

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

"I See the Light (from "Tangled")" - Mandy Moor

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

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

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

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

If you haven't filled out our survey yet (in worship or separately),
please 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

Today is the last Sunday in Epiphany, which according to the liturgical calendar is Transfiguration Sunday. On this day we hear a story I never heard growing up, of the Transfiguration of Jesus, a story told in all 3 synoptic gospels. Today we'll hear the version told in the Gospel according to Matthew. In this story, Jesus takes 3 disciples, Peter, James and John, up a mountain. This is the first time this trio is set apart from the disciples. The next time will be when Jesus takes them with him to the Garden of Gethsemane, where they will fall asleep instead of waiting up with Jesus. Let us listen to God speaking through the words of Matthew chapter 17 verses 1 through 9.

MATTHEW 17:1-9 (NRSV)

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

The Word of God for the People of God.

Thanks be to God!

"Transfigured by Compassion"

Let us pray . . .

I suspect one reason I didn't learn about the Transfiguration growing up is that it's one of the few obviously mystical stories in the Gospels. It's hard to fit it into our reasonable, rational world. It's a story about a mystical experience. And the more I live with this story and let it's power work in me, the more I've come to feel that this may be one of the most important stories in the Bible.

A story that works on us beyond the reasonable or rational,

Beyond what we can see, or hear, or read.
The dictionary says "transfiguration" means
"a transformation in form or appearance," or
"an exalting, glorifying or spiritual change."
When we hear this story, we usually focus on Jesus' transformation,
understandably with the blazing face and dazzling white clothes.
But the Greek word we translate as "transfiguration" is later used by the Apostle Paul
to talk about a change that is to take place within us.
There they were, up on the mountain, and Jesus' was shining with the Light of God—
shining so brightly that you could see it even through his clothes.
And Peter, man he was loving it.
According to Matthew at least, this doesn't seem to frighten Peter at all.
Nor did the appearance of two people he knew were long dead – Moses and Elijah.
This was great, Peter thought;
he wanted to stay in that moment, watching forever.
So in his excitement he offered to build dwellings, like little tents, for Jesus and
Moses and Elijah to stay in.
I've wondered why only 3 dwellings?
After all, there were 6 of them up there.
Didn't Peter, James, and John deserve a shelter up there too?
They seem like outsiders, looking in,
watching the Light as it shone out of Jesus,
seeing the glory of God made manifest not only in Jesus but in the presence of Moses
and Elijah,
yet not thinking that any of that it had anything to do with them.
They were spectators, nothing more.
But then something happened, and it's a part of the story found only in Matthew.
Peter was going on about the 3 dwellings he would build, and God interrupted him.
"While he was still speaking," it says in the text, this cloud came over them.
And notice it's not a dark cloud, it's a "bright cloud";
it's glowing too and right on top of them.
they were right in it.
Then a voice spoke to them. To them!
God addressed them directly,
Which can be pretty scary stuff.
And the text says that "when the disciples heard this" they fell on the ground
"overcome by fear."
And what struck me so forcefully on this reading was Jesus' compassion.
Jesus, glowing like the sun, surrounded by his ancestors in faith, was still aware
of Peter, John and James.
He paid attention, recognized their fear,
And took action to help them.
There they were, prostrate on the ground,
So Jesus would probably have had to kneel down to touch them,
Bend over them to gently reach out his hand,
To touch not just one, but each of them in turn.
His voice soft and familiar and trusted,
Spoken from a heart of love,
Surrounding them, comforting them.

Jesus could have looked at them with irritation,
Snapped out something like, "don't be silly, get up, we're going."
But he didn't.

He recognized their very real suffering and moved to ease it.
And that changed the whole dynamic on that mountain.
It released Peter, John and James from the grip of their fear,
So they could go back down the mountain with Jesus.

Compassion does that.

And, says professor and author Frank Rogers, Jr.,
Practicing compassion is the very Way of Jesus.

"Be compassionate," Jesus taught, "just as your Father is compassionate." (Luke 6:36 CEB)

Rogers defines "compassion" as "simply being moved in our depths by others' experiences

And responding in a way that intends either to ease their suffering or promote their flourishing."

And if ever the world needed compassion, it is now.

As violence stalks our streets,

And schools, and shopping malls, and dance halls;

As families and communities are ever more divided;

As hate crimes escalate, suicide is back to an all-time high, and the earth groans,
Compassion seems in short supply.

So how do we do that?

How do we cultivate and act out of compassion?

"Transform ourselves to transform the world,"

As activist Grace Lee Boggs said.

In his book, "Practicing Compassion: The Way of Jesus,"

Rogers distills Jesus' actions and teachings into elements that can be learned.

A spiritual practice that can tap into the "pulse of compassion" that beats within each of us.

As we move through Lent, I'm going to explore these elements in more depth,
But here is an overview.

Dr. Rogers uses the acronym PULSE,

Reminding us we all have hearts created for compassion,

We just need to feel for that PULSE.

"P" stands for "paying attention."

Noticing.

Often "we do not see other people on their own terms;

Rather, we perceive them through the filtered lenses of our own agendas."

So the first step in practicing compassion is to try to truly see someone,
Without judgment or agenda.

As Jesus say Peter, and John and James up on that mountain.

He didn't see his disciples who couldn't get with the program,

Making silly suggestions to stay on the mountain forever.

He saw three people who were reacting to some deep emotion.

He saw them as they were.

The "U" in PULSE, stands for understanding with empathy.

It means allowing ourselves to be moved in our hearts,

Recognizing the pain, the longings, the wounds at the core of someone's behavior or

experience.

As Jesus recognized and understood the fear of Peter, James and John.

The "L" stands for "loving with connection"

It means allowing love to flow out of our own hearts to surround those one's we see are hurting.

As Jesus did with Peter, John and James.

When I imagine the scene, the 3 disciples are prostrate on the ground, shivering in fear,

And Jesus, kneels beside them,

Still glowing,

That light surrounding them with his love.

The "S" in PULSE stands for "sensing the sacredness"

In the words of Frank Rogers:

"Compassion is a spiritual energy.

When our hearts are open to others' suffering

And a sustaining love flows through us,

The veil of the everyday world we live in is pierced and relativized:

Time seems to stop,

Errands lose their urgency,

Perennial irritations feel petty and frivolous. . .

Grace abounds."

These moments of compassionate connection,

They are holy, sacred moments.

Moments of grace when we are connected not just to the for whom we feel compassion

But to Source of all love and compassion.

Religious historian Karen Armstrong has noted that

"All faiths insist that compassion is the test of true spirituality

And that it brings us into relation with the transcendence we call God . . ."

There is no better image for me of this than Jesus' moment of compassion in this story,

As he incarnates the very presence of God,

Represented by that light shining forth from him,

A visual manifestation of that inner divinity,

That divine light that is also in each of us.

The "E" in PULSE stands for "embodying new life"

Compassion not only grieves with those in pain but delights when others flourish.

It celebrates the birth of new life and yearns for the transformation of suffering into joy,

For that which, the Psalmist sings, will turn "mourning into dancing."

And out of the PULSE of the compassionate heart,

Compassion responds, acts.

Some step is taken to ease the suffering, to nurture flourishing.

Compassion is not just an emotion,

Or empty sympathy,

Not just "thoughts and prayers."

Compassion includes, indeed it must include, some restorative action.

To paraphrase the words of Jewish rabbi Abraham Heschel

After marching in Selma with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,

There comes a time when we must pray with our legs.

As Jesus prayed with his legs, kneeling down to be beside Peter, John and James,

And prayed with his hands that reached out to touch each of them,
A touch that told them they were seen, they were understood, they were not alone,
And then prayed with his tongue that told them they did not need to be afraid.
Compassionate action may be something grand – like marching at Selma –
Or it may just be something we might say was kind.
Soon, Jesus will take a very grand compassionate action,
giving up his very life,
but in this story we see the power of even a seemingly small act of kindness or
compassion:
a touch, a quiet word.
But though a short moment of kindness,
Jesus' action restored Peter James and John to themselves,
And to their relationship with Jesus and God.
No longer were they overcome with fear.
They could stand up and walk back down the mountain next to their teacher, their
friend, their Lord,
Transfigured themselves, perhaps,
Transfigured by compassion.
Their hearts lighter, more open, more prepared for the time and the work ahead,
Better able to “be compassionate” as Jesus was compassionate, as God is
compassionate.
Remember that “transfiguration” doesn’t just mean a change in appearance,
It can also mean a “spiritual change.”
I think more than one type of transfiguration happened up on that mountain,
Not just shining light and bright white clothes,
But a transfiguration of compassion.

The compassion practice described by Frank Rogers that we will look at in more
detail in the weeks to come,
It starts with taking our own PULSE,
Paying attention to what we are feeling,
Treating ourselves with compassion,
So we can offer that compassion with others,
Or in Jesus’ words,
So we can “love our neighbors as ourselves.”

Maybe, just maybe, on that mountain that long ago day,
Jesus was afraid,
Having a pretty good idea of the trials that would be his if he went to Jerusalem.
And maybe, just maybe, Moses and Elijah,
Jesus’ ancestors in faith who had known their own trials,
Appeared by the grace of God in order to offer Jesus compassion, strengthening him
for the journey ahead.
He was seen, he was held, he was known by that all-encompassing Spirit of love,
Which he then offered to Peter, James and John.

As we enter the season of Lent,
When we walk next to Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, the cross, and beyond,
And as you walk whatever Lenten roads you are travelling,
Roads of fear, or anger, or longing, or pain,

May you know yourself held in the compassionate regard of Jesus,
Who sees each of us clearly, who knows and understands us,
And surrounds and holds us with love.
And then may you practice offering that compassion to yourself.
Because it begins in the pulsing hearts of each of us,
The path towards the compassionate transfiguration of the world.
Amen.

“Those Who See Light” by Nancy Elze cover by Chris Brunelle
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQSvkGEJ3IE>

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.
The world is waiting for your heart of compassion.
Go in peace,
come again in hope.
Amen.

“Lean in Towards the Light” – Carrie Newcomer
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxAUmNjWaIs>

GO IN PEACE