

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:

Today's sermon is, in part, about tradition.

I don't know about you, but I can't hear that word without having this song begin to run through my head:

<https://youtu.be/kDtabTufxao>, "Tradition" ~from Fiddler on the Roof

Tradition, tradition! Tradition!

Tradition, tradition! Tradition!

Who, day and night, must scramble for a living,

Feed a wife and children, say his daily prayers?

And who has the right, as master of the house,

To have the final word at home?

The Papa, the Papa! Tradition.

The Papa, the Papa! Tradition.

Who must know the way to make a proper home,

A quiet home, a kosher home?

Who must raise the family and run the home,

So Papa's free to read the holy books?

The Mama, the Mama! Tradition!

The Mama, the Mama! Tradition!

At three, I started Hebrew school. At ten, I learned a trade.

I hear they've picked a bride for me. I hope she's pretty.

The son, the son! Tradition!

The son, the son! Tradition!

And who does Mama teach to mend and tend and fix,

Preparing me to marry whoever Papa picks?

The daughter, the daughter! Tradition!

The daughter, the daughter! Tradition!

Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match.

Find me a find, catch me a catch.

Matchmaker, matchmaker, look through your book

And make me a perfect match.

Matchmaker, matchmaker, I'll bring the veil.

You bring the groom, slender and pale.

Bring me a ring, for I'm longing to be

The envy of all I see.

For Papa, make him a scholar.

For Mama, make him rich as a king.

For me, well, I wouldn't holler

If her were as handsome as anything.

Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match.

Find me a find, catch me a catch.
Night after night, in the dark, I'm alone.
So, find me a match of my own.
Hodel, oh Hodel, have I made a match for you.
He's handsome! He's young! All right, he's 62.
But he's a nice man, a good catch. True? True!
I promise you'll be happy. And even if you're not,
There's more to life than that. Don't ask me what!
Chava! I've found him! Will you be a lucky bride!
He's handsome. He's tall! That is, from side to side.
But he's a nice man, a good catch, Right? Right!
You've heard he has a temper. He'll beat you every night.
But only when he's sober- so you're all right!
Did you think you'd get a prince?
Well I do the best I can.
With no dowry, no money, no family background,
Be glad you got a man!
Matchmaker, matchmaker, you know that I'm
Still very young. Please, take your time.
Up to this minute, I've misunderstood
That I could get stuck for good.
Dear Yenta, see that he's gentle.
Remember, you were also a bride.
It's not that I'm sentimental.
It's just that I'm terrified!
Matchmaker, matchmaker, plan me no plans.
I'm in no rush. maybe I've learned
Playing with matches a girl can get burned.
So bring me no ring, groom me no groom,
Find me no find, catch me no catch.
Unless he's a matchless match!

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

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.
He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones
to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written,

"One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." '

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the
temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is
written,

"He will command his angels concerning you",
and "On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." '

Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."
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Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of
the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if
you will fall down and worship me.'

Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written,
"Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him." '

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

SERMON "On The Other Hand..."

I chose this lesson for worship today because it is associated with Lent, which
begins on Ash Wednesday.

This year, Ash Wednesday is on February 22nd.

Which means that this Tuesday, the 21st, is Fat Tuesday. And in French, Fat Tuesday translates to Mardi Gras!

Which means—maybe?—that today is Fat Friday?

I don't know about that. In fact, as I was preparing for this sermon I realized that there's an awful lot that I don't know about Mardi Gras.

Here's what I did know:

The most important, most joyous, most triumphant holiday in the Christian year is Easter.

Yes, Christmas is fun, but in many ways it's just a glorified birthday.

The all-important, world-changing, forces-of-Good saving the universe event is all wrapped up in the Resurrection of Jesus.

It's so important that Christian tradition has a whole season dedicated to preparing for it: Lent.

Lent always reminds me of the beginning of A Christmas Carol.

Do you know what the very first line is? It's a brilliant first line!

"Marley was dead to begin with."

Later on, Dickens makes clear why Marley's death is important,

"There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate."

That's what Lent is like.

It is dark and introspective and borderline self-deprecating—but there's a reason for it.

We need to remind ourselves about the state of the world—especially the state of ourselves!—in order for the miracle of Easter to be—well—miraculous!

Part of the tradition of Lent revolves around how Jesus was introspective, as is shown in today's lesson.

That's why fasting is a Lenten tradition. And that's why Lent is 40 days long.

For those of you who love numbers, you might notice that there are more than 40 days between the beginning of Lent and Easter—that's because when we count out the 40 days, we do not count Sundays.

Sundays are always celebrating the Resurrection, so they are considered to be outside of the season of Lent!

The Mardi Gras tradition—as I understood it—grew out of the fact that Christians traditionally fast for over a month.

The idea is that if you're going to refrain from animal products—meat, butter, cheese, lard, etc.—you're going to have to use up all those things before Lent starts, or they'll go bad!

I guess we'll just have to make a bunch of really delicious foods and really pig out!

Maybe we'll invite all our friends and family to help us eat all of that delicious food, too, don't you think?

In fact... This is a fantastic excuse for a party!

Here's the thing, though. I grew up in Southeastern Connecticut. The closest thing I had to Mardi Gras growing up was a Pancake Dinner at the Congregational (UCC) Church!

So I called up a friend who grew up in Slidell, Louisiana—about 33 miles from New Orleans—and asked her to tell me all about it.

And she said that she had truly mixed feelings about it:

She had some fond childhood memories of Mardi Gras parades.

And she had some truly disappointing adult memories of drunken people behaving badly.

And I began to ponder this idea of tradition, and wondering how we get from the joy of eating with friends and family to something more akin to a drunken frat party? In fact, the more we talked, the more we realized that we didn't know as much as we thought we knew about where these traditions came from!

For example—one of the things that we most closely associate with the spectacle of Mardi Gras is folk throwing beads or other objects from parade floats.

In fact, my friend taught me that such objects are simply called “throws!”

But why? Where did that tradition come from?

So I did some digging and one article said this:

“The tradition of “throwing” trinkets and treats to a mass of revelers predates Carnival itself.

The ancient Romans distributed whips made of goat hide—and playful whippings—

to the frolicking crowds at the conclusion of Lupercalia, the early forerunner to the Carnival celebration we know today.

These annual rites of purification and fertility were associated with the vernal equinox that marked the return of the sun.

In medieval France, the fête de la quémante saw groups of peasants emerging from the dark winter, donning miters and pointed hats to mock the wealthy classes, and begging and dancing for items to eat.

That tradition continues today with the Cajun courir de Mardi Gras.” (See the link at the end of the bulletin for the article in question.)

I don't know about you, but that rings true with me.

It reminds me very much of what little we know about the origins of All Hallows' Eve—Halloween. Not to mention several aspects of the Christmas traditions!

Christianity has a troubling history of intentional syncretism—incorporating Pagan traditions into Christian ones as part of the process of “converting the natives.”

I'm saddened by this because in all honesty, “rites of purification and fertility” sound much more meaningful than drunk women exposing their breasts in return for plastic beads.

All in the name of tradition.

I don't know about you, but I'm horrified and fascinated tradition.

On the one hand, traditions are good!

They can create meaning and bond people together and gift folk with positive experiences and the memories of those experiences can be—truly powerful and beautiful things.

In the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye talks about how truly dangerous it can be to live as Jewish person in a world fraught with antisemitism by using the titular metaphor:

“...in our little village of Anatevka, you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck. It isn't easy.

You may ask, why do we stay up there if it's so dangerous?

We stay because Anatevka is our home...”

And how do they maintain their balance? Tevya tells us in one word:

Tradition.

On the other hand, sometimes the world changes to the point where the old traditions

no longer work for us.

And some traditions can lose their symbolic meaning and warp into something very different—all while maintaining the weight of tradition.

And when that happens, traditions can become worse than unhelpful—they can be downright unhealthy, hostile and destructive.

Actually, I love Fiddler because it does such a good job of portraying exactly how complicated it can be to work through traditions.

And it is work.

Tevye is constantly saying, “on the other hand, on the other hand, on the other hand...” as he wrestles with the good and the bad, the moral and the immoral, the ethical and the unethical aspects of tradition.

As I talked about the tradition of throws with my friend, for example, she told me about “doubloons.” The article about throws I mentioned before describes them this way:

“Anodized aluminum coins, known as doubloons, debuted with Rex in 1960, surprising the crowds and becoming a coveted commodity.

Many collectors remember the method of securing a doubloon thrown from a float: quickly covering the doubloon with one’s foot and then retrieving the coin.”

My friend has fond childhood memories of doing precisely that.

Unfortunately, she also has an adult memory of putting her foot on a doubloon, bending over to pick it up—and being shoved from behind.

She fell in front of the float.

Thank God, they are slow moving vehicles and she was able to get up—doubloon in hand!—and leave.

But she’s not gone back. Because she doesn’t feel safe celebrating in that way anymore.

And that is very reasonable, quite fair—and really sad.

I feel the same way about the idea that one can sin as much as you want on Mardi Gras because you can just make up for it with fasting during Lent—I totally see how people got there—but it makes me sad.

I wish we could reclaim the meaning of Mardi Gras—the symbolism of purification and fertility and celebrating with friends and family in one last hurrah before that important period of introspection and preparation for Easter that we call Lent.

And, well, maybe we can.

Because we can learn about the history and symbolism and meaning behind Mardi Gras.

And I think we should.

What do you say? Amen?

PRAYER PREPARATION:

We heard Tevye’s starting point with tradition—here’s a piece that shows how he wrestled with it.

<https://youtu.be/AUGCpL8Qixw>, A Scene from Fiddler on the Roof

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

God of Mystery, God of Transfiguration, help us to view the world differently. Help us to experience places where heaven and earth meet, where the veil is thin, where we view life through Your lens.

Help us to find the holy wherever we are, to experience mystery and wonder.

May we experience awe that causes us to tremble in Your presence.

May we hear Your voice call to us, and may we feel You gently help us up when we are down.

May we experience the holy all around us, knowing You are ever-present and faithful.

Your steadfast love endures forever, in us, around us, and beyond us.

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:

This song is a joyful, traditional Mardi Gras tune.

And I don't understand a word of it.

The costumes you see in these old pictures—I don't know why they're traditional.

But I want to!

<https://youtu.be/L2faTyazAjU>, "La Chanson de Mardi Gras" ~Nathan Abshire and Dewey Balfa

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