

WELCOME

Grace and peace be with you my friends and familia on this lovely Sunday!

Thank you for coming!

Welcome to First United Church of Christ and Conference Center in second life.

My name is Yadi Martínez-Reyna, I am one of the Pastors in this community.  
And anyone you see with a "Minister" tag is an ordained UCC minister in real life.

One of the most exciting things for me to share is that we are a real life church with real life standing in the Eastern Association; Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ (UCC).

This month of June we celebrate Pride month.

Pride month, is typically in June and dedicated to the celebration and commemoration of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans gender, Queer, and inclusive of all of our siblings.

Pride Month began after the Stonewall riots, the beginning of our liberation for our people.

Our church familia is part of the Open and Affirming Coalition (ONA) of the United Church of Christ.

ONA as we shorten the title was founded in 1972 and it continues to advocate for our community to be equip and celebrated.

It is such a blessing to be part of a network connected with the common goal of sharing a message of hope and bearing witness to the Holy-One's unconditional love.

In fact I love to say, that you are welcome here, and that no matter who you are or where you are in your life journey you are welcome here!

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

Our service will be in voice and text.

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

If you don't know how to do that, let someone know and we'll try to help.

There will be a link in Nearby so you can watch it in your browser if the viewer isn't working for you.

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

One of the blessings and responsibilities that come with our being a real church with real standing is that we, like all UCC churches, support the work of the national church not only with prayer but financially.

So we greatly appreciate any offering you can make to support this ministry.

If you prefer, donations can be made on our website, [firstuccsl.org](http://firstuccsl.org).

So Invite you my friends to join me as we start our service with a prayer.

#### INVOCATION

Come Holy Spirit and fill this digital place, the homes, and places where this is being heard with your presence and touch us with your love.

Thank you for loving us, and for this place where we are all welcomed home!

We pray in your many names. Amen.

If there are any announcements about the life of the church, please type them in Nearby Chat during our Gathering Music.

#### GATHERING MUSIC

Excess Love - Mercy Chinwo (Official Video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=awexlghI7gM>

#### SCRIPTURE

A reading from the book of Matthew 10:16-20 (NRSV)

“I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the gentiles.

When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

The Word of God for the People of God.

Thanks be to God.

#### SERMON

Embracing All of Me

When I think of what it means to be a Christian I draw from my own upbringing, what that meant.

I think about my grandmother at church.  
How she would say a Christian must always be at church.

Let's see if you can fill in these blank.  
What do you think being a Christian means?  
By that see if you can fill in the blanks...

I'll start and the you...just type what comes to mind when I say the following:

"A Christian should not....." (drink)

Now you...

A Christian should not....

A female Christian should not...wear pants.

What are some of the things you have heard?

These statements are not entirely true but you and I know that each religious group might have their guidelines that might be attached to a moral code.

Often there is a specific model that people try to follow.

In fact that is where progressive Christians and Conservative Christians clash.

There are theological debates that have lasted for centuries on celibacy, marriage, slavery, gay marriage, abortion rights, human rights, and the list goes on and on.

The truth is that when we try to fit people in carefully crafted boxes, we leave other people out.

Everyone of us at one time or another have tried to hold a moral compass of our own. Perhaps it was handed down to you from your parents, your grandparents, your theological embedded beliefs.

Meanings you believe that way as a child and some of it has remained in your heart.

Or you might be a new Christian and found faith when you were older and you did your own research.

Each of us struggles with the questions of:

What is the truth?

What makes me a good Christian?

What keeps me good with God?

And who has the ultimate decision on what that really means?

Perhaps even the idea of being given self control and free will is too big to comprehend.

Has our lives been predestined?

I personally believe that each of us have the ability to make a choice in all we do. Galatians 5:16 says that if we go by the Spirit of God we will want the things of the spirit of God.

But what does that mean?

At best I could describe my spirituality as messy.

But I can tell you that everyday I'm committed to learning and trying again.

I am human after all.

But perhaps if we try to make a list of what being a good Christian means, will help to be better.

But keep in mind that just because that list worked for our lives does not mean others would embrace it.

It's kind of like all those diets out there.

There are so many of them.

But our metabolism is different, and so what might work for me, might not work for

you.

This is the same way as we think about how we follow the One we call Christ.

See today's scripture mentions animals to invite us to think about and explore. Jesus mentioned these animals perhaps as a way to invite us to explore and connect to what he is trying to teach us.

In the scriptures we have a dove, a wolf, a sheep, and a serpent/snake. Perhaps, we can make a bit of sense of these words of wisdom by looking at these animals and their spectacular characteristics.

Let's start with the snake.

There are 3,000 species of snakes on the planet.

Seven percent are able to kill or wound a human severely.

Snakes are covered with scales and as reptiles they are cold blooded and must regulate their temperature externally.

Maybe, Jesus was saying regulate your temperature when you get hot headed.

Just a thought.

Snakes hunt by using their tongues.

They flicker it and they smell their surroundings.

The flicker of their tongue helps them know where their food is nearby.

BUT, it also tells them if there is danger around their meal.

Is getting near that meal worth it?

Maybe it is not about being worth it but perhaps a desire to live and therefore wait for another meal to come around.

Now that is wise advice from a snake.

When I was starting in ministry up in the Dallas Texas area back in the year 2000.

I could not imagine that someone who was homeless or hungry could harm me if I ventured to go feed them on my own.

Why would anyone want to hurt me if I'm feeding them?

Well...let me tell you I had some close calls and I learned my lesson.

I could not even blame Jesus.

Jesus you said you would be with me always?!

Jesus gently replied "I told you it is better to go in two. why did you not listen?"

Humanity is complex, maybe even more when they are hungry.

Rev. Ana Kreisler wrote in a blog that most myths, legends, and folklore in Judeo Christian scriptures connect the snakes or serpent with evil forces.

I shall return to this in a minute.

Because we need to talk about the dove.

Doves feed from dawn to dusk. I like that.

When they mate and lay eggs both parents share duties.

Yep, the male sits on the egg too.

Doves are kind and their sense of duty to each other that reminds us of our own calling to help and heal the broken hearted.

BUT....

The doves have a high mortality rate due to their sensible nature.

I don't think a dove should be a Jesus recruiting animal.

Back to Rev. Ana Kreisler blog. In her blog she also pointed out the juxtaposition of Jesus' example here when he talks about both the serpent and the dove. She adds that a little evil isn't that bad. She says, "We all have a little bit of serpent and a little bit of dove in us. To ignore or deny any or either part of ourselves is to diminish the fullest of our humanity."

What do you think about this?

As humans both you and I have what I like to call a dark side. Now I'm not a Star Trek fan, I'm a newby. I know more about the Force than about this but...I have been trying to watch the old Star Trek. As I was watching an episode this scripture came to mind. Star Trek Season 1, episode 6, titled, "The Enemy Within" which first aired on October 6, 1966.

This episode reflected the story of Robert Louis Stevenson short novel "The case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." Have you ever met someone with this personality?

Well in the Enemy Within, there is a malfunction in the transporter and it splits Captain Kirk as he was beamed into the space craft. Captain Kirk has two sides that his crew gets confused about until they learn about the split. See one is meek and indecisive, while the other one is sharp, but violent and ill tempered.

Surely this is not what the scripture is talking about!  
Or is it?

Humanity has the ability to beautiful, kind, express compassion, love and tenderness. But it also has the capability to react in anger, disappointment, hate and violence.

In this episode Captain Kirk can not function without the other and he can't simply kill his alter ego. So he is confused as they fix the transporter to unit them again. He asks why he needs that other part of him. The one who he does not recognize!

Spoke says of himself that he is split in his own life. He says, "My human self, and alien self is submerged, constantly at war with each other. I survive because my intelligence wins over both, and makes them live together." He tells Captain Kirk that his intelligence, and his wisdom balances his two personalities making him one extraordinary person. Do you struggle with something like this, friends?

I often tried to be someone else.  
I'm so ADD but I want to be chill.  
I also want to be good at public speaking and more extroverted, those are great leadership skills!  
Are there times where you feel that way?  
How about when someone hurts you and you just know how to get back at them.  
Oh...if I would....fill in the blanks.

In Spanish my mother used to say "todos tienen cola que le pisen."  
Everyone has a tail that can be stepped on.  
In other words we all have a weakness that can be exploited.

Jesus was not trying to tell us to be more than something else or become someone else. But rather it was telling us to learn from the animals' personalities.  
Just as Rev. Ana was saying each personality is a gift.  
My quirky, ADD self is what makes me creative, energetic, and me.  
Sure I strive to be a good leader but instead of changing myself, I am learning to embrace my qualities and balance my not so good ones.

Jesus in these scriptures gave us the honest truth about what it meant to be his follower.  
He was not saying, take this power to heal, take my fame, and some thick snake skin, use it and crush those who come against you. Nope.  
I believe he was saying that we were going into a danger zone by following him.

Another animal mentioned in this scriptures are the wolves.  
Wolves are powerful as a pack.  
Alone they have sharp teeth, speed and strength are there too.  
But they know they must act as a pack to win.  
So they are smart and stay in packs of five or six.  
The wolves howl loud to communicate, to intimidate, and to send messages to warn others that they are getting close to their territory and they will defend it.

Jesus says, "I'm sending you like sheep into the midst of wolves."  
Plural, wolves.

You mean like we are going in like a supper sheep with powers?  
Nope, regular sheep.  
Sheep are clever animals, they self medicate, they have personalities, and they are emotionally highly social animals.  
But for all their clever and smart traits, they have no defending skills.  
They are totally dependent on their caregiver.  
Again, this is not a good recruiting animal.

In the example I gave you earlier about Captain Kirk being split into two I wanted you to see his struggle.  
Captain Kirk was struggling in accepting he had this evil self.  
He wanted to be a gentle and kind man.  
But he needed the other part of him that was sharp to make choices to protect his crew and make decisions not based on emotions.

I don't want to be a sheep dependent on someone, with no skills to defend myself.  
I don't want to be a dove with a low life span.  
And yet we need those characteristics in our lives to be the type of followers of Christ that welcomes those who are hurt.  
We need the kindness and community helping characteristics of both the dove and the sheep.  
We need those to be able to be gentle, welcoming, and a safe place.  
We need those characteristics to be that balm on wounds as people find wholeness in their lives through Jesus.  
But Jesus says, you also need the characteristics of the snake.  
Can our inner self be as Rev. Ana suggested and exist with both human characteristics?  
What keeps the other in check?  
These scriptures in Matthew talked about being dragged before kings.  
It talks about being flogged for being a follower of Christ.  
Is this true today?  
Are people persecuted for not being a certain type of religion or believing a specific way?  
During the time of the scriptures the Roman Empire was crushing people, hurting people, denying people their human rights, their basic needs, and their own dignity to exist.  
Is this true today?

We are called to follow in the way of Jesus but to be smart and wise on how we do this.  
Jesus is saying tap into that other side that can see evil for what it is.  
The side that can understand how the other team works.  
Jesus was not telling you to pay evil with evil, or to become evil.

But rather saying, stick your tongue out and sense if there is danger and go the other way if you have to.  
Martin Luther King Jr. showed his people a way to fight injustice by being tolerant and peaceful.  
There are stories of these siblings of ours sitting and learning to be spit on, yelled at, and pushed around without responding.  
I'm sure at first they were saying how can this work?

But today we look at the civil rights movement and their struggle and learn from it as we ourselves are deep in our own human rights struggle as trans siblings.

Friends, we all have the ability to respond, to act and to give our tormentors just what they deserve.  
But Jesus is saying to be wise because there is another way.  
In fact he is saying don't worry about what to say, your not alone.

People will constantly try in the name of Jesus to divide us.  
Be suspicious of the opposition when the powerful and privileged use their religious credit, their money, their status, their friends to hurt others.  
Be suspicious when humanity and those who the Holy One loves are persecuted for their gender identity, gender expression, or sexuality.

Henry Nowen said, "People will constantly try to hook your wounded self. They will point out your needs, your character defects, your limitations and sins. This is how they attempt to dismiss what God through you, is saying to them."  
So live your life authentically, with pride and with joy.  
But I also learned to be smart, wise, careful and safe.

Many will howl, gather in packs around the little sheep and try to take advantage, or intimidate this poor creature.  
But have you ever seen a herd of sheep running down the hill? You better move.

Together, we are stronger we learned that from the wolves.  
En conjunto, together we shall prevail, praying fasting, holding on to the promises that we are heirs of the Holy-One and demand to be treated with respect and with dignity.  
Who do you think you're talking too?  
We deserve to live our life abundantly.

We are wise as serpents, we know to pay attention, open our ears and really hear what people are saying.  
We are wise and not falling into promises that are not made to help but to destroy others.  
We are gentle as doves, helping each other, living life with joy, cooing, flying, and knowing that life might be short but the Holy-one said that we are to enjoy every bit of it because we are loved unconditionally.

We are like Captain Kirk divided at times but put together by the transporter of the Holy Spirit that makes us whole regardless of our circumstances.

Friends, following in the way of Jesus is not easy.  
Friends it was never promised.  
But we have been given this wisdom taught to us by the creation that has much to teach us, if we pay attention.

So embrace your dual self and May you be whole as you live abundantly making wise choices.

Amen

#### PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

We have come to this time of prayers.  
Together we will lift our prayers of joy and concerns.  
We are a community that holds each other in prayer.

Today, I invite you while this song  
plays to type in your prayer request in the chat box.

Get Your Hopes Up (LIVE at White Sands, NM) - Josh Baldwin  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEx38RwHhJ4>



Holy-One 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

Holy-One -We give you thanks, O God, for those who mean so much to us --  
Those to whom we can go at any time,  
Those with whom we can talk and keep nothing back,  
knowing that they will not laugh at our dreams or our failures,  
Those in whose presence it is easier to be good,  
Those who by their warning have held us back  
from mistakes we might have made.  
Above all, we thank you for Jesus Christ,  
Lord of our hearts and Savior of our souls,  
in whose name we offer this thanksgiving.  
Amen.

--William Barclay

#### BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Let us go forth from this place into the world to find yourself; a cause you can  
live for; and a love you can live into.  
May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, springing up  
like living water, fill your heart, and flow through your life.

Now, let us dance!

#### MUSIC FOR THE JOURNEY

Blessings On Blessings (The B.O.B. Bounce) (Official Video)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p58HS6h3l10>

Thank you for coming!