

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.

If you get a message stating that the video is unavailable, please toggle media in your viewer; that usually fixes the problem.

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 with me, or in the aisles, or in the back of the sanctuary, so if the mood strikes you at any point in the service—I say go for it!

GATHERING:

Today's lesson involves someone behaving differently under the cover of darkness than he does in the light.

He's a good person, but is afraid to let the world see his full self—which reminds me of this song.

<https://youtu.be/mWQACEqf4QY?si=jO6pPlMcgALMk0Y6>, "Courage to Change" ~Sia

World, I want to leave you better

I want my life to matter

I am afraid I have no purpose here

I watch the news on TV

Abandon myself daily

I am afraid to let you see the real me

Rain it falls, rain it falls

Pouring on me

And the rain it falls, rain it falls

Sowing the seeds of love and hope, love and hope

We don't have to stay here, stuck in the weeds

Have I the courage to change?

Have I the courage to change?

Have I the courage to change today? (Oh)

Have I the courage to change?

Have I the courage to change?

Have I the courage to change today? (Oh)

You're not alone in all this

You're not alone, I promise

Standing together we can do anything

You're not alone in all this

You're not alone, I promise

Standing together we can do anything

World, you're not alone in all this

You're not alone, I promise

Standing together we can do anything

I want to leave you better

I want my life to matter

I am afraid I have no purpose here

The rain it falls, rain it falls

Pouring on me
And the rain it falls, rain it falls
Sowing the seeds of love and hope, love and hope
You don't have to stay here, stuck in the weeds
Have I the courage to change?
Have I the courage to change?
Have I the courage to change today? (Oh)
Have I the courage to change?
Have I the courage to change?
Have I the courage to change today? (Oh)
You're not alone in all this
You're not alone, I promise
Standing together we can do anything
You're not alone in all this
You're not alone, I promise
Standing together we can do anything
Have I the courage to change?
Have I the courage to change?
Have I the courage to change today? (Oh)
Have I the courage to change?
Have I the courage to change?
Have I the courage to change today? (Oh)
You're not alone in all this
You're not alone, I promise
Standing together we can do anything
You're not alone in all this
You're not alone, I promise
Standing together we can do anything
You're not alone in all this
You're not alone, I promise
Standing together we can do anything
You're not alone in all this
You're not alone, I promise
Standing together we can do anything

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

John 2:23-3:21

When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing.

But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone. 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 apart from the presence of God.’

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 must be born from above.”

The wind 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 a 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 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.

‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’

SERMON “Nicodemus”

Today’s lesson comes immediately after last week’s, which was the overturning of the moneychanger’s tables as it appears in the Gospel of John—which means we’re talking about the very beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry.

I have grown to love the story of Nicodemus because he feels like a real, complex, imperfect human being.

Part of that complexity, at least at this point in the story, is a sincere tension between what is public and what is private.

And—there’s something kind of brutally ironic about that, because this story is the source of two historically “in-your-face” corners of Christianity: born-again Christians and John 3:16.

The thing is, “the context of the larger passage is a private conversation.

Jesus speaks with Nicodemus as the chapter opens.

The gospel demonstrates Jesus teaching and interacting with both his disciples and with crowds.

He also encounters people in need of miraculous intervention or in curious pursuit of answers.

Nicodemus seems to fall in the latter category.

He meets Jesus primarily under the cover of night.

For some reason, he hides his desire to learn from and about Jesus from the world.

More than likely, he fears the impact on his reputation, power, and prestige in his community.

Identifying as a follower of Jesus, even marginally, may cost him, and Nicodemus is not prepared for that. (Cheryl A. Lindsay)

As Nicodemus sits and speaks with Jesus—

I imagine them sitting at a table with a lantern on it, speaking in hushed tones so as not to wake the slumbering household where Jesus and his disciples are “couch surfing”—

Jesus uses the metaphor of being reborn to lay out the path that Nicodemus would

need to walk in order to understand what Jesus is doing.

Within the story, that's all being "born again" is about—inviting one guy to find a way to understand who Jesus is and what it is that he's doing:

"Even if this conversation with Nicodemus is representative, in other words, has meaning beyond the individual of Nicodemus, it still is particular.

Jesus is not speaking to a crowd; he's having a conversation with a person.

While there is universal truth in his teaching; there is also specificity in his message.

While speaking to a person who has placed a limit on his interaction with him, Jesus informs Nicodemus that his ministry is not individualistic.

Jesus comes for the world and its salvation." (Lindsay)

You've heard me say again and again that context matters, and I certainly believe this to be true of John 3:16, "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."

It's a beautiful little summary of one of the core Christian beliefs, but it is not the whole story—in fact, I've often wondered what would happen if one were to show up at a ballgame with a poster board that reads "John 3:17," that's "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

I think it's important to note that this passage is not ultimately about condemning "unfaithful," or "unchristian," people.

It's not about condemnation.

Which is weird, because theologians seem to want to condemn Nicodemus!

"Nicodemus's confusion is typically interpreted as genuine misunderstanding—evidence that, despite his best efforts, this poor Pharisee remains in the darkness (John 1:5, 3:19).

Hearers, however, influenced by the schemas and scripts associated with dissembling, may infer that something more obstinate is afoot:

Nicodemus rejects Jesus's message, presumably because he does not understand who Jesus is.

As a result, Nicodemus chooses posturing over genuinely coming into the Light.

The distinction is slight but important: Nicodemus seems to reject the message more than misunderstanding—at least in this initial encounter.

So while Nicodemus does "misunderstand:" this misunderstanding is aimed at the identity of the Johannine Jesus rather than at his message (3:19-21)...

It is no accident that 3:12-21 focuses not on misunderstanding but on the refusal to believe and receive the message.

Nicodemus embodies this resistance.

At issue therefore, in Johannine parlance, is not cognitive misunderstanding versus cognitive understanding, but rather love of the Light versus love of the darkness, acceptance versus rejection." (Michael R Whitenton)

So—how can we look at Nicodemus without condemnation? I see a parallel with the queer concept of coming out that might be helpful here.

Nicodemus is living a double life. Out in the open, he is a Pharisee, part of an important Jewish social movement that was in many ways the precursor of Rabbinical Judaism as we know it today. Later on in the story we will see him in his role as a member of the Sanhedrin, a legislative and judicial assembly.

In other words, we can look at Nicodemus as both a popular and important kind of

person.

On the other hand, under the cover of night, we have Nicodemus visiting Jesus, presumably to receive some private teaching from the radical teacher who, nevertheless, performed signs that simply can't be done apart from God.

So which one of these faces is the true Nicodemus?

Well, it's like being in the closet and letting the world assume that you're a straight, cisgender person. It's not that the public persona is true or that the private one is true—they're both important parts of you, but they aren't integrated. Being in the closet is about compartmentalizing off a very important part of who you are. And you cannot be fully whole while you're doing that.

I believe that when Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again, he's essentially saying to him, "You can't be whole while you're still in the closet;" that when Jesus talks about things hidden in the dark and things done in the light, that he is encouraging Nicodemus to have the courage to publically claim a part of himself that he knows is good, despite what others may think.

I believe that Nicodemus, somewhat humorously, is saying, "It's not that easy. There's too much to lose. I'm not ready."

In the Queer community, it is widely believed that coming out is not a requirement and that how, when, and to whom one comes out should be entirely up to them. It's all very personal.

So I will speak personally. Coming out was the most terrifying and healing process I've ever gone through. I did it in fits and starts as I was ready.

And the love and challenge and support of friends, loved ones, and allies made all the difference in the world.

I see you, Nicodemus.

Come out when you're ready.

What do you say? Amen?

PRAYER PREPARATION:

<https://youtu.be/uNSG2Eke8jw?si=eI56LhGECEpyiDIM>, "On Coming Out" ~a scene from Happiest Season

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:

Sojourning God, as we move through the halfway point of Lent, journeying toward the cross at Calvary,

we remember where we have gone astray on our own journey of faith.

At times we have taken You for granted.

We have taken the church for granted.

We have assured ourselves that we are good people, and that we do good things.

Remind us that the journey is as important as the destination.

We are called to help others in this world, not only to know You, but to know Your love through our love of them.

Call us to truly love our neighbor, in which we take notice of their needs, understand the systems and structures in place that continue to oppress and harm, and work for justice in this world.

For it is this life that matters.

It is in this life that we measure ourselves, whether we have lived into Your ways.

It is in this life that we have the opportunity to practice hospitality, welcome the stranger, lift up the poor, work for justice, and pursue peace.

In the name of Christ, who journeys with us, we pray.

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:

As we close, try imagining Jesus saying these things to Nicodemus!

<https://youtu.be/QUQsqBqxoR4?si=UNNEMmV9oFG1XGli>, "Brave" ~Sara Bareilles

You can be amazing

You can turn a phrase into a weapon or a drug

You can be the outcast

Or be the backlash of somebody's lack of love

Or you can start speaking up

Nothing's gonna hurt you the way that words do
And they settle 'neath your skin
Kept on the inside and no sunlight
Sometimes a shadow wins
But I wonder what would happen if you
Say what you wanna say
And let the words fall out
Honestly I wanna see you be brave
With what you want to say
And let the words fall out
Honestly I wanna see you be brave
I just wanna see you
I just wanna see you
I just wanna see you
I wanna see you be brave
I just wanna see you
I just wanna see you
I just wanna see you
I wanna see you be brave
Everybody's been there
Everybody's been stared down, by the enemy
Fallen for the fear and done some disappearing
Bow down to the mighty
Don't run, stop holding your tongue
Maybe there's a way out of the cage where you live
Maybe one of these days you can let the light in
Show me how big your brave is
Say what you wanna say
And let the words fall out
Honestly I wanna see you be brave
With what you want to say
And let the words fall out
Honestly I wanna see you be brave
Innocence, your history of silence
Won't do you any good
Did you think it would?
Let your words be anything but empty
Why don't you tell them the truth?
Say what you wanna say
And let the words fall out
Honestly I wanna see you be brave
With what you want to say
And let the words fall out
Honestly I wanna see you be brave
I just wanna see you
I just wanna see you
I just wanna see you
I wanna see you be brave
I just wanna see you
I just wanna see you

I just wanna see you
See you be brave
I just wanna see you
I just wanna see you
I just wanna see you
I just wanna see you
I just wanna see you
I just wanna see you
end