

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 references examples of the Mandela Effect, which is the phenomenon of many people incorrectly remembering something in the same way.

It was named for Nelson Mandela because the first person to name the phenomenon had a vivid memory of the news footage of his death in prison and was able to find people who had the same memory—except that Nelson Mandela did not die in prison.

In fact, he was the president of South Africa from 1994 to 1999.

Now, some people state that this is “proof” of some real science fiction conspiracy stuff and that is not what the sermon is about.

So I thought I'd start with this example of how lots of people can and will remember something wrong:

<https://youtu.be/PFamAXEFpdw>, “To Remember Or Not To Remember,” a scend from Brain Games ~National Geographic

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

Today's lesson is embedded in the sermon.

SERMON "Broken"

I want to play a game.

As quick as you can, answer the following questions—

you can type your answers into chat, or you can keep track on your own, but please just answer them as quickly as possible, without looking up the answer!:

What are the magic words the Evil Queen speaks to the Mirror in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs?

In Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back, Luke states that Obi-Wan Kenobi told him that Darth Vader killed Luke's father. What does Darth Vader say in response?

What is the first line to the theme song for Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood?

What kind of fruit do Adam and Eve eat in the Garden of Eden?

Well you might be surprised by the answers!

Here's the Evil Queen:

<https://youtu.be/4VIHNGbtYho>, "A Clip from Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs"

Here's Luke and Darth Vader:

<https://youtu.be/mwtaM0GC-js>, "A Clip from Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back"

And here's Fred Rogers!

<https://youtu.be/FhAJnx5uwUU>, "A Clip from Mister Rogers' Neighborhood"

Oh, and the fruit? Well, let's have a look at the text together, shall we?

Genesis 2:8-9 & 25-3:24

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the

garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...

And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made.

He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?'

The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die." '

But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate;

and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?'

He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.'

He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?'

The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.'

Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?'

The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.'

The Lord God said to the serpent,

'Because you have done this,
 cursed are you among all animals
 and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,
 and dust you shall eat
 all the days of your life.

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
 and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike your head,
 and you will strike his heel.'

To the woman he said,

'I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
 in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
 and he shall rule over you.'

And to the man he said,

'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
 and have eaten of the tree

about which I commanded you,
 “You shall not eat of it”,
cursed is the ground because of you;
 in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
 and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face
 you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
 for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
 and to dust you shall return.’

The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all who live.
And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.
Then the Lord God said, ‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever’—
therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.
He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Wow. The text simply says “fruit.” It doesn’t even describe the fruit except to say that it was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that it would make one wise!
When I notice this, I begin to wonder what else I’ve always known about this story that might actually be in the text.
So I handed this story to a very dear friend of mine who is a Librarian and has been an English teacher and asked her to analyze it as she would a piece of literature—and without taking into account the “traditional” interpretations.
She noticed several things: First the lack of “apple.” I’m glad I’m not alone in that!
Second, she noticed that the snake is never named as the devil or Satan.
It’s true! The story never ever says that the snake is Evil. Only that they were “...more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made.”
I have many questions about the snake, now.
If the snake isn’t Evil, what do they represent?
What does it mean if the snake is just—a wild animal living side by side with Adam and Eve and all the other animals in the garden?
Why is the snake craftier than all other animals? And how do they know that the fruit of the tree causes you to be like God, knowing good and evil?
Did the snake eat the fruit!?
And all of those questions make me wonder what happens if we read this story as if it is about the relationship between God, Humanity, and Nature?
When I tossed out the possibility of the snake representing Nature, my friend said “That is an interesting take,” which made me feel like I might be on to something!
Here’s what I see if we run with that idea—we know that God gave Adam and Eve one

boundary: do not eat the fruit.

Then the crafty snake–Nature–convinces Eve to eat the fruit. Then Eve convinces Adam to eat the fruit. Thus Humanity has overstepped that boundary.

Here comes God, who immediately realizes that the boundary had been broken.

There must be consequences!

The story tells us that the consequence of eating the fruit is–DEATH! “For in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

So God kills humanity then and there.

The End.

Hm? What’s that? That’s not how the story ends?

God must be merciful.

However–there are broken relationships all over the place.

Nature and Humanity can’t trust each other anymore.

Humanity can’t even trust itself anymore.

And God can’t trust Nature or Humanity to respect the one boundary They implemented.

Maybe–just maybe–what we perceive as God’s punishments are really descriptions of what happens when those relationships were broken?

I wonder–what would it look like if we worked to repair those relationships?

I wonder...

What do you say? Amen?

PRAYER PREPARATION:

There are precious few songs that are about both the relationship of humans with Nature and with each other.

But this one is:

https://youtu.be/Gfz_Telvv50, “Go To The Woods” ~Dar Williams

Rambling and rambling, rambling and rambling

It's the woods! What do you see?

In all the spooky shadows, in the forest of green

Is there a windy path, angry ass woman who will eat you?

Sad-eyed lumberjack, savior who will greet you?

It's a different story for you and for me

Go to the woods and see

Out in the storybook land are many leagues of the wild

Wise and uncontainable as a windy-haired child

There are the youth truth movements and they're springing from the ground

Freak flag wavers and you cannot chop them down

Hey, it's the home of the brave, you'll get the threat of the free

Go to the woods and see

Are you afraid of the woods?

Are you afraid of the woods?

And if I was your memory, what would you do?

'Cause you know if you go back in time there's something waiting for you

You've got your forest path, reading, math, dappling of shade

You can just admit it, there's a promise that you made

And you can't have the past back, but you can hold me

Go to the woods and see

I am afraid of the woods

I am afraid of the woods
But what I fear more, what I fear most
More than the man, the beast, or the ghost
Is that the woods are disappearing
So when I go back, when I finally dare
You know the woods'll be gone
You know they just won't be there
Rambling and rambling, rambling and rambling

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 the Wild Geese, we pray that You would gather us together, and help us to know the way to go.

Like the geese know when to fly, may we know when it is time to move on, and when it is time to sit down.

May we know when it is time to rise up and make noise, and when it is time to be still in our heart.

May we know our need to gather together, and may we support one another.

In this time of Lent, as we wait for the lengthening of the days, as we await the changing of the season, may we know You in the stillness of waiting for the earth to

be born anew, as we live into Your ways of love, justice, and mercy.
May the God of Wild Geese remind us that we are not alone on this journey of faith.
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:

Many of you know that I find Fred Rogers' work to be heroic in many ways. And so it was very difficult not to play the entire intro to Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood in the sermon.

That song means so much more to me.

So I'm going to end worship with the encouragement to look to Mr. Rogers as an example of how your relationship to the world can be—
after all, I have it on good authority that he was exactly as he was seen on television—

And with this rendition of that very special song:

<https://youtu.be/ow3SDgRXnVU>, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" ~Kelly Clarkson

[Verse 1]

It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood
A beautiful day for a neighbor
Would you be mine?
Could you be mine?

[Verse 2]

It's a neighborly day in this beautywood
A neighborly day for a beauty
Would you be mine?
Could you be mine?

[Bridge]

I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you
I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you

[Verse 3]

So let's make the most of this beautiful day
Since we're together, we might as well say
Would you be mine?
Could you be mine?
Won't you be my neighbor?

[Outro]

Won't you please
Won't you please
Please won't you be my neighbor?

end