today comes from Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth.

Throughout this letter, Paul addresses elitist attitudes and divisive behavior by some in the church,
as they lined up behind different teachers –
some behind Paul, and some behind another teacher who came after Paul named Apollos.

If we were to base our picture of Apollos only on this letter, we wouldn't know much.

But Apollos also shows up in the Book of Acts,
where we learn that he was Jewish from the metropolis of Alexander,
which was a center of Jewish wisdom traditions.

He was eloquent, well grounded in Hebrew scripture, and an enthusiastic evangelist.
In this era of email and texting and sound bites,
where we condense communication down to even less than complete words, the letters from the Apostle Paul and others included in the New Testament can be somewhat daunting.

It's hard to imagine the people of the Corinthian church, gathered around,
listening to someone read the whole letter that is First Corinthians.
Especially since the letters were written to a culture very different from ours,
with different norms and expectations, and address specific questions and problems of the people of that day.

Sometimes Paul's language is very intellectual and abstract –
perhaps intended for the more educated or theologically adept of the community.
But other times, like in the passage for today, he gets very concrete –
using metaphors and images to give those reading and hearing his letter something tangible to hold onto –
so they will understand his teaching.

Paul has to do it all with words – it's a letter after all –
and yet his images are very graphic and visual.

I suspect that if he were preaching today Paul would be very into sermon props and PowerPoint slides.

He wants to be sure everyone understands, so he goes with the simple and the graphic.

Let us listen to God speaking to us through the words of First Corinthians, chapter 3, verses one through nine.

1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-9 (NIV)

Brothers and sisters,

I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly–

mere infants in Christ.

I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it.

Indeed, you are still not ready.

You are still worldly.

For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly?

Are you not acting like mere humans?
For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos,"
are you not mere human beings?
What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul?
Only servants, through whom you came to believe—
as the Lord has assigned to each his task.
I planted the seed, Apollos watered it,
but God has been making it grow.
So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything,
but only God, who makes things grow.
The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose,
and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor.
For we are co-workers in God's service;
you are God's field, God's building

The Word of God for the People of God.
Thanks be to God!

"God in the World"

Let us pray ...
This is one of my favorite passages from Paul's letters,
And not just because of his graphic images.
I mean,
How many preachers today would have the nerve to get up
and call out the people in their congregation for acting like big "babies"?
He must have been pretty miffed.
But then he calms down and switches metaphors.
Instead of the nursery room, we're in the field or the vegetable garden.
Paul planted the seeds in that garden.
Apollos watered it.
"but God has been making it grow."
This is a beautiful image of God at work in the world.
"God has been making it grow."
Oh, scientists can now explain how it happens – how plants grow
You can read all about cell division, and genetics, and photosynthesis.
How roots take up nutrients in the soil, and how fungal networks connect plants
underground to help that process.
And unless you are a plant biologist,
Much of that work happens out of our sight,
In the dark under the soil,
At a small scale too small for human eyes.
But God has been making it grow, all the time,
even when we couldn't see it.
And the fact that it happens at all,
that a small seed can grow into a big, green, leafy plant
that is miraculous and mysterious.
If you garden or tend house plants or culinary herbs on your window sill,
Or look outside in the Spring and notice daffodils popping up through the soil
or new green leaves sprouting on barren branches,

You touch that miracle, that mystery.
But Paul also talks about another way God works in the world,
through God's servants, God's co-workers,
Those planting, those watering, those pruning and tending.
We often quote Teresa of Avila:
"Christ has no body now but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which [Christ] looks compassion on this world.
Yours are the feet with which [Christ] walks to do good.
Yours are the hands through which [Christ] blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes,
You are [Christ's] body.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours."
So Paul, Apollos, you, me – God works through us in the world.
And in my theology, I would say that the inspiration that leads us to plant in the
first place,
The choice of what seed to plant where and when,
The patience to wait for it to sprout and fruit in its season,
To not give up on it,
The perseverance to keep watering and tending it appropriately,
Not neglecting it so it withers or overwatering it so the roots rot,
The knowledge of when the fruit is ripe enough to harvest,
Those are gifts of the Holy Spirit.
And, says Paul, those who have those different gifts,
Those who plant and those who water,
Use those gifts to work together for "one purpose."
God's purpose.
In the case of this letter from Paul,
He's talking about God's purpose for the church at Corinth.
And all these spiritual gifts are accessed through the spiritual practice of
discernment.
You may remember me talking before about the quintessential discernment question,
"What is mine to do?"
But discernment isn't just for individuals, it's for communities.
Which is the process we embarked on last Sunday for God's church gathered here at
First UCC Second Life.
If you weren't here last Sunday,
There is a notecard called "Survey" in the red binder with the bulletins.
We would appreciate it if you would take one, consider the questions on it,
And return it by sharing it back to me or any staff member when you can.
It's an initial survey, taking the pulse of our church, if you will,
To see where we are going as we enter this discernment process.
The last question, in particular, gets to what I want to talk about today:
"What does God long for from First UCC SL?"
Another way of saying "what is God's purpose for First UCC SL?"
Some folks remarked how hard that questions is.
Someone else asked me how we could possibly know what God longs for.
At other times I've been asked what "discernment" means.
Because the Church, capital "C", has largely forgotten our centuries' old tradition
of discernment as a spiritual practice.

The word has been co-opted in the secular culture to mean “decision-making,”
But they are not the same.
Decision-making is grounded in logical thinking and debate.
When we look at a question with that rational mindset,
We look at pros and cons, consider the available data,
Use an orderly process of debate,
Nowadays typically Roberts Rules of Order.
People advocate for or against a side,
And then we take a vote,
Which, if it is a split vote, results in winners and losers.
Discernment is different,
Because the goal isn’t just simple group agreement,
It’s tapping into the will and movement of the Spirit.
It’s about listening deep inside for God’s guidance.
And it is usually best done in stillness,
As we quiet our inner selves to listen.
Which is why I asked you take some centering breaths before considering that last question.
Ruth Haley Barton defines discernment as “an ever-increasing capacity to ‘see’ the work of God in the midst of the human situation,
So that we can align ourselves with whatever God is doing.”
To throw yet another metaphor into the mix,
It’s seeing which way God’s train is moving, so we can hitch ourselves to it.
And when we discern as a community,
We move beyond our own personal preferences to see what God is doing with the community as a whole.
Both decision-making and discernment are good processes for church governance in different contexts.
Though it may take discernment to determine which process is appropriate at a given time.
To use an example from a brick and mortar church context,
If you need to decide which light bulbs to buy,
Is decision-making or discernment more appropriate?
Well, if the lights are out and no one can see, you just buy the first available that work in those fixtures.
But if the question is should we use LED lights because they are better for the environment, even though they are much more expensive and use more church resources?
Well, discernment may be the way to go.
Which choice is more in line with where the Spirit is leading that church to live in the world?
If the church has done the work to name where God is leading, then that will be simple.
If not, well, it may take longer.
I do know a church that spent an entire 4-hour council meeting on which light bulbs to buy.
There the real issue was some of the council were using a rational decision-making approach and some were using a more discerning approach.
So it helps to know the difference.

Discernment is a practice with deep roots in the Judeo-Christian scripture and

tradition,

Even though the word itself doesn't often appear in the Bible.

But consider, for example, the story in Acts 15,

Where the early church is debating whether to require Gentile followers of Jesus to be circumcised and follow Jewish dietary laws.

Paul and Barnabas bring this question to the church council,

Who pray and "consider this matter" until they can say with one unified voice:

"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" to eliminate the burden of Jewish law on Gentile converts,

Well, mostly.

Together the members of the early church discerned the leading of the Holy Spirit in that matter.

The thing is,

Discernment as a spiritual practice confronts us directly with our own assumptions

About how God works in the world,

And our experience of God.

The Apostle Paul addresses this in the second chapter of First Corinthians,

The chapter right before today's reading.

Discernment as a practice doesn't make much sense to those who believe God set the world in motion

then stepped back to watch humans figure things out on their own.

That God isn't involved in our world or in our decisions,

That "who can know the mind of God"?

to quote a familiar phrase from a different translation of that second chapter of Corinthians,

usually taken out of context.

Well, Paul goes on to say, who can? We can.

We have access to God's thoughts through the Spirit,

Or by, in Paul's words "putting on the mind of Christ."

I also meet people all the time who believe God is active in the world,

But don't trust themselves to recognize the promptings of the Spirit.

They second guess what they know in their hearts.

Discernment, listening for the Spirit speaking in us,

It takes practice.

And you can start by settling in, letting yourself still, and remembering.

So I invite you to take a moment and reflect on what you believe about how God works in the world,

And what you have seen or experienced.

Have you ever felt led by God to take some action?

To make some change in your life?

We are God's field, says Paul.

What have you felt stirring in you, deep in the ground?

What do you feel now?

We'll pause for a moment to be still.

[time of quiet reflection - about a minute]

Can you think of a time that you would name as God at work in the world?

Some time when seeds were planted.

Someone who watered and tended what was growing.

[time of quiet reflection]

And as you think of those, as you remember,

Pay attention to how it feels.
Notice what is rising inside you, what emotion, what feeling in your body.
[time of quiet reflection]
God is at work in the world and in us.
As individuals and as a community.
How do we align ourselves with God?
What seeds need to be planted in and by First UCC SL?
What needs to be watered, tended?
What is growing here?
What does God long for from First UCC SL?
We can know, through the Spirit,
Listening, discerning together.
Who are you to know the mind of God?
You are God's co-worker.
Christ's eyes, and hands and feet.
Filled with the Spirit.
Connected to mystery.
Discernment continues,
We'll talk again.
Amen.

"It's in Every One of Us" - David Pomeranz
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qiGXyYOR3o>

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

And now, if you have a prayer of joy or concern that you wish to lift to God,
and have supported by the energy of those gathered here, type it in Nearby Chat at
this time.
As people share their prayers in text
please read them prayerfully
and hold this space as sacred and safe
to open our hearts to God.
Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers.

Lord hear our prayers.
Those voiced here today.
Those spoken only in the depths of our hearts.
Those for which we have no words.
We lift them all to you, O Lord,
with faith in your boundless love and grace.
And we pray together the words Jesus taught us, saying
Our Father who art in heaven
hallowed be thy name
thy kin-dom come
thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil

for thine is the kin-dom and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Our worship is over
our ministry to the world is just beginning.
Go in peace,
come again in hope.
Amen.

“Planting Seeds” – Empty Hands Music (Nimo Patel & Daniel Nahmod)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AmqYcWjBmc>

GO IN PEACE