

Grace and Peace be with you in the name of the Holy-One-of-All!
Thank you for coming! We're so glad you've chosen to worship with us today.

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.

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."

This month of July, we acknowledge disability, mental health awareness months, and
international self care day.
These are only some of the things that came up when I searched awareness causes for
July.

In the United Church of Christ we have a Disability Ministry that envisions a world
in which all people are included in the fullness of life because they are created in
the image of God.

Here at First UCC in 2nd life we recognize the challenges of underrepresented
groups, and that not everyone has access to all aspects of the church's life and
ministry. (<https://uccdm.org>)

Here in second life our digital body might move differently, run, and be unlike in
RL but this does not make it less real.

Oh my friends it is so good to be real in Second Life and what can be more real than
our sharing communion together.

Therefore, being our First Sunday of the month, we will be partaking in Holy
Communion.

I invite you to gather the elements for after the Message of Hope to share together
in Holy Communion.

Gather something to eat, such as bread, a cracker, or a cookie.
As well as a cup of grape juice or wine to drink as well together when the time
comes to pray over the elements and remember our savior Jesus Christ with the ritual
of Holy Communion.

Today's service will be in voice and text.
Music will be on the media viewer, so be sure that you have your 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.

Welcome!

GATHERING MUSIC

Zach Williams - Lookin' for You (Music Video) ft. Dolly Parton
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ptsx8EZ6c5Q>

SCRIPTURE

Today's scripture comes from the book of Mark 6:1-13 The Message and the NRSV

I'm going to do a combination here so bare with me.
I love the way the Message puts it very clear in the first part of our reading.
But I also love the way that Jesus gives specific instructions in the NRSV.

Just a Carpenter (The Message)

Mark 6: 1-6

He left there and returned to his hometown. His disciples came along.

On the Sabbath, he gave a lecture in the meeting place.

He stole the show, impressing everyone.

"We had no idea he was this good!" they said.

"How did he get so wise all of a sudden, get such ability?"

But in the next breath they were cutting him down: "He's just a carpenter—Mary's boy.

We've known him since he was a kid.

We know his brothers, James, Justus, Jude, and Simon, and his sisters.

Who does he think he is?"

They tripped over what little they knew about him and fell, sprawling.

And they never got any further.

Jesus told them, "A prophet has little honor in his hometown, among his relatives, on the streets he played in as a child."

Jesus wasn't able to do much of anything there—he laid hands on a few sick people and healed them, that's all.

He couldn't get over their stubbornness.

He left and made a circuit of the other villages, teaching.

Now for the 2nd part on the NRSV -

Mark 6:7-13 NRSV

He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.
He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff: no bread, no bag, no money in their belts,
but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.
He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place.

If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."
So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent.
They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Word of God for the people of God,

Thanks Be to God

SERMON

Dude we know you!

Have you ever brought a guest to your hometown and listened to the stories and anecdotes from your past being shared at the dinner table?

It's always interesting to hear how others perceive us based on the memories and experiences they have of us.

I recall a specific instance when I visited my hometown in the southern tip of Texas, near the border in the Rio Grande Valley area, and my father mentioned that he had come across something about me.

It's fascinating to see how our actions and experiences are remembered and interpreted by those who have known us for a long time.
Over a decade has passed since the year 2014, a time before the dominance of social media in our lives.
BUT...I still had concerns.

The thought of my dad stumbling upon something about me sent shivers down my spine, making me anxious about what he might have come across.
As I delved into my memories, I couldn't help but wonder what exactly had caught his attention.

I frantically tried to recall any recent incidents or activities that could have raised eyebrows, hoping I hadn't done anything to cause concern.
Going over the events of the past few weeks in Dallas, I reassured myself that I hadn't been involved in any trouble or legal issues.

I pondered whether I had unintentionally made any waves that could have reached my dad's ears, but nothing significant came to mind.

Before facing my dad, I made a point to visit my aunts in Ft. Worth, ensuring that everything was well at home and that they were content. This small gesture helped ease my nerves and provided some comfort before the impending conversation with my father.

But there I was in a newspaper article about an event I was putting together for the youth called Texas [You]th lead in the Dallas area with an activist friend of mine. (picture on screen)
I smiled and said ah yes that is me.

Dad was proud and he beamed about it. He had said that a family member of mine had seen the news and shared the article with him.

Anyways, dad said I did not know you did this. What?
That is all I talked about at home, my calling, my work with young people and desire to help them.

My family's surprise at my appearance in the news for doing something new was a thing of the past.

A decade later, when I made headlines for the ACLU coming to our aid, their reaction was noticeably different. For starters many of my family members have come to terms with my "gayness." (picture on screen)
And my father is gone.

Yet somehow I know he is proud of what we have done. It has taken a long time for the people back home to believe in my abilities and talents.

Despite my accomplishments and growth, some of my aunts (the more conservative side of the family) still perceived me as the same awkward kid from the past, lost and in need of saving.

Upon revisiting this narrative, I initially believed it revolved around familial connections, only to realize its deeper significance.

The account portrays Jesus performing miracles and aiding individuals in need, showcasing his compassion and divine abilities. However, upon returning to his hometown, acquaintances express surprise.

Dude I know you!
I like the way the Message puts it, "Is that not Martha's boy?!"

The familiarity of Jesus as a carpenter's son raises doubts about his extraordinary

deeds, leading some to question his true identity and capabilities. You can hear many of them saying, "We know this guy, his sisters, and his brother are here with us!"

Despite the skepticism, the juxtaposition of his humble origins with his remarkable acts of kindness and healing serves as a powerful testament to his mission and purpose.

I can hear them, dude I know you, and you are now coming back home saying you're the son of God?

Really, God?

I mean they are saying, "I have known you since you were a kid."

They tripped over what little they knew about him.

It's intriguing to consider whether Jesus could have been similar to Clark Kent, concealing his extraordinary abilities.

Perhaps he appeared to be an ordinary carpenter, toiling with sweat and hard work, his hands bearing the marks of labor.

But could it be that he covertly wielded his powers to effortlessly shape wood with a mere touch, with celestial beings assisting him in the shadows of his workshop, like the minions with Gru? (Picture on screen)

Oh what a contrast from last week's scriptures "your faith has made you well" to him being "amazed by their unbelief."

Or as the message puts it "He could not get over their stubbornness"

And although he could not do much at home he still laid hands on a few sick people and healed them.

It's truly puzzling why receiving recognition in one's own hometown is such a challenge.

Despite all my experiences and journeys, I never received acknowledgment for my expertise or leadership in the place where I grew up physically and sadly even spiritually.

I recall questioning this phenomenon and receiving ambiguous answers in return. It's possible that the church who saw me grow, still perceive me as the inexperienced seminarian from a decade ago?

It is truly disheartening when those closest to us, whether it be our friends, family, or community, are unable to recognize the grace of Christ shining through us.

Dear friends and fellow church members, let us not lose hope or feel discouraged by this, for even Jesus Christ faced similar challenges during his time on earth.

Remember that our faith and actions may not always be understood or appreciated by everyone, but it is important to stay steadfast in our beliefs and continue to spread love and grace to those around us.

Jesus embarked on his teaching journey, calling his twelve disciples.

The twelve disciples, likely smelling of fish and cursing like sailors, may not have been the obvious choice to bring about significant change in the world.

Probably not the people one would have chosen to change the world. Rather than dwelling on their shortcomings, Jesus focused on teaching, motivating, and setting an example for his disciples to follow.

What a great leadership 101 master class we see here!

Jesus gives them authority and empowers them to touch lives just like he was doing.

The same way that we are called to go forth with confidence, exercising your authority to proclaim the good news and bring liberation to others in body, mind, and spirit.

Even though the people in his hometown fail to recognize his present and future potential, Jesus continues to press on.

Jane Perry in the book chapter, Come As You Are, says, "To begin forward movement, we must first go back.

This is the African diasporic value of Sankofa, (picture on screen) symbolized by a bird looking backward gathering a pearl in its beak.

There is wisdom to be gained by looking at the flow of social movements from the past to the present. Doing so helps us dream of our more just future."

Looking back is not staying back there.

It is nodding to a past, thank you for the lessons, the pain, the anguish, the struggles "y pa' adelante" move forward

In 1960 friends the disability rights movement came into view in American lives, aiming to make it unlawful to discriminate against individuals with disabilities in terms of employment, access to public spaces, and membership in establishments.

However, it wasn't until 1989 that Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of "internationality" into the legal framework, highlighting the interconnected nature of various forms of discrimination and the need to address multiple layers of oppression.

This was a pivotal moment in the disability rights movement, as it brought

attention to the unique challenges faced by individuals with disabilities who also experience discrimination based on race, gender, or other factors.

But what does intersectionalities mean?

Well, they are our social identities (race, gender, nationality, sexuality, ability, socioeconomics, class, religion) and multiple years of marginalization.

The church's approach to accommodating individuals with disabilities has been a topic of discussion.

While there are mandatory handicap signs in the parking lot, the question remains whether there are specific accommodations inside the church as well.

Historically, there has been a binary view of disability - either someone is visibly disabled or not. However, it is important to recognize that not all disabilities are apparent at first glance.

Jane Perry's insights on disabilities in the book chapter *Come As You Are*, shed light on the diverse realities and limitations that individuals may face, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and understanding approach within the church community.

As I was reading this week scriptures I could not help but see that in the electing of the twelve, Jesus tells them what to take.

He tells him not to take extra equipment.

Their go bag is really no bag at all.

It is a staff, no bread, no money in their belts, but sandals and two tunics.

As someone with a life changing incident that requires me at times to use a cane, I noticed the staff.

But why did these strong fishermen need a sturdy staff?

Well, it seems like in Biblical times everyone had a staff, a large straight stick used for traveling, walking and evidently to also record information.

The passing down of the staff from Abraham to Isaac, and then from Isaac to Jacob, symbolized a transfer of authority, control, and leadership from one generation to the next.

The Psalmist on Psalm 23 says, "Tu vara y tu cayado me infundirán aliento"
"your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

Jesus may have asked them to bring the staff not just for the purpose of recording things, but also as a symbol of support for the journey ahead, anticipating the physical strain they might face during their travels.

Perhaps Jesus intended for the staff to serve as a reminder that seeking support from others is not only acceptable but encouraged in the Christian faith, emphasizing the importance of community and interdependence.

Walking through life with a sense of support, whether it be from a physical object like a staff or from the people around us, is not only acceptable but a reflection of the values of compassion and care that Jesus embodied.

Recognizing and respecting the unique strengths and needs of each individual, as Jesus did with his disciples, is a fundamental aspect of living out the teachings of love and empathy found in the Bible.

By equipping his followers with the staff, Jesus demonstrated a practical example of how to support one another and meet each other's needs, showing that caring for others is an integral part of living a life of faith and love.

You have full authority and this is what you need, the basics.
Don't rely on money and therefore don't take it.

Don't rely on a bag of tricks, don't take the bag.
Don't overload it and it weighs you down in your journey.
Leave the bag.

Take two pieces of clothes, you might give one away.

Engaging in social justice work involves recognizing and addressing the needs of others, and this requires a willingness to learn and be open to new possibilities.

It is about creating a more inclusive and accessible environment for everyone, regardless of their background or circumstances.

This means actively seeking out ways to ensure that all individuals are treated fairly and have equal opportunities to thrive.

Jane Perry shares the 10 core principles of disability justice, which are:

1. Intersectionality.
2. Leadership of those most impacted
3. Anti-capitalist politic
4. Commitment to cross-movement organizing
5. Recognizing wholeness
6. Sustainability
7. Commitment to cross-disability solidarity
8. Interdependence
9. Collective access
10. Collective liberation.

Each congregation and place of worship requires thorough research and understanding to cater to the specific needs and beliefs of the community it serves.

At First UCC in 2nd Life, I was truly impressed by the dedication shown by individuals who took the time to type and share a notecard detailing the activities and purpose of the congregation.

It was heartwarming to see the importance of representation within the virtual community, as I observed an avatar wearing a breathing apparatus that they used in real life, emphasizing the significance of inclusivity and acceptance.

On the other hand, I also noticed that some individuals did not feel the need to represent themselves in a specific way, embracing the freedom to express themselves authentically.

Despite the diverse approaches to virtual representation, what stood out the most was the acceptance and lack of judgment within the community, highlighting the value of being true to oneself.

As we say every time we meet, "It feels good to be real in Second Life!"

Reflecting on the teachings of Jesus sending his twelve disciples, the emphasis on humility and simplicity resonated within the virtual congregation, emphasizing the importance of genuine connection and service over material possessions.

When Jesus sends his twelve he tells them not to go looking for a luxury.

Church, liberation and freedom comes when we understand Jesus' unfailing love. When we come to terms that liberation might also look like seeking counseling, therapy, seeking help, leaving a situation, or learning to live in a new form or way.

We are not meant to be a church alone, an island.
We are meant to be in community!

Jesus sends the disciples two by two because such support is important.
Who is your partner in this world?

Church, know that the pastors and leadership here on First UCC in 2nd Life walks alongside you.

Feel free to reach out by sending me a note card if you wish to have a conversation on Second Life, either at the connect space or another location of your choice, as a pastor here I am willing to meet you where you are.

I believe friends, church, that when we pray together and are in community together we are stronger.

Despite the possibility of being turned away or not taken seriously by others, remember that Christ is with us, who can be against us?

Just as Christ advises to shake off the dust when unwelcome, take inspiration from

the Taylor Swift song and shake off any negativity or doubt that may come your way.

Taylor Swift says,

“keep cruisin'
Can't stop, won't stop movin'
It's like I got this music in my mind
Sayin' it's gonna be alright
'Cause the players gonna play,
And the haters gonna hate,
Baby, I'm just gonna shake,
I shake it off, I shake it off”

Shake those sandals, and let's move along.
We can dance after the benediction together.
I know it is most simply said that it is done to shake off when we are denied, or sent away, mistreated or NOT seen.

This is especially true when facing challenges or disabilities that are not immediately visible or acknowledged by others.

But we church we claim and foster our collective liberation.
We support each other in recognizing our inherent wholeness.
During a recent sermon, I emphasized the concept of wholeness.
It is not a quick fix or a miraculous cure that we can expect from external sources or achievements.

Wholeness is about embracing all our imperfections and holding them together as we navigate life in connection with God.
It is a journey of growth and self-discovery.
Just like how Jesus faced challenges due to being known by others, we too may be misunderstood or underestimated by those around us.

But every day presents a new opportunity for others to truly get to know us through the lens of Christ.
Jesus could not do what he did best because they KNEW him.

And there in his own town he only helped a few.
Oh they KNEW him but failed to really KNOW him.

Despite the fact that people may have been familiar with us in the past, through our faith in Christ, we believe that each new day presents an opportunity for us to start anew and make a positive impact

It is now up to them to take the initiative to truly get to know us.
Fellow members of the church, I want to emphasize that while I may not have a personal relationship with each of you, we are connected through our shared faith and the unconditional love of our Savior.

We are all called to spread the message of hope and love, and it is my sincere

desire to build genuine connections with each one of you as we work together to share the good news of salvation.

For we are saved through Christ and there is nothing you can do or have done to earn this.

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39)

Salvation, redemption, forgiveness, new life, is yours, no questions asked. We are called to live and live abundantly.

We are empowered to keep moving forward, to overcome obstacles, and to spread joy.

May it be so.
Amen

SHARING GOD’S TABLE

On the night Jesus was betrayed he shared a meal with his friends, his followers the people he called family.

At a simple table Jesus gathered with friends, he remembered the liberating story of the Passover, shared the bread, passed the cup, and asked us to do the same, and remember – remember God’s liberating work in the world – work embodied in Jesus. We remember how the greatest gift he gave to us was very life.

On this month this table is live reminder that all are welcome here.
This table is open to all who seek nourishment for the soul.
Join together in this holy communion
not because you must, but because you may
not because you are full
but because in your emptiness you are in need of God’s mercy and assurance
come just as you are
It is the Lord’s table
And it is spread for you.

I invite you to hold your hands over the elements as we pray:
God of liberation, with this bread we remember.

Let us pray
Come Holy Spirit upon these gifts of grape and grain.
Make them before us the life and love of Jesus, that we may
become the life and love of Jesus, for the world.

In Real Life, in Second Life,
We are connected to each other
Through our faith in you,

In and through this community,
we may find that your love
Is as real and tangible
As this bread and cup
We share.
Amen.

Now take the bread.
Feel it in your hand.
And let us remember another time, and another table,
when Jesus gathered in a upper room with his disciples,
his closest friends.
When he took the bread on the table for the evening meal, blessed it, broke it, and
shared it saying "This is my body, given for you. Take. Eat. And remember me."

Let us eat this bread of life together.

Now pick up your cup of drink,
Because at the end of the meal, Jesus took a cup of wine, the juice of the vine,
And said, "This is the cup of the new covenant, a new relationship in my blood.
Drink, and as often as you drink, remember me."

Let us drink this cup of blessing together.

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.

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

And come as you are,

Blessing Offor - Believe
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7SFT4ZWpZ20&list=RDUFIyEFmIXvA&index=43>

For the mirror God of all flesh, God of these hips, this nose, these lips.
God of fat bodies, disabled bodies, aging bodies.
God of Black bodies, glistening like the mirror itself.
Speak over our flesh now: Our bodies are good.

We have endured all manner of antagonism.
We have been trained in a singular, white-exalting form of beauty. Grant us an
enduring belief in our own loveliness, but keep us from punishing ourselves on the
days we feel that we do not have access to that belief.

Remind us that we are doing the best we can to love ourselves in a world that breeds
self-hatred.

And let us remember that our beauty is never dependent on anyone's belief in it, including our own.

This flesh, this face is inherently sacred—its beauty cannot easily be undone. Show us daily the miracle of these bodies that pump blood, shed tears, keep breathing.

Remind us that we are those whose flesh grows back, that we possess the mystery of regeneration within our bones. Give us the courage to marvel, every mirror a portal to the awe we are worthy of.

Ase.
y Amen

Arthur Riley, Cole. Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying Human (p. 85). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Let us go forth from this place into the world to find yourself; a cause you can live for; and a love you can live into.
Go in peace!

Now, let us dance!

Shake it off!
Taylor Swift - Shake It Off (Super Clean) [Lyrics in Subtitles]
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IP3CIHGmPMM>