

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 in the aisles or in the back of the sanctuary, so if the mood strikes you—I say go for it!

GATHERING:

In today's service we'll be working with the metaphor of fruit. So does this song.

<https://youtu.be/t8uAxxgTOQE?si=Xqnhr1NwidRwDFko>, "These Apples" ~Bare Naked Ladies

A friend brought me flowers, she said they were lilacs

I've never been good with plants

Her next presentation, a new dictionary

She circled the word "romance"

So enthusiastic, a little bit drastic

I shaved her name in my head

As she beheld it, she said I misspelled it

Need more be said?

These apples are delicious

"As a matter of fact they are, " she said

Can all this fruit be free?

She wrote me a letter, as big as a phone book

I've never been big on mail

I sent her a postcard from somewhere near Lethbridge

And wondered if it still went by rail

I've never been frightened of being enlightened

But some things can go too far

Though sometimes I stammer or mix up my grammar

You get what my meanings are

These apples are delicious

"As a matter of fact they are, " she said

Can all this fruit be free?

I'm not trying to sing a love song

I'm trying to sing in tune

I know I am sometimes headstrong

Falling in love, catching fire

I want to be consumed

Wondering will I ever tire, will I ever tire?

These apples are delicious

"As a matter of fact they are, " she said

Can all this fruit be free?

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 15:1-8

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower.

He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he
prunes to make it bear more fruit.

You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me
as I abide in you.

Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither
can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches.

Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can
do nothing.

Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches
are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Actually... context matters. Would you continue reading, please?

John 15:9-17

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.

I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

SERMON "Your Fruit"

I just said that context matters, so let's start with the larger context and focus down.

We are in the Gospel According to John and we do not know exactly who the author was.

We can say that most Biblical scholars, through the rigorous use of logical textual analysis and archeology, have concluded that it was the last of the four Gospels to be written.

Moreover, the Gospel of John is unique. It tells the story of Jesus very differently than the other three Gospels—

in fact, there's a fancy name for the three that are similar to each other: the "synoptic" gospels.

One very likely reason that the Gospel of John is so different is that the author wrote it say something very specific about God and Jesus to their audience:

"John's audience is not oriented towards outsiders.

The synoptics have long been available by the time his account is written.

John writes to a community facing both persecution and a form of apostasy.

The divinity of Christ comes into question, and John intends to make his case clear." (Lindsay)

You can thin of John as having two big overarching themes or sections, one that focuses on the Ministry of Jesus to the world, and the other which focuses on instruction given to his disciples:

"The material contained in John 13-17 is unique to this Gospel.

The underlying perspective of the farewell discourse is different from the first half of John's Gospel, which narrates Jesus' ministry to the Jews, with his followers playing only a minor role as disciples of Rabbi Jesus.

The farewell discourse, on the other hand, presents Jesus' mission to the world, based on his cross-death and carried out through his followers in the power of the Spirit.

The underlying assumption is that Jesus has been exalted; thus, he will answer prayer offered in his name, send his Spirit and direct the mission of his followers, and take his disciples into the loving and unified Father-Son relationship.

The disciples have risen from lowly helpers to partners in ministry.

The parallels between the present discourse and "covenant language" in Moses' parting Deuteronomic instructions suggest that Jesus here is cast as the new Moses, who institutes a new covenant with his disciples.

Just as Moses was prevented by death from leading God's people into the promised land, so Jesus will be separated—albeit only temporarily—from his followers."

(Andreas J. Kostenberger, theologian)

So, to sum up: We're in The Gospel According to John which was written last with a particular audience of Christians in mind.

This is not part of Jesus' public ministry to the Jews—this is private instruction for the disciples.

And this part of the private instruction for disciples is meant to prepare them to take over the public ministry after Jesus is gone.

So what does that have to do with vines and fruit?

Well, Jesus was a rural storyteller. He used metaphor to make his point come alive for his audience all the time, and frequently those metaphors were very down-to-earth.

Sheep and shepherds, sowing seeds, making wine—and in this case a vine, its branches, and its fruit.

Jesus does not leave much of his metaphor open to interpretation:

God the Father is the horticulturalist who works with the vine for the purpose of promoting a bountiful harvest of fruit.

Jesus is the vine. His disciples are the branches.

Therefore, for a disciple to bear fruit, he must be connected to Jesus in a very real way.

And the purpose of being connected to Jesus is to bear fruit—in fact, Jesus goes so far as to say that a disciple will not be allowed to remain connected to Jesus if they do not bear fruit.

That's how vines and branches and fruit work—the branches that aren't producing are still pulling energy and resources from the plant.

When you prune the branches that aren't producing, the ones that are have more energy and resources and therefore produce more fruit.

Now, the next part of the metaphor is pretty brutal if you think about it.

Especially if you end where we ended the first half of our reading:

...such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. Glory to God and those people can go to Hell!

Not the point. Not the point at all, of that metaphor. The point is the fruit, right?

So, what's the fruit?

You could argue that the continuing ministry of Jesus is the fruit, and I think there's some truth to that idea. If it weren't for the disciples carrying on the work of Jesus, then today his story would barely live on as one more failed revolution against the Roman occupation of Palestine that ended in brutal execution. Instead, "The disciples will be charged to birth a new ministry. The blueprint has already been established. The Divine Gardener has planted a vine in the world in Jesus Christ. As Kostenberger notes, "Jesus' coming from God is a theme that pervades the entire Gospel. What is about to follow took place precisely because Jesus knew his true status and position." In turn, Jesus ensures that his companions also know theirs in the Triune God. A vine does not exist to bear fruit once and die. A vine has the capacity to produce fruit year after year and flourish perennially. At the same time, a vine that gets cut down or destroyed in some way may appear to meet its end, yet if the roots contain life, it may be renewed and grow to new height, breadth, and length."

Now, that's an interesting point—in this metaphor, do the pruned branches live on in the life of the vine? Or in the fruit? I wonder.

But I left a point hanging—I said that the pruning part of the metaphor was especially brutal if you end the passage early.

Because if you end it there, you leave the fruit open to interpretation, and it is entirely too easy to focus on the pruned branches. To wonder who those poor bastards are.

To judge them.

How many times have you seen Christians go down that road? Oh, those people—not me, of course—are going to Hell. We'd better judge them into repentance for their own good.

But! That's not where Jesus goes in this passage!!

What comes next is love.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

That is what it means to be a Jesus-branch: abiding—staying—in his love.

The energy and resources at play? Love.

The fruit that God is working so hard through us and with us to bring into the world? Love, love, love!

And let me be clear—I'm not talking about "tough love" that judges and rejects people for who they are.

I'm not talking about dehumanizing rhetoric dressed up in the language of love. Nor am I talking about what King referred to as "emotional bosh."

I'm not talking about saccharine, greeting card love.

No, I am talking about the Fruit of God. I am talking about the Love of Christ.

And when I read the Gospel—when I read about what Jesus said and did— I see that he was able to challenge people without judging them—in fact he had a very specific teaching about judgement:

It's not for you. Don't.

I see that he not only welcomed people on the margins, but that he met them where they are.

I see that he was able to be reasoned with and that at times he changed his mind.

I see God's Love in everything that Jesus said and did. I see the "strong, demanding love" that King talked about.

I see the Light that cannot be overcome. I see the answer to Hate.

That is the Fruit, my friends.

Let's all go out and bear it.

What do you say? Amen?

PRAYER PREPARATION:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7xMfIp-irg, "All You Need Is Love" ~the Beatles

Love, love, love

Love, love, love

Love, love, love

There's nothing you can do that can't be done (love)

Nothing you can sing that can't be sung (love)

Nothing you can say, but you can learn how to play the game (love)

It's easy

Nothing you can make that can't be made (love)

No one you can save that can't be saved (love)

Nothing you can do, but you can learn how to be you in time (love)

It's easy

All you need is love

All you need is love

All you need is love, love

Love is all you need

Love, love, love

Love, love, love

Love, love, love

All you need is love (whoa)

All you need is love

All you need is love, love

Love is all you need

Nothing you can know that isn't known (love)

Nothing you can see that isn't shown (love)

There's nowhere you can be that isn't where you're meant to be, it's easy

All you need is love

All you need is love

All you need is love, love

Love is all you need

All you need is love (all together now)

All you need is love (everybody)

All you need is love, love

Love is all you need

Love is all you need (love is all you need)

Love is all you need (love is all you need)

Love is all you need (love is all you need)

Love is all you need (love is all you need)

Love is all you need (love is all you need)
Love is all you need (love is all you need)
Love is all you need (love is all you need)
Love is all you need (love is all you need)
Love is all you need (love is all you need)
Love is all you need (love is all you need)
Love is all you need (love is all you need)
Love is all you need (whoa, yeah)
Love is all you need
Love is all you need (love is all you need)
Yesterday (love is all you need) whoa
Love is all you need
Love is all you need
Love is all you need, oh yeah
In love with you, yeah, yeah, yeah
In love with you, yeah, yeah, yeah
Love is all you need
Love is all you need (whoa)
Love is all you need (whoa)
Love is all you need (oh)
Love is all you need
Love is all you need, I'm coming
Love is all you need

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:

Mystery of Mysteries, help us to seek Your wisdom by living into Your truth, and Your truth is found in the love we have for one another.

May our love be fearless.

May our love be without judgment.

May our love call us into Your ways of justice, Your ways of practicing kindness, and Your ways of building peace.

Mystery of Mysteries, we only know You in a glimpse; but we know You most fully in the abiding love we have for one another, a love that comes only from You, who gave Your life for us.

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:

One of the most powerful experiences I had of God's love growing up was as a teenager at (what was then) the Connecticut Conference's center for outdoor ministries, Silver Lake Conference Center.

Think "church camp."

It was there that I discovered a summer conference where we would write and produce a musical over the course of the week.

If you've ever been involved in theater, then you know the post-performance rush, and the band would share that rush with the audience by launching into fun music to dance to.

And this next song was a staple of that post-show set.

<https://youtu.be/UfmkgQRmmeE?si=c8MkXizujukIvMPzf>, "Brown Eyed Girl" ~Van Morrison

Hey, where did we go?

Days when the rains came

Down in the hollow

Playin' a new game

Laughin' and a-runnin', hey, hey

Skippin' and a-jumpin'

In the misty morning fog with

Our, our hearts a-thumping and you

My brown-eyed girl

And you, my brown-eyed girl

And whatever happened

To Tuesday and so slow?

Going down the old mine with a

Transistor radio
Standing in the sunlight laughing
Hiding 'hind a rainbow's wall
Slipping and sliding
All along the waterfall with you
My brown-eyed girl
You, my brown-eyed girl
Do you remember when we used to sing?
Sha-la-la, la-la, la-la, la-la, la-la tee-da
Just like that
Sha-la-la, la-la, la-la, la-la, la-la tee-da, la-tee-da
So hard to find my way
Now that I'm all on my own
I saw you just the other day
My, how you have grown
Cast my memory back there, Lord
Sometimes I'm overcome thinking 'bout it
Making love in the green grass
Behind the stadium with you
My brown-eyed girl
You, my brown-eyed girl
Do you remember when we used to sing?
Sha-la-la, la-la, la-la, la-la, la-la tee-da
Sha-la-la, la-la, la-la, la-la, la-la tee-da

end