

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.  
During the opening piece, please feel free to make any Announcements for the good of the community.  
And 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:  
In today's lesson, the folk in authority feel threatened by the message of Jesus. This song is about precisely that kind of "authority."  
[https://youtu.be/9NnedZXcupI?si=n79a1xg0I-NK7yK\\_](https://youtu.be/9NnedZXcupI?si=n79a1xg0I-NK7yK_), "Portrait of Authority" ~Bad Religion

Nothing more, nothing less,  
An icon on the wall, decoration and duress,  
That which many strive to be,  
It's the marble statue staring over me,  
And nobody has the will to tear it down,  
it determines wrong and right,  
but to me it's just a stereotype  
and it makes us lose our sight.  
The portrait of authority (portrait of authority),  
You tell me that's what I'm supposed to be (portrait of authority),  
You tell me that's what I'm supposed to be.  
Another time, another man,  
An oppressive intrusion  
And a plague across his land,  
And it haunts him every day,  
It tells him that he has no chance  
His hope just fades away,  
And he lives his life prepared to tear it down,  
But he can't muster the support,  
And to him it's just a stereotype  
Of his life-long fight.  
The portrait of authority (portrait of authority),  
It embodies what he cannot be (portrait of authority),  
It's what he cannot be.  
The portrait of authority (portrait of authority),  
Portrait of authority.

#### ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Most churches have a time of offering.  
Making an offering, sharing what you can in God's name, is a spiritual practice.  
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](http://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.

#### 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."

#### SCRIPTURE

Matthew 21:23-46

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said,

‘By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’

Jesus said to them, ‘I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.

Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?’

And they argued with one another, ‘If we say, “From heaven”, he will say to us, “Why then did you not believe him?”

But if we say, “Of human origin”, we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.’

So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’

And he said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

‘What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, “Son, go and

work in the vineyard today.”

He answered, “I will not”; but later he changed his mind and went.

The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, “I go, sir”; but he did not go.

Which of the two did the will of his father?’

They said, ‘The first.’

Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

‘Listen to another parable.

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower.

Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.

When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce.

But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way.

Finally he sent his son to them, saying, “They will respect my son.”

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.”

So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’

They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.’

Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the scriptures:

“The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord’s doing,

and it is amazing in our eyes”?

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.

The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.’

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.

They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

SERMON        “Interruption!”

Today’s sermon was inspired by a Sermon Seed written by the Rev. Dr. Cheryl A. Lindsay, the UCC’s Minister for Worship and Theology.

She focused on the questioning of Jesus’ authority and the first of the two parables we heard this morning—and I know it resulted in an extra-long scripture lesson today, but I absolutely could not end the lesson where she did.

I mean, I could have, but I never would have felt ok about it because I think we need the full picture, here.

We need the full picture of the conflict at hand—with the chief priests and the

Pharisees on one side, and with Jesus and his followers on the other.

As Rev. Lindsay points out:

“Jesus has been ministering and teaching for a significant time.

They have heard his teaching before, and it’s worth noting that they never question the content of the teaching, just the person conveying it.

Their objection, however, is to both, but they do not have an argument against the claims that Jesus makes that are deeply rooted in the Law and the Prophets.

He knows the sacred texts better than they do for reasons obvious to those who follow him but oblivious to those who hold an adversarial attitude towards him.

Jesus and his teaching threatens them.

They question his authority because his message undercuts theirs.

The priests and the elders have lost their way, forgetting that the role of religious leaders is to facilitate the faithful functioning of the community, not to hold power over but to share power with those entrusted to their care.

Jesus cuts through their rules and barriers, regulations and boundaries in order to be with those seeking an encounter with the Holy One.

There’s no need for an intermediary when the Creator comes to creation.”

That’s the conflict: the priests and the elders are threatened by Jesus and his teaching. His message undercuts their message. They cannot argue with it, because he’s right, and they hate it.

Can you hear the passion in my voice?

What’s that about?

It is so important that we know the who and the why of this conflict. It’s about the religious leaders and how their power has been threatened.

Again, it’s Rev. Lindsay who points out that:

“There is no inherent conflict, however, between Jesus and the Jewish people.

He and his earliest and closest followers faithfully practiced the faith.

In the early church, it was common for followers of Jesus to keep Sabbath on one day and to gather for Christian worship and fellowship the next.

It is important to remember this reality as this passage, among others, has been used to denigrate Jewish people and to justify violence against them.

Not only is that harmful, it’s not faithful to the good news of Jesus.”

But it’s my passion you hear in my voice.

I hate when the words of Jesus are used to justify denigration and violence.

I hate it.

“There is a troubling (supersessionist) turn in some commentaries when they work out interpretations of these two parables.

They take them to mean that the church now “supersedes” Israel in God’s work of salvation.

In the parable of the two sons they associate the disobedient son with Israel and the obedient son with the church.

In the second parable, they associate the evil tenants with Israel and the “other” (new) tenants with the church.

Quite apart from the way in which such interpretations could promote supersessionism and its attendant abuses, this is a distortion of the plain meaning of the parables.

Jesus’ “target” is the religious leaders, not Israel as such.

It is unlikely that Matthew or his (predominantly Jewish) community would have promoted this idea, setting Jew against Gentile in their shared community of faith. Matthew maintains a privileged place for Israel in God's salvation history while opening God's blessing to all the nations. The inclusion of the nations was part of the traditional Jewish eschatological hope.

There is much more reason to believe Matthew is associating Israel with the vineyard itself (as in Isa. 5:1-7). It is a change in the leaders that is needed; replacing the unfaithful with faithful leaders. (Anna Case-Winters)

If you're not feeling troubled by that interpretation, I beg you to reconsider; the anti-Semitism it bolsters is not a thing of the past. In fact, Anti-Semitic incidents in the United States have nearly tripled in the last 6 years. And I hate knowing that such hatred is at all supported by interpretation of the scripture I hold so dear:

"Such interpretations of Christian Scriptures constitute a long, shameful, and tragic tradition of anti-Jewish attitude and practices among Christian groups that should not be forgotten, but should never be replicated. Such readings pose an ongoing challenge to Gospel readers. Has God forever abandoned Israel, revoking covenant with God's people? Has God withdrawn love and grace once and for all? It is both tragic, given the history of interpretation, and hopeful, for a different future, to recognize that these supersessionist or replacement readings are not inevitable or necessary. They can be interrupted." (Warren Carter)

These interpretations are wrong. And it does not take a Biblical scholar to see that they are wrong. Jesus was Jewish. His disciples were Jewish. The 12 Apostles were Jewish. The crowds of people who followed him throughout his ministry—Jewish! It is the chief priests and the Pharisees who are at the center of these passages—religious leaders who have lost their way, who are threatened, and afraid, and hateful. When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet. That is the point, not some twisted, anti-Semitic reading of the text. Such readings are not inevitable. They are not necessary. They can be interrupted. And I, for one, intend to interrupt them. I invite you to interrupt them, too. What do you say? Amen?

#### PRAYER PREPARATION:

I regret to inform you that I could not find the lyrics to this song published

anywhere.

But I can tell you that it was recorded by a Jewish Bluegrass band, and is a prayerful response to the massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue.

<https://youtu.be/K9RSZXgfKIM?si=ufngUkAr-fXsWNpq>, "Tree of Life" ~Nefesh Mountain

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:

I am in the habit of breaking this silence with another prayer, but truthfully—today I do not have the words to express the heaviness in my heart.

I will instead simply say that God knows my heart, and for that, I am grateful.

Amen.

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:

I thought I'd end tonight with a piece of music from a remarkable woman who also happens to be a Russian Jew who knows what it's like to be a legal alien in the United States.

But also, her music just plain makes me happy. And that kind of creativity also gives me hope.

And I wanted to share that hope with you as you go out into the worlds you travel!

<https://youtu.be/VCokhCqK9rw?si=uQJDGhbSfFQQw9q0>, "Better" ~Regina Spekter

If I kiss you where it's sore  
If I kiss you where it's sore  
Will you feel better, better, better?  
Will you feel anything at all?  
Will you feel better, better, better?  
Will you feel anything at all?  
Born like sisters to this world  
In a town blood ties are only blood  
If you never say your name out loud to anyone  
They can never ever call you by it  
If I kiss you where it's sore  
If I kiss you where it's sore  
Will you feel better, better, better?  
Will you feel anything at all?  
Will you feel better, better, better?  
Will you feel anything at all?  
You're getting sadder, getting sadder, getting sadder, getting sadder  
I don't understand, and I don't understand  
But if I kiss you where it's sore  
If I kiss you where it's sore  
Will you feel better, better, better?  
Will you feel anything at all?  
Will you feel better, better, better?  
Will you feel anything at all?  
Anything at all  
Will you feel anything at all?  
Anything at all  
Will you feel anything at all?  
Anything at all

\*end\*