

Bulletin - August 6, 2023

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,

wherever you are

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.

Now let us all take a deep breath,

breathing in the peace of God

breathing out the stresses of the day

we may have carried here with us.

Let God hold them for you, at least for a while,

as we gather on this holy ground to worship God.

. 'm going to start our Gathering Music and run the rest of the announcements underneath.

GATHERING MUSIC: "Kindness" by Ryan Adams

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPB0WNDrUxo>

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.

We will also celebrate Holy Communion together today and all are welcome at the Lord's Table.

So you may wish to gather the elements: some bread, a cracker or cookie, even some cake or pie,
and something to drink such as wine, juice, or water.
Whatever makes you feel closer to each other and to God.

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.

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.
We pray all this in the name of the one who taught us to eat and to pray together,
saying:
Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kin-dom, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kind-dom and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

The feeding of the multitudes is one of the most important stories passed down from the oral tradition about Jesus.
We know how important this story was to the early Christians
because it is the only miracle story that appears in all 4 gospels.
Matthew and Mark even tell it twice!
Of course, each of the 4 gospels tells this story of Jesus slightly differently.
Today, we will hear the version recounted in Chapter 14 of Matthew,
Which begins when Jesus learns of the death of his cousin, John the Baptist.

Jesus takes a boat to a deserted place to be alone with his grief,
But the crowds intrude upon his solitude,
And he responds with compassion,
even in the midst of his grief.
Let us listen to God speaking to us through the words of Matthew, chapter 14, verses 13 through 21.

SCRIPTURE READING: Matthew 14:13-21 (NRSVUE)

Now when Jesus heard this,
he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.
But when the crowds heard it,
they followed him on foot from the towns.
When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd;
and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.
When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said,
"This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late;
send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages
and buy food for themselves."
Jesus said to them, "They need not go away;
you give them something to eat."
They replied,
"We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."
And he said,
"Bring them here to me."
Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass.
Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven,
and blessed and broke the loaves,
and gave them to the disciples,
and the disciples gave them to the crowds.
And all ate and were filled;
and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.
And those who ate were about five thousand men,
besides women and children.

The Word of God for the People of God.
Thanks be to God.

A STORY: "Stone Soup" – Chinese Folktale, retold and illustrated by Jon J. Muth

Before I share my thoughts on this gospel story,
I'd like us to listen to another story
from another culture.
It's a favorite of mine,
"Stone Soup" - a folk tale from China
here retold and illustrated by Jon J. Muth.

I have put the text of the story in a NC in the red bulletin folder in the back, if
you want to read along.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P_TXIoiuBd4

"A Deserted Place"

Let us pray ...

Perhaps you remember hearing this story in Sunday school, maybe while cutting fishes and loaves of bread out of construction paper.

I remember being told about the wonderful magic trick Jesus did by taking a little food and multiplying it to feed all those people.

I imagined Jesus waving his hand, saying few magic words, like "abracadabra"

and poof – 5 loaves became 5,000, fish appeared in mid-air, or something like that.

But today when I read the story, I hear it very differently.

Jesus and the old magical multiplying loaves just doesn't do it for me anymore.

When I look at all the starving people in the world,

not just around the globe but in our own backyard,

it's hard for me not to think:

"If God, through Jesus, could feed those 5,000 people back then, why won't God do it today?"

At the very least,

why couldn't the gospel writers have given us the magic words, so we can do it ourselves?"

And then I read the story again, and I think perhaps they did.

You see, at no time in any of the gospel accounts, does it say that Jesus magically multiplied the bread and the fish.

It says Jesus took 5 loaves and 2 fish,

blessed them, broke them, and gave them to the disciples to distribute.

Then it says that everyone ate until they were full, with lots of leftovers.

That's it.

That's all it says.

It's up to us to fill in the blanks

about how Jesus used those 5 loaves and 2 fish to feed them all.

If we think this is a story of supernatural power,

then all we have to do is sit on the ground and wait to be fed.

Holding our mouths open like baby birds waiting for Mama,

or in this case Abba,

to drop in dinner.

But perhaps this isn't about supernatural power.

Perhaps something else was going on in this story –

something at once more challenging, and more miraculous.

Because you see, while I may not still believe in magical multiplying loaves,

I do believe this is the story of one of Jesus' greatest miracles.

And I'll tell you why.

Imagine the scene. Matthew sets this telling of the story in a "deserted place."

Or it was deserted, until the crowd followed Jesus there.

Now we're told that there were 5,000 people –

but as the text makes clear, that meant 5,000 men.

If you add women and children, it was a whole lot more.

And the disciples say to Jesus, "it's late, send the crowd away so they can go find

some food to buy.”

Basically, let them fend for themselves.

But Jesus had something else in mind.

He says, “they don’t need to go away, you” –

I imagine him pointing to each of the disciples here –

“you give them something to eat.”

And the disciples say,

“we have nothing here but 5 loaves and 2 fish.”

They look around, and all they see is desert.

“We have nothing but ...”

“We.”

It seems the disciples were carrying some food.

5 loaves and 2 fish to be exact.

But they can’t have been the only ones among the 5,000 plus people there who brought food.

Back then, it was common for travelers

or those who would be away from home for the day

to carry some food with them.

After all, it’s not like they could stop at McDonald’s

and pick up a burger and fries when they got hungry.

They had to bring something to eat, particularly if they were going somewhere remote,

like this “deserted place.”

So the passage says that Jesus had everyone sit down on the grass.

Picture thousands of people sitting down, except for Jesus.

I think Jesus wanted everyone to see what was happening.

This was a teaching moment.

So everyone could see Jesus accept the bread and the fish,

bless them, looking up towards heaven,

break them into bits and then sharing the food among those sitting nearby.

I think the other people in that deserted place,

led by Jesus’ example,

I think they reached into their own pockets,

dug out the food they had brought,

and then also began to share it with others.

Now instead of “abracadabra,”

I imagine a wave, starting with Jesus and gradually expanding around him,

rolling over the countryside,

as people began to recognize what Jesus was doing,

began to connect with each other,

began to connect, perhaps, to that divinity within themselves.

It’s like that experiment

where you set up a room full of mousetraps with pingpong balls.

Then throw one ball in,

which sets off one trap,

which sets off two,

which sets off three,

and pretty soon there are pingpong balls flying everywhere.

A chain reaction.

A chain reaction of grace.

Food eaten, food shared.
It was like making Stone Soup.
That day, more than 5,000 people, likely from all walks of life,
and perhaps some different nationalities and races and religions,
sat together and shared a meal,
quite literally, at the Lord's table.
As holy a communion as any at church,
where we too take, bless, break and share bread as a community.
At that meal, Jesus showed people that they could reach beyond themselves,
be part of something extraordinary,
touch something divine.
And when they shared what they had with each other, as a community,
there was more than enough.
Not magic, but a very great miracle.
Not magic, but make no mistake,
the Spirit was working overtime that day.
As happens so often, we stand in the shoes of the disciples here.
How often do we look around,
find ourselves literally surrounded by human need,
and know we don't have the resources to address that need?
How often do we say to ourselves,
"this is a deserted place," there isn't enough?
I don't have enough, what can I do?
And if it were all up to each of us, alone, we'd be right. But it's not.
Times are tough.
There is so much hunger in the world - and not just for food.
There is so much that needs to be done,
the problems sometimes seem insurmountable.
It's easy to get discouraged, to give up, to sit back down.
But this story can motivate us to get up off the ground,
follow Jesus' example and become part of the solution,
knowing that when we pool our resources and efforts with others,
with faith in God,
miracles can happen.
Soup is made, people are fed,
what is broken can be made whole.
In the gospels, Jesus repeatedly says that the Kin-dom of God is here,
all around us,
if only we could open our eyes and see.
Just for a moment, a deserted place was deserted no longer
because the Kin-dom of God was visible here on earth -
and there was more than enough for all to be fed.
In the deserted places in our world,
let's make it visible again.
Amen.

"Until All Are Fed"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLwmYIzkb78>

SHARING GOD'S TABLE

As in that deserted place,
long ago,
we gather as a community,
to listen to Jesus.
And now, as then,
the space between us becomes a table
at which we are fed,
and there is room at this table for all.

This table is open to all who seek nourishment for the soul.
Join together in this holy communion
not because you must, but because you may
not because you are full
but because in your emptiness you are in need of God's mercy and assurance
come just as you are
It is the Lord's table
And it is spread for you.

I invite you to hold your hands over the elements as we pray:
Lord,
Wherever we are,
no matter how deserted it seems,
we are not truly alone,
because you are with us..
Bless this bread and this cup
May they be vibrant with your grace
Nourishing what is deepest in us.
And through this holy meal
May our eyes and hearts be opened
To the wonder of your presence
Even in the most unexpected of places
May we come to know
that wherever we are
In Real Life, in Second Life,
We are connected to each other
Through our faith in you,
And that in and through this community,
we may find that your love
Is as real and tangible
As this bread and drink
We share.
Amen.

Now take the bread.
Feel it in your hand.
And let us remember another time, and another table,
when Jesus gathered in a upper room with his disciples,
his closest friends.
When he took the bread on the table for the evening meal, blessed it, broke it, and
shared it saying "This is my body, given for you. Take. Eat. And remember me."

Let us eat this bread of life together.
(pause to eat)

Now pick up your cup of drink,
Because at the end of the meal, Jesus took a cup of wine, the juice of the vine,
And said, "This is the cup of the new covenant, a new relationship in my blood.
Drink, and as often as you drink, remember me."

Let us drink this cup of blessing together.
(pause to drink)

Let us pray.
Lord of all our life,
We give thanks that you have welcomed us
To your table.
As we have been given healing and hope and nourishment
At this table,
May we share it with others,
Each of our offerings coming together
Until all are fed.
Amen.

WORDS FOR THE JOURNEY

"Blessing of Enough" by Jan Richardson
I know how small
this blessing seems;
just a morsel
that hardly matches
the sharp hunger
you carry inside you.
But trust me
when I say—
though I can scarcely
believe it myself—
that between
and behind
and beneath
these words
there is a space
where a table
has been laid
a feast
has been prepared
all has been
made ready
for you
and it will be
enough

and more.
Amen

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

And now,
Our worship is over, but our ministry to the world is just beginning.
The world is waiting.
Go in peace, come again in hope.
Amen.

MUSIC FOR THE JOURNEY

“Room At The Table” by Carrie Newcomer
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=920M5bdQ4N4>