

WELCOME

Grace and peace be with you my friends and familia on this lovely Sunday!

Thank you for coming!

Welcome to First United Church of Christ and Conference Center in second life.

My name is Yadi Martínez-Reyna, I am one of the Pastors in this community.
And anyone you see with a "Minister" tag is an ordained UCC minister in real life.

One of the most exciting things for me to share is that we are a real life church with real life standing in the Eastern Association; Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ (UCC).

We believe that no matter who you are or where you are in your life's journey, you are welcome here!

And as we like to say here, it's good to be real in Second Life!

Our service will be in voice and text.

Music will be on the media viewer, so be sure that you have voice and media turned on.

If you don't know how to do that, let someone know and we'll try to help.
There will be a link in Nearby so you can watch it in your browser if the viewer isn't working for you.

If you would like a bulletin for today's service you can find it in the red binder in the back along with a donation bowl.

One of the blessings and responsibilities that come with our being a real church with real standing is that we, like all UCC churches, support the work of the national church not only with prayer but financially.
So we greatly appreciate any offering you can make to support this ministry.
If you prefer, donations can be made on our website, firstuccsl.org.

So Invite you my friends to join me as we start with an invocation and a prayer.

INVOCATION

Come Holy Spirit and fill this digital place with your presence touching the homes, places and locations where our worship service is being seen, or heard.
Connect your presence through the digital waves infused with your love and covered with your peace.
We pray in your many names. Amen.

If there are any announcements about the life of the church, please type them in Nearby Chat during our Gathering Music.

GATHERING MUSIC

Kirk Franklin - Love Theory (Official Music Video)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3aD80K07iIY>

SCRIPTURES

Today's Scriptures come from the book of John 3:1-16 NRSV

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person."

Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You[c] must be born from above.'

The wind[e] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you[f] do not receive our testimony.

If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

The Word of God for the People of God,

Thanks be to God.

SERMON- Evangelism
Am I save?

In John chapter 3:1-16, we read about an important Jewish leader named Nicodemus who visits Jesus under cover of darkness of night.

Gail R. O'Day describes this as the action of a historical Jewish leader reflecting that of a disciple, even though it was done in secret.

Perhaps Nicodemus feared a public confession might become a problem in the synagogue

community as a Jewish leader?

So privately, Nicodemus confesses to Jesus,
"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God,"
showing Jesus that there are more who believed in him.

Church, today, I want to talk about evangelism.

When I hear this word, I cannot help but remember how I was raised in a
fundamentalist church where evangelism was grounded on John 3:16 and the act of
being born again.

After each church service, morning prayer, bible study, and missionary visit to the
border, our church would recite John 3:16.

In every community gathering, everyone would wait for our leader to raise his hand,
and we would then raise our right hands and recite it loud and proud as a pledge.

The pause between "all who believe in him" and "will not perish" was an
important part of this ritual. As a teen, I was paired with an older person
to pass out tracts in downtown Brownsville or in the plaza of Matamoros, Mexico.

When I was being trained as a young missionary, the emphasis was clear:
people are dying in sin, but we have the solution, and it is Jesus.
The story of Nicodemus was used to remind us that Jesus said,
"You have to be born again."

How many of you were taught that evangelism is telling people they
must accept Jesus into their hearts in order to be born again?
Are you Saved?
Are you born again?

Nicodemus, like many people, is confused by the idea of how
someone can be born again.

As good evangelists, we would tell them that they needed to be
reborn as a new person, free of sin, ready to change your life and give it to
Jesus. Sounds daunting and scary.
That is why for the longest time after I returned to the church,
I felt that the pastors, evangelist, or missionaries were in charge
of this complicated process of becoming a Christ follower.

After all, they were trained to go out there and bring people
to the church who would turn their lives over to Jesus. Does this sound familiar?

But what if I told you, church, that evangelism is more than a personal
salvation, one-time event to check off of your list?

What if I told you that it is NOT a gift to receive after you follow a set of
guidelines?

What if I told you that it is NOT a get out free jail/hell card?

What if I told you that evangelism is something that you and I are also called to

do?

Now I know you're probably thinking, "Oh no, Yadi's lost their mind! We are about to be sent out there to knock on doors, pass out tracts, or make a pledge." Rest easy, church. That is not what I'm talking about at all!

"Evangelism" is not a "recruitment tool" or "religious egoism."
Evangelism is a word that we must reclaim as good news for all, and it is as simple as being authentic, compassionate, and real.

"Evangelism is the inevitable, intentional invitational nature of our life as a church.

We participate and are sent to repair and relieve the particular brokenness and burdens of the persons and systems, despite the real risks of rejection."

In today's reading we read the gospel of John.

The Gospel of John is beautiful and difficult to reconcile when it is taken out of its historical context.

This book has a dualistic form that includes symbols used by some conservatives to excludes others.

A good example is the symbolism of death and life.

If you or I accept the One who died for our sins, we get to live.

The light represented Christ, the Lamb of God, who took the sin of the world.

If we reject this light, we choose the darkness which ultimately means death.

Darkness meant being away from God and risking a life of misery even left behind when Jesus returns.

The church has the same dualistic mentality.

Good or bad?

So you have two options: are you in or out?

Are you safe or not?

As a young person I could no longer buy into this type of good news.

I stopped believing in evangelism because I felt like a cheap salesperson who no longer believed in the product.

What if your family rejects you because you could not stay in the light?

What if your spiritual life is so messy that you just can't measure up to the model of a good Christian?

What if you just do not feel that you fit in sitting in a pew with members who look you up and down because of your tattoos, piercings, or punk fashion style.

Here at First UCC, Second Life you are encouraged to bring all of you, tattoos, glitter, and all.

Do you remember how you felt when you found this place here at First UCC, Second Life?

But we must remember church that evangelism is not about getting people here to the church to put in our rosters.

Evangelism is sharing the good news that all of the avatars, unicorns, furies, and gender fluid people embodied in this digital space are unconditionally loved, with doubts and all.

In the Johannian community, where Nicodemus existed, a choice had to be made between publicly following Jesus or continuing as a Jewish person.

The historical context at that time was the need to choose to help both communities move on with their lives by respecting each other.

I believe that it is the same way in our communities today.

We can be progressive people of faith who respect other communities, such as our siblings who are Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim.

Reading the Gospel of John with a progressive lens helps us share the message of God's grace without the demand to fit faith in a perfectly crafted box and to let them see church evangelism in action beyond words.

We love our neighbor and do justice.

We take care of the least of these

and befriend those who are considered socially unacceptable and unworthy of attention.

WE know how to do that!

We are the living example of what good news is all about.

We know how to reclaim the scriptures from a perspective where God stands with us in the margins.

We know how to be good evangelists church.

Perhaps I misunderstood the message of evangelism all along.

Evangelism is an embodiment of God's love in the world.

Or as Luther Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, it is about pointing people to Christ and not about a "sin management program" or trying to convince people to live a certain way.

Nadia Bolz-Weber took a step further this week in a newsletter and said

"So, John, what does "saved" mean to me?

Being saved from the totally made-up burdens of the existential nightmare of Hell.

But also being saved from my own anger and bitterness about all of it. (that is a process)

Saved from my need to be right about this.

Saved from self-obsession.

Saved from my addictions.

Saved from dualistic thinking.

Saved from thinking that I have to get all my needs met through shit I can buy.

The root word for salvation in Greek is sozo which means wholeness."

When we know this Jesus, we want to be what Jesus was all about,

which church it was about going out to the margins and making people feel welcome, love and accepted. We can do that!

When we become whole, seek to be whole and complete it is our salvation.
For me that meant seeking therapy to deal with all the childhood trauma and mess.
And yet it is not a complete process I must seek wholeness, chose to get up every morning to try and try again.
I was saved 2000 years ago.

You were too.

Church, I propose that we continue seeking Jesus even when our faith is so weak that we feel we have to look for him at night.

Just as we say that it feels good to be real in Second Life, it feels good to know God's love is real. The Holy Spirit inspires, us and enables us to live our lives to the fullest by sharing our gifts with others and serving those less fortunate.

I am confident that God did not call us to a dualistic approach where we hate, reject, close our borders, hide our belongings, and refuse to interact with those who do not believe like us.

In the end, we are called to share a message of hope that does not exclude, but that truly reflects the life and ministry of Jesus.

May wholeness be with you!

Amen

PRAYER PREPARATION:

We have come to the time where we come together in prayer.

Let us give thanks for the gift of this day
and pray for the life of the world ...

If you have a prayer of joy or concern that you wish to lift to God, and have supported by the energy of those gathered here, we invite you to share.

As this song plays, in the silence of our hearts or type your request in the nearby chat.

Song:

Fear is Not My Future (Radio Version)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9xhASFbizA

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.

PASTORAL PRAYER

For embodied healing God of every ache,
Help us to befriend our bodies.
We confess that it is easy to turn against them as the source of our struggle.
Awaken a compassion, a tenderness, toward the parts of us that are changing,
hurting—remembering that our bodies are doing everything they can to protect us,
to hold back the pain and exhaustion.

With every ailing and unseen thing, guide us toward those capable of listening and
perceiving when we are not okay, that we wouldn't feel pressure to pretend or
apologize or explain.

Remind us that we are not a burden but a beacon to those who are so poorly attuned
to their own bodies and needs that they have forgotten what self-compassion looks
like. Help us exist in the truth of what we need.
Hold us in love as we resist the demands of this world.

Breathe

INHALE: Healing is after me.
EXHALE: I am ready to be well.
INHALE: I am more than pain.
EXHALE: Tragedy is not my name.
INHALE: God, restore me to myself.
EXHALE: Let this breath be a mending.
Amen

Black Liturgies - Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for staying human

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

May you practice a sacred reclamation of all this world was made for—dignity, love,
belonging, delight.
May you nurture your own imagination for repair in all its forms, and expand with
self-compassion, in the knowledge that no healing is linear, and no reparation
final.

Go in Peace,

Amen.

MUSIC FOR THE JOURNEY

Now let us dance,

Kirk Franklin - All Things (Music Video)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Qnqm3MHVZM>

Thank you for coming!