

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:
Our opening song's most memorable line, "You gotta keep 'em separated," speaks directly to today's scripture lesson.
The rest of the song describes some of the realities of gang violence and reads like a cautionary tale—which speaks directly to today's scripture lesson.
https://youtu.be/GHUql3OC_uU?si=DYEMnEDp0h1r1ogW, "Come Out and Play" ~The Offspring

You gotta keep 'em separated
Like the latest fashion
Like a spreading disease
The kids are strappin' on their way to the classroom
Getting weapons with the greatest of ease
The gangs stake out their own campus locale
And if they catch you slippin' then it's all over pal
If one guy's colors and the other's don't mix
They're gonna bash it up, bash it up, bash it up, bash it up
Hey, man, you talkin' back to me?
Take him out (you gotta keep 'em separated)
Hey, man, you disrespecting me?
Take him out (you gotta keep 'em separated)
Hey, they don't pay no mind
If you're under 18 you won't be doing any time
Hey, come out and play
By the time you hear the siren
It's already too late
One goes to the morgue and the other to jail
One guy's wasted and the other's a waste
It goes down the same as the thousand before
No one's getting smarter, no one's learning the score
Your never-ending spree of death and violence and hate
Is gonna tie your own rope, tie your own rope, tie your own...
Hey, man, you disrespecting me?
Take him out (you gotta keep 'em separated)
Hey, man, you talkin' back to me?
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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

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 25:31-46

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.
All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.
Then the king will say to those at his right hand,
"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;
for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."
Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?
And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?
And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"
And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."
Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;
for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me."
Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?"
Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."
And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

SERMON "In the End"

I promise that I did not know that this was the scripture for this week when I crafted last week's sermon—
but I will admit that this piece has been sitting at the core of my personal theology alongside maybe two other really important lessons from scripture for my entire adult life—
so I'm kind of not surprised that what I explored last week lines up so well with today's lesson.
But also, we've been following along in Matthew all along, and it shouldn't surprise us that certain themes get picked up and repeated—
after all, this is all the same author telling us about the life and teaching of one man!
Speaking of the life and teachings of Jesus, the Rev. Cheryl A. Lindsay says that, "If there is a record of Jesus speaking about the end times and his second coming, this is it."
After turning his attention from religious leaders to his devoted followers, Jesus focuses on how they are to proceed once he departs.

This is the last of that teaching.”

Jesus said, “‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.

All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.”

Ok, so, the setting is the return of “the Son of Man,” sitting on his throne—a symbol of authority and justice.

But his actions are like those of a shepherd—someone who cares for the flock.

This Shepherd separates people into two categories, like one might separate the sheep from the goats.

I wonder about that metaphor.

I wonder, and I remember how things became more clear to me last week when I thought about how the Hebrew scripture may have influenced Jesus’ storytelling.

I could go on for a long time about the imagery of sheep and goats in the Hebrew Bible, but I only ran across one that had anything to do with separating one from another—

it’s in the story of Jacob, just before he gets renamed “Israel,” as he’s working to be able to support his family and get out from under his father-in-law’s thumb:

Genesis 30:31-36

He said, ‘What shall I give you?’ Jacob said, ‘You shall not give me anything; if you will do this for me, I will again feed your flock and keep it: let me pass through all your flock today, removing from it every speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and such shall be my wages. So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come to look into my wages with you. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, shall be counted stolen.’ Laban said, ‘Good! Let it be as you have said.’ But that day Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted, and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had white on it, and every lamb that was black, and put them in charge of his sons; and he set a distance of three days’ journey between himself and Jacob, while Jacob was pasturing the rest of Laban’s flock.

I don’t know if Jesus had this scene in the back of his head as he spoke to his disciples, but I find it worthwhile to remember that both sheep and goats were valuable—

in the case of Jacob, goats are to be his wages, and those wages become the center of an injustice.

These words of Jesus are heavy with judgement, and at the center of that judgement are issues of injustice.

And.

All of the people are valuable. Both sheep and goats are valuable.

The judgement does not make anyone worthless, and that makes this teaching nothing less than a tragedy.

There is nothing more important than being human.

And when the day of the Lord comes, all humans will be judged according to how we treated each other in this world, in our everyday lives.

Period.

So have some compassion, for God’s sake.

Rev. Lindsay points us toward something that I'd never considered regarding this separation of sheep from goats,
"Jesus shares words of caution as he describes what re-creation of the beloved community will look like. There are similarities with that projected experience and the first narrative of creation."

She's right, consider this:

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.

And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.

God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.

And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.'

So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome.

And it was so. God called the dome Sky.

And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. (Genesis 1:1-8)

Rev. Lindsay is right:

"God creates and re-creates through separating.

In the beginning, there is chaos; in the world Jesus entered and humanity inhabits, there is chaos of a different kind.

In order to bring order, the Creator goes through a process of separating..."

I really like that read! In literature it's called "book-ending" when a theme from the very beginning of the story reappears in some fashion for the end of the story—and I find those things incredibly satisfying.

It reminds me of a very, very short story from one of my favorite authors. I'm going to share it with you now, but please know that I've transcribed it from a recording—my books are all in boxes, still.

I hope Mr. Gaiman will forgive me if I got any capitalizations or punctuation wrong! The piece is:

"In the End" by Neil Gaiman

In the end, the Lord gave mankind the world. All the world was Man's, save for one garden.

"This is my garden," said the Lord, "and here you shall not enter."

There was a man and a woman who came to the garden, and their names were "Earth" and "Breath." They had with them a small fruit, which the man carried, and when they arrived at the gate to the garden the man gave the fruit the woman, and the woman gave the fruit to the serpent with the flaming sword who guarded the eastern gate. And the serpent took the fruit and placed it on a tree in the center of the garden. Then Earth and Breath knew their clothedness and removed their garments, one by one, until they were naked.

And when the Lord walked through the garden, he saw the man and the woman who no longer knew Good from Evil, but were satisfied.

Then the Lord opened the gates and gave mankind the garden.

And the serpent he raised up and it walked away proudly on four legs, and where it went then, no man can say.
And after that there was nothing but silence in the garden, save for the occasional sound of the man taking away a name from another animal.

I like that. I like it a lot.
What do you say? Amen?

PRAYER PREPARATION:

This song talks about the beginning and the end and compassion—and I hope it moves you the way that it moves me.

<https://youtu.be/tLCXt4d-wz0?si=F4zD5DewQRR6Z2A7>, “Two Thousand Years” ~Billy Joel

In the beginning
There was the cold and the night
Prophets and angels
Gave us the fire and the light
Man was triumphant
Armed with the faith and the will
That even the darkest ages couldn't kill
Too many kingdoms
Too many flags on the field
So many battles
So many wounds to be healed
Time is relentless
Only true love perseveres
It's been a long time and now I'm with you
After two thousand years
This is our moment
Here at the crossroads of time
We hope our children
Carry our dreams down the line
They are the vintage
What kind of life will they live?
Is this a curse or a blessing that we give?
Sometimes I wonder
Why are we so blind to fate?
Without compassion
There can be no end to hate
No end to sorrow
Caused by the same endless fears
Why can't we learn from all we've been through
After two thousand years?
There will be miracles
After the last war is won
Science and poetry
Rule in the new world to come
Prophets and angels
Gave us the power to see
What an amazing future there will be

And in the evening
After the fire and the light
One thing is certain
Nothing can hold back the night
Time is relentless
And as the past disappears
We're on the verge of all things new
We are two thousand years

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:

Eternal Savior, there is nothing that will ever separate us from You.

Even in these despairing, hopeless times, we trust in You that somehow, this will turn, this will change, this pain and suffering we are experiencing will come to an end and that You will lead us through.

We hold on to the hope of new life now, that we can be Your disciples on earth and live by example for others.

We pray that we can find peace in our own lives, so we can live by that peace to one another.

Help us to remember that You are an eternal God, not a temporary one.

What we experience and know now is temporary, but what You have shown us—Your way, Your truth, and Your life—is eternal.

We cling to that hope, O Sovereign of all.

Amen. (Rev-o-lution Resources by Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell

<http://rev-o-lution.org>, (c) 2021. Used by permission.)

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 have always seen something of the Second Coming of Jesus in this song.

Let's find out if you see it, too!

<https://youtu.be/8LhCd1W2V0Q?si=s4bgceRalBtjVd23>, "Are You Gonna Go My Way?" ~Lenny Kravitz

I was born long ago

I am the chosen, I'm the one

I have come to save the day

And I won't leave until I'm done

So that's why, you've got to try

You got to breathe and have some fun

Though I'm not paid, I play this game

And I won't stop until I'm done

But what I really want to know is

Are you gonna go my way?

And I got to, got to know, eh

I don't know why, we always cry

This we must leave and get undone

We must engage and rearrange

And turn this planet back to one

So tell me why, we got to die?

And kill each other one by one

We've got to hug, and rub-a-dub

We've got to dance, and be in love

(But what I really want to know is)

Are you gonna go my way?

And I got to, got to know

C'mon!

Are you gonna go my way?

'Cause baby, I got to know, yeah

end