

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

"Be Thou My Vision" - Audrey Assad

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Optrm7lF16s>

First United Church of Christ and Conference Center Second Life 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."

We celebrate God's Love everyday.

and seek to be a place of belonging for those who need it, where all people will be included, accepted and supported in their journey of faith and their struggles in life.

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

If you would like to make a donation to support this ministry

there is a donation bowl in the back,

or you can go to our website

firstuccsl.org

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

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

We begin with the lectionary selection from the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible, A story often referred to as the "Call of Abraham," or "Abram" - since God has not yet given Abram his new name.

After that we will hear a familiar passage from the New Testament,

The portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew called "the Beatitudes."

Let us listen to God speaking through the words of Genesis, chapter 12, verses 1 through 4, and then Matthew 5 verses 1-12.

GENESIS 12:1-4a

Now the Lord said to Abram,

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him.

MATTHEW 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kin-dom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kin-dom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,

for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

"Blessed Be"

Let us pray ...

Frederick Buechner wrote:

"Worry says that the more you get, the more you have.

Jesus says the more time, talent and treasure you give away to relieve someone else's worry,

the more you are."

Are what? The more we are - what?

The more we are -- blessed.

Jesus said it in the Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the peacemakers, and so on, meaning, blessed are all of you.

That is who you are, that is who you will be. Everyone. Blessed.

Jesus didn't use that word, "blessed" by accident.

It's a key word in scripture.

In Genesis alone the word "blessed" or "blessing" occurs 88 times.

So Jesus' audience would have heard word "blessed" echoing back through time to the founding of Israel,

to the blessing of Abram.

You, Jesus was saying, all of you, are blessed, as our ancestor Abraham was blessed.

But in this key text from Genesis, we see that there are two sides to this blessing, to this state of being blessed.

If you are blessed, then you are a blessing – or you should be.

God didn't give Abram blessings so that he could recline on pillows and watch whatever passed for football in those days.

God promised Abram that he would be blessed so that he would "be a blessing" and that in him "all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

For Abram, receiving God's blessing meant picking up and moving from everything he knew, his country, his home, the majority of his family.

It meant leaving a secure comfortable life to journey into the unknown with God, to share God's blessing with others.

When Jesus said,

"strive first for the kingdom of God and God's justice, and all these things will be given to you"

this is what he was talking about.

Blessings received, blessings given, blessings received, blessings given.

And God is in all of it.

Because this is who we are – in God, in Christ.

In the church we have a word for this – stewardship.

Stewardship is how we describe the spiritual practice of recognizing that all we have comes from God,

and then using those blessings for others.

It is recognizing that we are blessed, and figuring out how we can be a blessing.

Stewardship is the practice of letting go of our worry, and work instead to relieve the worry of others.

Stewardship is answering the call giving to Abram, the same call Jesus gives to all of us,

to let go of all the things we think will give us security

and journey into the unknown, knowing that God is with us.

To take this journey, so that in us, the world may be blessed.

And in the journey, in the blessing, we will be blessed in return.

Both in the Bible, and in the life of the church, this kind of stewardship is an essential aspect of covenant.

The covenant, or Promise, of God to us – that we will be God's people and God will be with us on the journey.

And the covenant we make both as disciples of Christ and as members of the church:

That we will be good stewards of the blessings given us, by being blessings to others.

It's a pretty daunting task – being a blessing.

It's hard enough to think of ourselves as blessed – particularly when times are rough,

but the thought that we should be a blessing, so that in us all the world, can be blessed.

That's even harder.

Overwhelming even.

Alright – now I have a new worry – a new anxiety.

How do I do this?

St. Augustine is not one of my favorites, for a number of reasons I won't go into

here,
but he has his moments.
He said, "Since you cannot do good to all,
you are to pay special attention to those who, by accident of time, or place, or
circumstance, are brought into closer connection to you."
You can't help everyone, but you can help the ones you meet on your way,
the ones who you become connected to on your journey.
This is about share God's dream of building a world
in which human dignity is real and the presence of God is manifest."
Isn't that what it means to be God's people?
Isn't that what it means to be a church – to be a group of people who agree to share
God's dream of the kin-dom here on earth?
Isn't that what we claimed for this church in our vision statement:
"We seek to be a place of belonging for those who need it,
Where all people will be included, accepted and supported in their journey of faith
and their struggles in life."
There are many ways to do this,
and each of us is called to this practice of stewardship in different ways as our
blessings take different forms.
Think about some of those Jesus lifts up in the Beatitudes, those he calls
"blessed" – as Abram was called "blessed":
Peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful.
Jesus sets it up for us – because that is who they are, blessed, that is what they
do.
The 19th century German preacher and religious reformer Eberhard Arnold believed
that the people who heard Jesus' message,
both in his own time and in ours,
were obligated to act on the ancient call of God to live the Great Commandment,
to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves,
not simply to listen to it.
To be stewards of the blessing, to dream God's dream and follow that call,
Because that is who we are – blessed,
And that is what we do.
There is a fabled story from the desert fathers, about two men,
Abba Lot and Abba Joseph.
And the story goes that Abba Lot goes to Abba Joseph and lists what he is doing to
experience the presence of God:
things like prayer, meditation, fasting, etc.
And then he asks, "What else can I do?"
Old Abba Joseph stands up and stretches his hands towards heaven.
His fingers, the story says, become like ten lamps of fire.
"If you will," Abba Joseph says to Abba Lot, "you can become all flame."
You can shine with the fire of the Spirit within you.
You can reflect God's light to the world.
This is the choice God gave to Abram when he called and blessed him so long ago.
It is the choice presented to us by Jesus, whether to follow his Way.
It is the choice that we must make each day.
It isn't enough to bask in God's light shining on us, in our lives.
We need to figure out how to shine for others.
To become, all flame.

Blessings received blessings given.
To become stewards of the blessing.
You are blessed.
So, a blessing be.
Amen.

“Blessed to Be a Blessing” – The Many
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rN05YsQeq8Y>

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Worship is a time when we,
as a community,
join our hearts together,
to connect to God and to each other.
So this time is the essence of what we do here together.
If you have a prayer 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.

Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber has a contemporary version of the Beatitudes,
I offer them in prayer today as well:
"Blessed are the agnostics.
Blessed are they who doubt,
those who aren't sure, those who can still be surprised.
Blessed are those who have nothing to offer.
Blessed are they for whom death is not an abstraction
Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones, for whom tears could fill an
ocean.
Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like.
Blessed are they who don't have the luxury of taking things for granted anymore.
Blessed are they who can't fall apart,
because they have to keep it together for everyone else.
Blessed are those who still aren't over it yet.
Blessed are those who mourn.
Blessed are those who no one else notices,
the kids who sit alone at middle school lunch tables,
the laundry guys at the hospital, the sex workers,
and the night-shift street sweepers.
Blessed are the forgotten,
blessed are the closeted,
blessed are the unemployed,
the unimpressive,
the underrepresented.
Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones who never catch a break, the ones for whom
life is hard,

for Jesus chose to surround himself with people like them.
Blessed are those without documentation.
Blessed are the ones without lobbyists.
Blessed are those who make terrible business decisions for the sake of people.
Blessed are the burned-out social workers
and the overworked teachers
and the pro-bono case takers.
Blessed are the kindhearted NFL players
and the fundraising trophy wives.
And blessed are the kids who step
between the bullies and the weak.
Blessed is everyone who has ever forgiven me
when I didn't deserve it.
Blessed are the merciful,
for they totally get it.
You are of heaven, and Jesus blesses you."
I invite you to continue this prayer of blessings in your own words,
are there any you feel need to be recognized as "blessed" today?

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.
Amen

"Baba Yetu (The Lord's Prayer in Swahilli) – Stellenbosch University Choir
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCa8RxaOPW8>

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY
Our worship is over
our ministry to the world is just beginning.
The world is waiting,
for you, blessed ones.
May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
Amen.

"We Are Here" – Alicia Keys
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYQ_pzY00hE

GO IN PEACE!