

WELCOME

Thank you for coming! We're so glad you've chosen to worship with us today on this Sunday as we continue to walk together this Lent season.

It gives me great joy to tell you that First United Church of Christ and Conference Center 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 real 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."

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.

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

So now,
let us open our heart up to God,
remembering that where two or three are gathered
God is there.

Be still and open yourself to God's presence within and all around.

GATHERING MUSIC

Our gathering song is by Marvin Sapp "He saw the best in me."
I want you to meditate on these words as Jesus sees beyond what others see and sees the best and each and everyone of us.

The Best In Me (Radio Version)

Marvin Sapp

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BY07yWhqILA>

SCRIPTURE - John 2:13-21 NRSV

Today's Scriptures comes from the book of John chapter 2:13-21 NRSV

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves and the money changers seated at their tables.

Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, with the sheep and the cattle.

He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.

He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?"

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?"

But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

The Word of God for the people of God,

Thanks be to God.

Sermon - Jesus did what?

Today's scriptures are one that I have read many times before.

I will admit as a young person I actually got excited about Jesus tossing things in the temple and throwing people out.

I had this image of good guys vs bad guys and we won!

It seems easy enough when you read the passages Jesus goes in and tells people this is my Father's house, how dare you!

This narrative we read today can be found in the gospels, the book of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The story is also found in the book of John but with some difference.

All four of them have the incident occurring before the Passover.

All of them have Jesus flipping tables.

Today, I want to invite you to contemplate the story from the physical action taking place.

I want to invite you into the story and see from the perspective of those standing around watching Jesus in another type of action.

I want to invite you to consider the emotions of those who are selling things, the merchants at the table, the vendors.
And finally I want you to ponder, what spiritual unrest does this story bring up in you?

Perhaps, the 360 degree view of Jesus' actions makes us consider the story from different angles as it invites us to go deeper into the text and ask questions.

Yes, we are invited to wrestle with the text and say, God this makes no sense will you help my unbelief.
Now this is not something I could do as a young fundamentalist Christian.

I believe that things were simple.
You cheat people, you get caught and you get punished.
You sin, you die.
You lie, you pay.
You rob or steal, you should be jailed, and persecuted.
You fail, you fall, you struggle, you're probably bad and these are your actions behind your sinful life.

Ironically as someone who struggled with anger issues as a youngling I liked this Jesus using a whip and tossing things.
I could relate.

And yet, things are not as black and white.
If there is one thing that I have learned as I have progressed in my walk with Christ is that nothing is dualistic.
Or if you are a Star Wars fan you will understand that only the Sith deals in absolutes.

As I mentioned, all three gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke showed that this story was around the time of Jesus' ministry wrapping up and his life coming to an end.
John would parallel this to Luke 4:16-31.

The thing we have to remember about this temple is that it was not like a regular church that you and I might think of in modern times.

According to historians the temple was huge, about the size of twelve soccer fields from end to end.
Writer Amy Jill Levine in the book *Entering the Passion of Jesus*, says that his actions in one end of the temple did not disrupt business as usual.
So then why do it?

I also found odd in Amy J. Levine's writings that what Jesus had done was more symbolic rather than practical.
I had to stop and think about this.
How was this symbolic?

There was nothing symbolic about flipping tables and whipping things around. Come with me to this scene for a moment.

Close your eyes and think about people walking around you and tables set all around with merchants.

And then here comes this guy, he is getting louder.

You turn around to see him take the time to get something to make a whip.

A whip?

Jesus does not act impulsive, he stops to make a whip.

He then starts whipping and turning tables.

John tells us, "In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle.

He also poured out the coins of the money changers. (John 2:14-15).

In all cases but especially in John's Gospel, Jesus appears violent.

When you close your eyes did you see the doves flying, the noise of a disturbance erupting?

Did you see the people scattering so they would not get hit?

Did you hear the coins clanging on the floor, the doves flapping their wings, the cages hitting the table, the tables hitting the ground?

Did you see this scene?

Turn off the volume and pause everything, what does this bring up emotionally?

In the Hero's Bible which was given to me as a gift when I was a youth pastor and I now used it to share stories with my grand boy this story makes Jesus look pretty angry.

Check out this picture that tells this story. (Jesus angry graphic novel picture)
What do you think of this picture?

Now what do you think of this picture that went viral after the Super Bowl? (Picture of man yelling at the coach)

This story that I once cheered for made me uncomfortable today.

Why?

Perhaps it is because as I got older I learned something about grace.

I realized that maybe this story had to do with something other than liars and sinners being punished.

I realized the joy of people coming together and taking time to travel for the Passover. (John 2:13; 6:1, 13:1)

We know that they had cattle, sheep, and doves that were required for burn

offerings. (Lev 1, 3).

As I was thinking about the people traveling and gathering I could not help but think on how they started the convention and conference practices of today! I can still remember the first time I met Doug and Pastor Jerry in person at a UCC general synod convention and the joy we had. See there were already conferences, and gatherings happening in Jesus times.

Now here is the thing about the temple in order to buy anything around there shekels was the currency and money had to be exchanged.

So why did Jesus say, "stop making my house a den of robbers?"

Author Amy J Levin, believes that people were not being exploited, or robbed. So then what was that all about?

Levin says that when we think about the money exchange not to focus on the much needed practice of exchanging the money but rather on the rate in which the money was being exchanged for.

I mean we know that people had to buy animals to sacrifice. Some people did not want to travel with the animals for fear of them getting hurt so they bought them at the temple instead. Business had to happen in the temple; it was part of that life.

I'll break down the temple and its business practices in an excerpt written by author Amy J. Levin.

"The Jerusalem Temple, which King Herod the Great began to rebuild and which was still under construction at the time of Jesus, had several courts.

1. The inner sanctum, known as the "Holy of Holies," is where the high priest entered, only on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, to ask for forgiveness for himself and for the people.
2. Outside of that was the Court of the Priests, then the Court of Israel, the Court of the Women, and then the Court of the Gentiles, who were welcome to worship in the Temple.
3. The outer court, the Court of the Gentiles, is where the vendors sold their goods.
4. The Temple at the time of Jesus was many things: it was a house of prayer for all nations; it was the site for the three pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Shavuot/Pentecost, and Sukkot/Booths; it was a symbol of Jewish tradition (we might think of it as comparable, for the Jewish people of the time, to how Americans might view the Statue of Liberty); it was the national bank; and it was the only place in the Jewish world where sacrifices could be offered."

Jesus was not against the system in place to buy, to sell, to get the animals for sacrifice.

He was and is against a system that benefits the wealthy and exploits the poor.

As people of God we know that the church has to take care of certain aspects of business to run.

We have board meetings.

Which by the way here in SL we are having ours this upcoming month of March.

We have Pastor meetings, or at least we gather to talk about what's coming up in our seasons of the church.

We have the offerings that are collected and the financial responsibility to our denomination.

These things are the practical part of the church.

How can this have any part in the emotional part of the church?

Well, we care for the people of God while doing all we can to keep our digital lights on. Seems like these two things are apart, very polar opposites of each other.

And yet they are connected.

Perhaps it is that in everything we do we must remember why we are doing it.

The business side of the church just as in our daily lives must reflect the one who has called us to give life.

Such practices must move with integrity, fairness, compassion and not be polluted by greed.

When we stand in our truth we do not move towards exploiting others, or taking advantage of those who have nothing.

If this was going on in the background perhaps it gives a reason behind the anger in Jesus' eyes.

How many times has anger gotten the best of us?

The image of Travis Kelsey having a meltdown during the Super bowls was probably not the image he wanted out there.

Social media lit up with comments about Travis yelling at this poor old man.

Emotions got the best of him.

Just as emotions get the best of us.

Although they, coach Andy Reed and Travis would work things out that image will be out there.

Jesus tossing tables, being angry is what many took to this story and held on to.

In the process of Jesus showing us his humanity, he invites us to have that passion for his Father's House.

A house that should be a safe and brave space for many to come and belong.

This claim to the temple compared to his life is to say, I'm clearing all this that gets in the way for you to come in.

This was the symbolism that Jesus was trying to connect.

The connection between the temple falling and being rebuilt with his death and resurrection.

The people around him might have mocked him because he made no sense.

While others were clearly upset that He was once again disrupting what should have been business as usual.

Now that is the spiritual essence of this story and the life of Jesus, radical inclusion.

The radical inclusion that disrupts business as usual.

Business as usual here was the gathering, the selling, the gentiles being allowed in some areas of the temple but not others.

What was the big deal here?

Our Jewish siblings were celebrating Passover.

The people were traveling and gathering as part of their faith practice to go and sacrifice.

Today we celebrate Holy Week from Maundy Thursday, to Good Friday and Easter.

I once heard someone say that Jesus came to get rid of that nonsense of the Jewish people gathering with these new practices of having church.

I just stood there shocked.

Our Jewish siblings still gather and celebrate their Holy days.

Our Muslim siblings gather and celebrate their Holy days.

Our faith calls us to be radically inclusive and respectful of those who practice their Holy Days.

Perhaps, the spiritual movement created here was how Jesus cleared out a path that started in the outskirts of the outer court and moved into our homes.

He went from the holiest of Holy places that only the Priest could go into making a way for all to go in.

Perhaps Jesus was cleaning out the mentality that was once bound by the slavery of dogmas, religion and a world where those in power can decide who gets forgiven and who does not.

I once read in a book in seminary how people would gather their offerings and then take them to the church so the Priest could pray for their family and have their sins forgiven.

These folks did not know how to read.

Perhaps they had not read or realized that the price had been paid.

Jesus cleared out the space and such practices for all to find peace and hope regardless if you can afford it or not.

He moved it from a specific place and way to creating multiple ways to reach him.

You can reach Jesus at home, online (thankful for this place) and even in our cars as we jam on the way to work.

Jesus became the living sacrifice, creating a covenant where we along with anyone who wants to join our faith can come and be radically loved and included. We celebrate this and remember when we share in Holy Communion.

As I was driving to take my youngling to school one morning, I was reading all the signs inviting people to their Easter celebration. I particularly was interested in the ones with children celebrations like finding the eggs, and petting little animals. And yet...and yet...I know that my partner and I cannot just walk in with the boy. I mean we could but it would probably be uncomfortable.

Perhaps the physical part of the cleansing of the temple friends was that Jesus was saying all of this will have to go as a new welcoming reality was being born.

Perhaps the emotional and spiritual connection is a practice that must happen today regardless of the size of the church.

For some people they love big churches and congregations because they have lots of things going on.

They might have more programming for the younger folks in the family. They seem to have something for everyone and the music is legit loud, with lights, and cameras. While others might think that those big churches are only putting on a good show.

For some people they love being in a smaller congregation, a church. I hear the song of cheers, "where everybody knows your name...and they are always glad you came."

But yet at one time or another there is this realization that small churches can become clique, and you either fit into the majority's culture or you're out.

Then what is the point?

Perhaps the point is that Jesus was showing us an uncomfortable reality that comes with speaking out from the gut, with the zeal of the house of the Holy-One within you.

Friends, let us consider a physical response to move, change, transform and clear out what separates us from truly serving God.

Let us consider the emotional things at stake for those in the margins who can't afford to BUY hope, a safe and brave space among our communities.

And lastly, let us ask ourselves, if Jesus came through our doors, digital and real, would he show up, stop, make a whip and clean the place out?

This lent friends, I invite us to take inventory of our lives and explore the physical, emotional and spiritual connection that the stories leading up to the Passion and death of Christ have in your life.

Jesus did what?

Jesus stirred things up again, may he keep it up in our lives.

Amen

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

We have come to this time of prayers.
Together we will lift our prayers of joy and concerns.

We are a community that holds each other in prayer.
Although we know that our God is faithful, and hears us
it is good to know we all pray for each other.

Today, I invite you while this song plays to type in your prayer request in the chat box.

Crowder, Dante Bowe - God Really Loves Us
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yG-Y9bWlCw8>

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

God our Helper, we thank you for keeping our lives always in your care and protection and pray for any and all who are in harm's way.

For those walking in the midst of danger....
For those who are treading a slippery path...
For those who are exhausted and seeking relief...
For those who face a mountain of worry or dept or any other obstacles...
Be Guardian and Guide, we pray, setting all our feet
on your path of righteousness and peace.

We pray for those who are struggling with a new challenge or call, with a major transition in life or livelihood....
with their faith and understanding....with grief, ancient or new...

Keep in your tender care and mercy, O God,
those who are sick in mind, body or spirit..
those weighted down by depression or pain....
those recuperating from surgery or an accident...
Protect not only us and those we love, but also
the whole wide world you so love.

O Holy-One-of-Those in the Margins....
hear our prayers those voice here today
Those spoke only in the depths or our hearts
those for which we have no words
We lift them all to you

Where hope has grown tired and thin, lift our sights,
so that we may see hope beyond hope,
life beyond death,
and you, lifted up before us.
In the name of Christ,
who gave himself in love for us all, we pray.
Amen.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Go forth knowing you are free from condemnation,
free to question and seek, knowing God's love
surrounds you in both the good days and bad.
You are not alone!

Blessings on your journey!

Now let's dance!

This next song has the lyrics to the Spanish parts of the song so enjoy!

Social Club Misfits - Tuyo ft. Danny Gokey + Jordin Sparks (Audio)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_UJORIuwBM