

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.

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.

This is the last Sunday before Advent,

which on the traditional liturgical calendar is called "Reign of Christ" or "Christ the King" Sunday.

Some of you may remember that when I lead worship on this Sunday I always include this video from Stephen Colbert.

Enjoy.

"King of Glory" – Stephen Colbert

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oASYa-Wkroc>

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

The lectionary gospel reading is the last reading from the Gospel of Matthew for the next 2 years.

With Advent we move to another year in the Revised Common Lectionary.

Today's scripture includes the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats,

Which I doubt is anyone's favorite parable,

But which also includes a very familiar, if challenging, text.

We are reading this scripture in the context of the last of our sermon series Based on Barbara Brown Taylor's book, "An Altar in the World."
Today we'll be looking at the Practice of Encountering Others.
Let us listen to God speaking through the words of Matthew, chapter 25, verses 31 through 46.

MATTHEW 25:31-46 (NRSVUE)

[Jesus said,] "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.
All the nations will be gathered before him,

and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

"Then the King will say to those on his right,

'Come, you who are blessed by my Father;

take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,

I was a stranger and you invited me in,

I needed clothes and you clothed me,

I was sick and you looked after me,

I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him,

'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you,

or thirsty and give you something to drink?

When did we see you a stranger and invite you in,

or needing clothes and clothe you?

When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply,

'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

"Then he will say to those on his left,

'Depart from me, you who are cursed,

into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat,

I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,

I was a stranger and you did not invite me in,

I needed clothes and you did not clothe me,

I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

"They also will answer,

'Lord, when did we see you hungry

or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes

or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

"He will reply,

'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

The Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

"Faces of God"

Let us pray . . .

"Just as you did it to one of the least of these . . . you did it to me. . . .
Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."
Jesus said it.

Profound, radical words. .

Uncomfortable words,

because we know the implications -- if we take Jesus seriously,
if accept that Jesus meant what he said.

I know that I can't help everyone.

I don't have either the money or the time.

I could give away everything I have

and wouldn't make a dent in the problem of world hunger, or poverty, or universal
health care,

or any of the major social problems implicated by this story.

I can't fix the environmental crisis no matter how much recycling I do.

The problems are so big, so overwhelming, that they often paralyze us -
we feel powerless in the face of such need.

How can anything small thing we can do make a difference?

We look into the mirror of this story -- and judge ourselves wanting.

We can never be sheep - it seems an impossible goal -- so why bother?

It's goats all the way for us - we're doomed.

Or are we?

I think part of the problem with scripture stories like this

Is that we read them through the lens of our own inner critic, or inner judge,

Rather than with the eyes of the God we know,

Intellectually at least,

Is a God of love.

And who - most importantly - we know loves us.

At some level we don't really believe that God loves us,

Our inner critic tells us we're not worthy.

So as soon as we read Bible passages like this, we hear the voice of judgment in
them.

But what if we hear them differently.

I'll give you an example,

Dennis Linn tells a story about his cousins, Ann and George, and their teenage
children,

Children he saw as wonderfully well adjusted.

Dennis once asked Ann and George if they could ever remember a time when he punished
his kids.

They looked blank for a moment then came up with a story

About a car trip when the kids were making so much noise it was dangerously
distracting,

So George growled at them,

"If you kids don't be quiet I'm going to tie you to the roof of the car."

And it got really quiet.

When the teens came home, Dennis asked them the same question.

Son Joe's face lit up and he said,
"Remember that time we were in the car on a trip and we were making so much noise?
Dad, you told us that if we weren't quiet you would tie us to the roof of the car.
And boy did we get quiet,
But we knew you wouldn't tie us to the roof of the car."
And everyone laughed.
If we really know, deep down, that God loves us,
We'll hear these words as the hyperbole of a loving parent,
Not as the threats of a divine judge.
Our image of God matters.
How we read scripture matters.
So let's look at what this scripture actually asks of us.
One of the mischaracterizations I often hear about this story
is that the sheep help every single person in need they come across,
so that only people like Mother Theresa are sheep,
and that goats are those who failed to help even one person,
so most of us are doomed.
I know I would be.
But life isn't so cut and dry,
and Jesus knew that.
Look at the sheep.
Jesus doesn't say they helped every person in need,
he said that when they helped "one of the least of these" they helped Jesus.
Most of us aren't sheep or goats -- we're something in between.
I bet each of us can think of at least one time
when we fed someone who was hungry or gave clothes for someone who needed them.
So we're sheep.
But I bet each of us can also think of at least one time when we walked past a
hungry person
or failed to clothe someone in need,
or drove past a prison without visiting.
So we're goats.
Dennis Linn and his wife, Shiela, and brother, Matt,
Told this to a group of nuns at a retreat,
And one very old sister's hand shot up and she exclaimed,
"I get it! We're all good goats!"
Which became the title of one of the Linn family's books,
"Good Goats: Healing our Image of God."
It's a gem.
So if judgment isn't the point, what does this parable have to say to us?
First, it's important to realize that Jesus was using a traditional teaching method
of his time;
this is a story of apocalypse,
which literally means "revelation,"
to "reveal" or "lift the veil"
but its purpose wasn't to reveal the future, or God's plan for the future,
its purpose was to reveal what is happening now,
and like father George's hyperbole about putting his children on the car roof,
the goal is to get us to change our behavior,
the way we live and move through the world.

Apocalypse isn't about some nebulous future,
ours or the world's.

The goats, they failed because they failed to help even one.

Jesus wanted us to see that each act or each failure to act when the choice is
presented to us –
it matters.

Why?

Because what you do for the least of these,
for each hungry, thirsty, sick, imprisoned stranger,
you do to me, Jesus said.

You want to see the face of God?

Look into the face of the people you meet,
Particularly the vulnerable, the marginalized.

This, says Barbara Brown Taylor,

Is the Practice of Encountering Others.

It's the practice of coming face-to-face with another,

Especially those "different enough to to qualify as a capital 'O' Other –

And at least entertaining the possibility that this is one of the faces of God."

She recommends starting this practice when you are in the checkout line at the
store,

Meeting the eyes of the cashier, even if just for a moment,

And saying, "thanks."

"Sometimes," writes Barbara, "that is all another person needs to know she has been
seen–

Not the cashier but the person–

But even if she does not seem to notice,

The encounter has occurred.

You noticed, and because you did,

Neither of you will ever be quite the same again."

Barbara only spoke of human Others,

But I would add all beings from the more-than-human world as well.

Have you ever looked deeply into the eyes of an animal?

What did you see?

I remember distinctly when one of my daughter's high school friends

Was holding our cat,

Paused in her petting and looked directly into his eyes.

They stared at each other, cat and teenage girl, for a few moments,

Then she said in a voice of wonder,

"There's someone in there."

"Yes," my daughter said, "I told you."

The king on his throne,

The hungry beggar, the naked one on the street,

The prisoner, the cat,

The teenage girl,

The face of Jesus every one.

Jesus turns the image of a king, and a kingdom, on its head,

And with it our image of God.

Instead of a kingly judge, what we need to see is kin,

Our relations,

In the kin-dom of God.

I read a story about something that happened to a man named Tom Stone.
He was on his way home from a New Year's Eve party.
He'd had a lot to drink and didn't want to drive,
but he didn't live far away, so he decided to walk.
There was one area he had to walk through that was a little rough, and it worried him.
As he walked, he kept his eyes open for signs of trouble.
But once he crossed, 32nd street, he knew he would be safe enough.
So he kept walking.
He was almost there, to 32nd street,
when he thought he saw what looked like a man's body on the other side of the street ahead.
Probably somebody passed out, he thought, and began to walk by.
But then, for some reason, he paused, and looked. Really looked.
And as he looked, in the dim light he saw that the man was naked,
and there was something there, it could be blood.
Still looking around for trouble,
Tom made his way over to the beaten man.
The man didn't move.
He had been severely beaten, stripped of his clothes, and robbed.
But he was still breathing, and groaning softly.
Tom called an ambulance, and waited.
While they waited,
the man opened his eyes once and looked right at Tom.
Then seemed to lose consciousness again.
Tom accompanied the man to the emergency room
and stayed with him until he could see that the man would be well taken care of.
Then Tom went home.
But the next day, when Tom woke up in the afternoon,
he decided to go to the hospital to see how the man was doing.
It took a while to find him,
because he hadn't known his name,
but he found his room, and went in.
The room was quiet,
but the man was awake and looked at Tom as he came in and whispered,
"I recognize you.
You're the man who helped me last night.
When I saw your face,
I thought it must be the face of Jesus."
Tom was struck dumb.
And as he struggled to find what to say, the man repeated it.
"When I saw your face, I thought it must be the face of Jesus."
Then Tom replied,
"No, it's the other way around.
When I found you, beaten, stripped naked,
I thought you must be Jesus."
Where do we find Jesus,
In the face of the Other,
Within ourselves,
And in the space between us,

The relationship,
The connection we make when we meet the Other's eyes.
In a world that seems too big to be changed,
our lives, our choices, our actions, big and small, they matter –
they have more meaning and value than we can imagine.
It on such little things the kin-dom of God depends.
There is a Swahili proverb that says,
"Drop by drop the bucket fills."
Our one drop makes a difference.
It's an ongoing process.
With each choice to connect,
to help where we can,
a window opens and we see a bit of the kin-dom of God, here on earth.
And each time we turn away,
a window closes, and we miss it.
I believe Jesus tells this story because he knows we are capable of more compassion
than we let ourselves show.
Sometimes we are sheep,
sometimes we are goats.
But we are good goats,
God will never judge us as harshly as our own inner critic,
Because God loves us,
God is with us,
even when we fail,
even when our failures lead to suffering for ourselves or others,
Creating our own hell here on Earth.
But – pay attention, Jesus says, SEE.
Look in the eyes of those in front of you,
Including the face in the mirror
And see me.
Once you see, you cannot unsee,
once you see, you will be moved to do what you can.
Tom Stone and the man he found on the street –
they were both right.
Whichever way you turn,
There is the face of God.
Amen.

This song is an extended contemplative chant.
Make you self comfortable.
Take a deep breath, and listen.
When you feel comfortable with the song,
You may wish to sing along.

"Whichever Way You Turn" by John Philip Newell, sung by Fran McKendree
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3btooRmw_38

By the way – the words of those lyrics are from the Quran.

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

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

“Testify to Love” – Winona Judd
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHBdGz2wH6Q>

GO IN PEACE!