

Welcome!

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."

On this Sunday, I would like to welcome back Rev. Mike Wright-Chapman as our
preacher.
Welcome Rev. Mike and we are so thankful you keep coming back!

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.

So thank a deep breath thanking the Holy-One-of-all for this place and for how good
it feels to be real in Second Life.

Would you pray with me?

Come Holy Spirit and fill this digital place and the waves of energy, and the World
Wide Web net that touches the lives of those connected.
May your blessings be upon our preacher, the bearers of good news and those here and
beyond.

In Jesus' name we pray. 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 - Revolution

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hdKQNg18ARY>

SCRIPTURES

Today's scripture comes from the book of Luke 10:25-37 CEV

An expert in the Law of Moses stood up and asked Jesus a question to see what he would say. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus answered, "What is written in the Scriptures? How do you understand them?"

The man replied, "The Scriptures say, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind.' They also say, 'Love your neighbors as much as you love yourself.' "

Jesus said, "You have given the right answer. If you do this, you will have eternal life."

But the man wanted to show that he knew what he was talking about.

So he asked Jesus, "Who are my neighbors?"

Jesus replied:

As a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, robbers attacked him and grabbed everything he had.

They beat him up and ran off, leaving him half dead.

A priest happened to be going down the same road.

But when he saw the man, he walked by on the other side.

Later a temple helper came to the same place.

But when he saw the man who had been beaten up, he also went by on the other side.

A man from Samaria then came traveling along that road.

When he saw the man, he felt sorry for him and went over to him.

He treated his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them.

Then he put him on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him.

The next morning he gave the innkeeper two silver coins and said, "Please take care of the man.

If you spend more than this on him, I will pay you when I return."

Then Jesus asked, "Which one of these three people was a real neighbor to the man who was beaten up by robbers?"

The expert in the Law of Moses answered, "The one who showed pity."

Jesus said, "Go and do the same!"

Word of God for the people of God,

Thanks Be to God

SERMON

A Law Expert Challenges Jesus

Law experts. It's always the law experts!

Today we read a passage in the gospel of Luke and we find that it's a law scholar who's stirring up trouble for Jesus. Again.

Try to imagine the scene. Jesus, at this point in the story a popular, dynamic young rabbi, is teaching the Torah, religious law, to the rapt attention of increasingly large crowds of people.

A lawyer in the crowd asked Jesus to offer a rabbinical opinion about Torah, to help him distill religious law in the detailed and intricate way that lawyers like to do.

In point of fact, an interplay like this one was a common occurrence in the society of Jesus' day: this is how the powerful, elite, professional, educated folks interacted with each other, a sort of unwritten societal standard not unlike any big city cocktail hour when, upon meeting someone for the first time you immediately know to ask: "What do you do?"

The Law expert was certainly interested in Jesus; Jesus had been generating a lot of buzz all over the countryside.

Some of the things he was saying and doing were edgy, strange, different. The lawyer wanted to engage him a sort of intellectual swordplay, where they'd spar with each other over questions of merit and importance.

It was an exercise in finding your place in the grand order of things; trying to figure out who this Jesus guy was and whether he was really rising in the ranks of Jerusalem power brokers like many suspected and, if so, to make sure they knew each other.

So this is how the scene unfolds, two educated Jewish men, playing the professional games we all play...

The lawyer testing Jesus was just doing what educated men - and regretfully it was only men - of that day did, you know, professional posturing. But Jesus had a surprise in store for him, because Jesus was not your average young rabbi.

Jesus regularly and consistently took generally accepted assumptions about power and influence and turned them upside down leaving all the folks who thought they understood puzzled, scratching their heads in confusion.

What's notable today is that our gospel lesson comes from Luke chapter 10, perhaps the most familiar and popular chapter in Luke's gospel, where Jesus tells the most famous parable of all, the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

You know the story; I know you do.

An expert in the Law of Moses challenges Jesus, asking for exact instructions about how he might attain eternal life. True to form, Jesus answers the lawyer's question with a question of his own.

The Law expert, of course, already knows the answer.

So he shows Jesus he knows the answer: the way to attain eternal life—to win in the end—is to follow the two most important commandments, love God and love your neighbor.

Okay then.

This guy follows up with another question. He wants to spar some more with Jesus, to test him and see if he's really got the chops to make it in upwardly mobile Jerusalem society: "And who is my neighbor?"

And so, as he typically did, Jesus tells a story. You know this story as well as I do; here's the way we often hear it told:

There was a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho.

This was a particularly treacherous stretch of land, a road you should never travel along because of bands of robbers who regularly attacked travelers.

Such had happened to this man, who was beaten severely, robbed of everything he owned, and left by the side of the road to die.

Along the road came a priest, who was traveling the same way.

The priest was really important in society; part of the very elite class of temple staff.

The lawyer listening to Jesus would have known that this guy was a power broker; really important; elaborate-motorcade-making-me-late-to-an- appointment important. The priest saw the hurt man, crossed the road to the other side, and passed by without stopping to help.

Next came a Levite.

Levites were also part of temple leadership.

Levites assisted the priests in the work of the temple, and were born into their calling.

Maybe the Levite wouldn't have had a whole motorcade, but he fell into the power hierarchy somewhere near the top; you'd notice him in a restaurant, in other words. And so, Jesus tells us, the Levite also sees the hurt man, crosses over to the other side of the road, and passes on by.

He wasn't quite as important as the priest, but I think I always learned he was in a hurry—he had things to attend to at the temple and so he didn't stop.

Too preoccupied and self involved.

Then comes a Samaritan man along the road. Well, the lawyer listening to Jesus could immediately understand the contrast here.

While a priest was as high as you could go in Jewish society, a Samaritan was on the opposite end of that spectrum.

Just a little bit of Jewish history: by the time Jesus and the lawyer were doing their little intellectual sparring, Jews and Samaritans had hated each other for over a thousand years.

When King Solomon died the monarchy broke into two factions: the ten tribes of the North rebelled and founded a capital in the city of Samaria. The two southern tribes made their capital in Jerusalem.

There was long-held ethnic hostility and political and religious rivalry between Jews and Samaritans.

So when Jesus said "Samaritan" the lawyer immediately knew where that man fell in the ranks of power.

Well, you know what happened.

The Samaritan stopped and helped the wounded man; bandaged him and took him to safety; provided for him until he was fully healed.

The Samaritan was the good guy.

And the way we've always heard this story interpreted is this: the lawyer asked "who is my neighbor? – let me get exactly clear what I have to do, who I have to help."

And the answer we've always heard from this story is that the hurt man on the side of the road is our neighbor, of course.

We should always go out of our way to help anybody who needs help, no matter who they are.

The Samaritan demonstrates this.

And this of course is a very nice way to interpret this parable, one that I am sure Jesus would have taught had he been the kind of teacher whose main objective was to leave us with a nice morality tale that makes us feel guilty when the guy at the stop light knocks on the car door window asking for money and we pretend like we don't see him while willing the light to change.

But let's look again. It's always tricky to hear a beloved and oft-told passage of scripture; we assume we know what it means.

But we should always be sure to listen again, carefully, because we don't want to mistake familiarity for understanding.

There was a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.

Bad idea to travel all alone and you know what happened.

Cut to: lying broken and bleeding on the side of the road.

Along comes a priest, who sees the man and crosses the road to the other side, then hurries along.

Well, of COURSE he does. He's a priest; he has people waiting for him at the temple. His presence and service are indispensable there, and to touch someone hurt and bleeding would mean he was unclean and unable to perform his work.

He couldn't stop; his obligations to God meant he had to pass on by and hope the man got some help soon.

Same with the Levite.

Holy, powerful, pulled by the obligations of his position and power.

He couldn't stop either.

I don't think it's fair to label the priest and the Levite shady, power hungry and selfish people.

They passed on by, but they may very well have passed on by regretful that their obligations at the temple prevented them from stopping.

Regardless, it was the Samaritan, the one of the three who was decidedly Unholy, with no power in society to speak of.

For whatever reason he had the time and the impetus to stop and help. And he did.

Jesus asks the lawyer: three men, two powerful and holy; one an outsider. Who's the neighbor?

The lawyer has to admit: it's the Samaritan.

But that wasn't the question.

The lawyer had asked: who is my neighbor?

Jesus' story in answer challenged: who is being a neighbor?

And this is exactly how Jesus turns this parable on its head, showing us a different expression of power.

In answer to the lawyer's question Jesus didn't take out a paper and pencil and list: the homeless guy on the street corner, the person with the flat tire, the checker at Wal-Mart, the college student with nowhere to stay for Thanksgiving, so the lawyer could check them off one by one and meet the legal requirements for heaven.

Jesus doesn't answer the lawyer's question at all. Instead, Jesus asks a different question: are you ready to BE a neighbor?

As usual, Jesus completely re-frames the conversation. For the lawyer standing there that day having a scholarly conversation with a young, up and coming rabbi, the theoretical questions he posed were about religion and rules.

But Jesus' story about powerful and holy people doing what they thought was right alongside a societal outcast who actually did what was right sends an upside-down message to the powerful lawyer in search of his next step up the social ladder: Do you think you're powerful because you follow the rules?

If you do, you're headed down the wrong path.

True power comes from a faith that animates our lives and transforms our hearts; it's not about who you are on the power grid of human life. It's about the power of sacrificial love that knows that outward trappings of power mean very little; it's inner transformation that results in radical actions of love that seem to all the respectable people...well...a little strange.

True power doesn't come from your professional label, your societal position, your "power" in the world.

He thought he, a powerful lawyer, was having a theoretical discussion with a powerful rabbi, where they could come to some understanding about the rules.

But Jesus changed the question, switched the paradigm, and described a world in which the people who looked powerful on the outside were distracted by outward expectations and human constructs...while the pitiful societal outcast was the real powerhouse.

Who is my neighbor?
Could I have a list?

Yeah, not so important.
How do I be a neighbor?
Now that's a better question.

I tried to imagine how this scene might play out in our big and powerful city. It would certainly have to happen at a cocktail party, don't you think?

Maybe you'd notice Jesus, over near the bar, surrounded by people drawn into the charismatic manner in which he's speaking. So you sidle up to the bar and order a drink, then kind of push your way through the crowd. You see a few friends and associates, pass out a couple business cards, until you get into his line of sight. Wow, he really is compelling.

And then he starts talking to you!
The conversation begins with the typical question, of course, "What do YOU do?" and it progresses from there.

You can tell: this guy is really smart; he seems to have a unique take on the pressing political and social issues of our day.

Wanting to be sure you make a good impression—just in case you need him as a contact in the future—you toss out a question like: "Hey Jesus, what kind of legislation do

you think we need to pass to address the racial and social injustices in society today?”

As you're listening intently; you stick your hand in your pocket and press the voice recorder on your iPhone so you're sure to remember what he says.

And Jesus pauses for a minute and replies: “On May 3, 2024, Kita, a 46-year-old transgender Black woman, was killed in a hit-and-run incident in Kansas City, Missouri.”

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.

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

Mandisa - Bleed The Same ft. TobyMac, Kirk Franklin
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVKuA1s5I3o&list=RDHVKuA1s5I3o&start_radio=1

God of those who tremble, Courage can feel foolish when we've seen the world in all its terror.
But, protect us from life lived in perpetual vigilance.

Keep fear from monopolizing our relationships, our desires, our motivations, so that we can act without rehearsing the worst of our imaginations.
Help us meet our fear with kindness and mercy.

There are times when we feel small and exhausted.
Harness our courage. Grant us contentment in our limits, and community in our battles.

Send others who tremble alongside us, who will speak truth with calmness.
Show us we need not be giants if we have good friends.

And lead us beside still waters.
The space is thin between bravery and rest.

Remind us that fear is as bodily as any emotion.
Slow our breath, ground our attention.
Lie still with us as courage finds us.

May it be so.
Amen

Arthur Riley, Cole. Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying

Human (p. 127). 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!

Mandisa - Overcomer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8VoUYtx0kw>