

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.

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

GATHERING MUSIC

"Prayer for Presence" and "As A Deer Longs"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4N7LLXSZDU&t=118s>

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 continue tonight with our sermon series based on Barbara Brown Taylor's book, "An Altar in the World."

As this Thursday is Thanksgiving Day in the US,

I'm going to look at Barbara's "The Practice of Pronouncing Blessings,"

Along with our scripture text from the Book of Genesis,

The Call of Abram, who will later be called "Abraham."

Let us listen to God speaking through the words of
Genesis chapter 12 verses 1 through 3.

GENESIS 12:1-3

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."

The Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

"The Practice of Pronouncing Blessings"

Let us pray. . . .

You may have noticed that I often say, "Blessings" before I log off.

Some of you do too.

Every time we do that we are pronouncing a blessing.

If you sneeze in public, several people may respond with "Bless you" automatically,
Yet would rarely think of doing so intentionally.

Some might even say, "Oh, I can't offer a blessing - I'm not qualified, I'm not good
with words, etc."

Anyone can pronounce a blessing and you can bless anything.

And you can learn a lot about the world around you by practicing blessing.

When you bless something or someone you focus on it, pay attention to it.

Barbara gives the example of blessing a stick you pick up from the ground.

Even a stick on the ground has a story.

What tree did it come from?

How did it end up on the ground? Was it broken by some creature passing by?

Or did it fall from the wind? Or an accumulation of snow?

Has it been lying there long?

Barbara writes: "To pronounce a blessing on something,

It is important to see it as it is.

What purpose did this stick serve?

Did a bird sit on it?

Did it bear leaves that sheltered the ground from the hottest summer sun?"

Smell it. Can you still smell the scent of sap on it?

"This is no less than the artery of a tree that you are holding in your hand.

Its tissue has come from the sun and from the earth.

Put it back where you found it and it will turn back into earth again."

But before you put it back, you can offer a blessing.

Something like,

"Bless you, stick, for being you."

Sounds simple, silly even, but try it.

You can do it with things you have around you.

The chair you are sitting in.

The computer you are using to be here in SL tonight.

A pen. Your coffee cup, and the coffee in it.

Anything can be blessed, and anyone can offer a blessing.

If things your critical mind would say doesn't deserve a blessing.

As you try it, you may find your inner judge mouthing off inside your head, saying things like:

"Who gave you the right to call that dump blessed? Who do you think you are, anyway?"

Or "Where did you get the eyes to see the holiness in a dump like that? Who taught you to do that?"

Then you can get curious. Where did that judgment come from? Where did I learn that?

So you can also learn a lot about yourself through this practice.

The best way to discover the effect of blessings is to try it a few times and see what happens.

"The practice itself will teach you what you need to know."

There are no magic words, but Barbara does share some wisdom from various traditions that practice blessing.

"The first piece of wisdom is that a blessing does not confer holiness.

The holiness is already there, embedded in" the very essence of the thing.

All are of God, as God is in all things,

So they all "share in God's holiness."

In Jewish tradition, blessings begin by blessing God.

For example,

"Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe,

Who has made the works of creation."

Celtic Christian writer John Philip Newell,

Whose meditations and prayers we often use in our morning meditations here at First UCC SL,

Continues that practice.

We heard an example at the beginning of worship from him:

"At the beginning of time and at the end,

You are God and I bless you."

We begin blessings by blessing God,

because God is in all things.

Beginning blessings by blessing God reminds us that God,

In the words of the Gospel of Matthew,

makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good

and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

So this practice of pronouncing blessings can be used not only for those things we are grateful for,

But also for those things we are not as grateful for

That are nevertheless part of this complicated world.

We bless those things because God is in all things,

And will help shift our perspective and relationship to them.

As Barbara writes:

"Blessing prayers do not overlook such complexity or the pain and suffering that can accompany it.

They simply decline to adjudicate it."

We may feel like cursing it,

But as our scripture texts cautions,

That which we curse may bring down curses on our own heads.

And haven't we seen that play out on the world stage recently?

So we can choose blessing instead,

And leave the judgment up to God.

Also, by blessing what we may otherwise be inclined to curse
We may begin to really believe that God blesses us as well,
That we are worthy of such blessing,
Which the Bible tells us we have already received.
Indeed, the fact that we are able to bless one another is itself evidence that we
have been blessed, whether we remember it or not.
We are, like Abram, blessed to be a blessing.
After all, Abram, whom God blesses, is a very imperfect man –
Both before and after this blessing.
Yet God finds him worthy of blessing.
Lastly, to look with compassion at others and bless them
Puts you, as Barbara writes, “as close to God as you can get.”
I’ve talked about the Compassion Practice before,
And pronouncing blessings is the Compassion Practice at work.
“To learn to look with compassion on everything that is;
To see past the terrifying demons outside to the bawling hearts within;
To make the first move toward the other,
However many times it takes to get close;
To open your arms to what is instead of waiting until it is what it should be ...
This is to land at God’s breast.
To pronounce a blessing on something is to see it from the divine perspective.
To pronounce a blessing is to participate in God’s own initiative.
To pronounce a blessing is to share God’s own audacity.
This may be why blessing prayers make some people uncomfortable.”
Why some are more comfortable letting the paid pray-ers,
The clergy,
Say the blessings for them.
Barbara closes this chapter with a story about her dying father.
He had a sudden seizure and was taken to the hospital,
Where he lay on a bed in the hallway, waiting to die,
Because there were no rooms available.
He was dazed, but he knew his family were around him.
Barbara’s husband, Ed, went over, leaned down, and said something in her father’s
ear.
Then Ed knelt down on the linoleum floor by her father’s bed,
So that his head fit beneath her father’s bony hand.
The Ed reached up to put one of his own hands over her father’s,
So it did not slip off his head,
And held it in place for a moment, while her father’s lips moved.
When Ed got back up, he said something else in her father’s ear and stepped away.
“What was that?” Barbara asked her husband when he was back at her side.
“I asked him to bless me,” said Ed, “I asked him to give me his blessing.”
Anyone can ask for a blessing, and anyone can bless.
You don’t need seminary training and official paperwork to authorize you to do it.
So I encourage you to try it, not just once, but enough so you begin to see the
blessing in the blessing.
As Barbara writes, “the world needs you to do this,
Because there is a shortage of people willing to kneel wherever they are
And recognize the holiness holding its sometimes bony,
Often tender,

Always life-giving hand above their heads. . . .
That we are willing to bless one another is miracle enough to stagger the very stars.”
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.

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 pray together:
Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed by Thy name.
Thy kin-dom come, 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 kin-dom and the power and the glory,
forever.
Amen.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Barbara ends her chapter on The Practice of Pronouncing Blessings by quoting a poem by Sufi poet Rumi,
So I'd like to close with it as well,
It is a blessing as well:
“Today like every other day

we wake up empty and frightened.
Don't open the door to the study and begin reading.
Take down a musical instrument.
Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground."
Amen.

"Let the Beauty We Love Be What We Do" - Carol Logan
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85bYF1ehsas>

GO IN PEACE!