

WELCOME

Grace and Peace be with you in the name of our Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit.

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).

Our 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 Chat 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.

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.

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.

My name is Rev. Yadi Martínez-Reyna, I am one of the Pastors in this community.
And anyone you see with a "Minister" tag is an ordained UCC minister in real life.

This February, we recognize Black History Month, National Cancer prevention month,
Teen Violence awareness month and some celebrate Valentine's day on the 14th.

We pray for our siblings in this country and beyond, still searching for equity and
bringing awareness to injustice in the world and places around us.

We extend our thoughts and prayers to those impacted by organizations that have
scaled back their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives.
Our hopes are with those striving to liberate individuals exploited by systemic
injustices, as we affirm the importance of fairness and equity for everyone.

Today is not the first of the month where we normally partake in holy communion.

Last week I was in a retreat with my Color Splash Out Team and brother Doug covered for me, I'm thankful.

So today, I invite you to gather the elements for after the Message of Hope to share together in our sacred time of remembering Christ in the breaking of bread.

Gather something to eat, such as bread, a cracker, or a cookie.

As well as a cup of grape juice or wine to drink after we pray over the elements remembering our savior Jesus Christ with the ritual of Holy Communion.

Will you pray with me before our gathering song?

Come Holy Spirit and fill this place and the homes of your people with your presence.

May your spirit keep leading us to a more equitable world and may we be able to listen to your voice in a world filled with many voices trying to claim it is you calling.

Holy-One may this service be a refreshment and a place of comfort, in Jesus name we pray.

Amen.

GATHERING MUSIC

Katy Nichole - "When I Fall" (Official Music Video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lWR7irz-UoI>

SCRIPTURES

Today's reading come from the Gospel of Luke 5: 1-11 NRSVUE

Once while Jesus] was standing beside the Lake of Gennesaret and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gotten out of them and were washing their nets.

He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore.

Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to burst.

So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus's knees, saying, "Go away from

me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

For he and all who were with him were astounded at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.

Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Word of God for the People of God,

Thanks be to God.

SERMON - Believing enough to try again

Life often demands that we push ourselves to keep moving forward, much like a boat navigating through water.

There are moments when we feel stuck or exhausted, we allow the waves to carry us instead.

You can lay there and relax in your boat until the waves become too rough, forcing you to act or risk capsizing.

Believing, persevering, and envisioning a new reality are the core themes of today’s message, emphasizing the importance of faith even in the absence of concrete evidence.

Being raised by the border of The Gulf of Mexico I enjoyed spending time at South Padre Island, where I would sit in the sand, sketching while watching the boats drift by.

I love seeing boats, big, small, tiny, expensive, not so expensive, some used for commercial purposes, while others for pleasure.

Then there are the fishing boats of all types too with different apparatus attached to them while others have a simple net hanging from the sides.

Today's scripture features a boat, sparking my imagination and memories of my childhood.

I recall the fishermen arriving at the dock, where my dad would take me to buy fresh fish.

In those days, we could easily purchase a bucket of fish or shrimp, with fishermen in their water boots and floppy hats smiling as they weighed our catch.

But those were the days when you can go buy fish and shrimp straight out of the water.

Today, you have to go to the local supermarket.

The docks are no longer selling anything because all the catch goes to stores nearby.

I know because I have gone back home and checked.

Being a fisherman is hard work.
Early rise.
Equipment must be in good working conditions.
And long days of hard work.

Every piece of equipment they have is essential, from their nets and boats to cutting tools, gloves to prevent rope burns, and water-resistant boots.

Yet, it's not just the physical tools that matter; the mental strength to endure the unpredictable weather—be it wind, rain, sun, or storms—is equally crucial.

Then there is the smell of the ocean, the fish and each other.

Fishermen understand that perseverance, and belief in the unseen are integral to their profession.

The fish don't always leap into their nets, nor is there a guaranteed spot for success.

This uncertainty made it an ideal setting for Jesus to share his teachings, address the crowds from a boat, and choose his first disciples.

While some may view fishermen as less desirable leaders due to their lack of formal education, their resilience and dedication in the face of unpredictable conditions actually make them exceptional candidates for Christ's mission.

Because even with the best intentions to work hard, the outcome can vary significantly, whether it's a substantial catch, a minor one, or none at all.

What if there's a tear in the net that was missed at inspection?

The same applies to their boats.

They can be extravagant, equipped with advanced machinery to facilitate the hauling of the net.

Alternatively, they can be modest and simple, relying on dedicated crew members willing to invest the hours and the hard work to get the job done.

However, if the fish aren't there, it doesn't matter what type of boat is used; the catch will be nonexistent.

While a larger vessel may reach deeper waters and operate more efficiently, increasing the chances of a successful haul, the absence of fish renders all efforts useless.

Yes it is true that a larger, better-equipped boat will venture farther and enhance the likelihood of success.

That's simply how life works.

We understand that having more resources enhances your ability to explore, endure, and achieve greater success, a principle applicable across all professions and lifestyles.

In the fishing industry, for instance, a larger boat can navigate rougher waters, often leaving smaller boats behind or even submerging them with the large waves they create as they pass by.

While we can't alter the boats around us, we sometimes find ourselves confined to the boat we are in.

Sometimes, we have no choice but to remain in our situation; other times, we must save, wait, and persist until we can obtain an upgrade.

Like fishermen, we must trust that bigger isn't always better, believing that each journey will yield a return.

Faith involves believing in the unseen and taking action based on that belief, requiring a holistic commitment of mind, body, and soul.

As scripture reminds us, faith without action is lifeless; it becomes stagnant and unproductive.

Faith embodies the conviction in the unseen.
It transcends mere belief, urging action and engagement.

Church only you and I can trust deep within that all shall be well.

The mind often clings to logic, grounded in tangible evidence, while the body may wrestle with the unease of uncertainty regarding success.

Meanwhile, the soul whispers reassurance, encouraging patience and trust in a higher power.

Inviting you to imagine a possibility outside a confined boat, or box.

That was the invitation that was made to Simon, let down your net.
Faith is required to believe that even after you have been toiling all day there is still a way beyond the evidence that there is nothing to be found.

“Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.
Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.”
If you say so.

As a child, my faith in the church was rooted in an unquestioning acceptance of everything presented to me.

I placed my complete trust in the preacher, the teacher, and the church itself, believing they would act in my best interest and not exploit the scriptures for their own gain—be it spiritual, physical, or financial.

Today, this blind faith has transformed into a troubling allegiance to Christian nationalism, where the concepts of country and God are intertwined, and the message of Jesus is distorted to suggest that tolerance for sin is not a part of loving one's neighbor.

But what is sin?
And who is my neighbor?
Really who?
I'm asking for a friend.

Simon had to believe in the one who said cast that net again.
You and I have to believe enough to cast the net again even when we have yielded no results in our efforts.

Not blind obedience for I am convinced that my God can take my unbelief, my questioning faith, and troubled heart.

Like in the gospel of Mark when Jesus was asked to heal a child, the father explained,
"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24)

God, I'm troubled, I'm mad and disappointed. Help me!

God, I'm troubled, I'm up to my neck in doubt and drowning in a sea of self pity, content, fear, and arrogance, help my unbelief!

See Jesus required an action to the faith of Simon to cast the net again despite the fact that they had been at it all day.

And so faith becomes action.
Faith in action can look like us yelling to the sky, GOD WHERE ARE YOU?!

When Simon does as he is told he pulls a net filled with fishes, certainly not what he was expecting to see.

Scriptures say, "when they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to burst. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. "

They did not say we have too much but why should we share?
We don't know if there will be any tomorrow!
No!
They signal their partners to come and help them.

According to Sheryl A Kujawa-Holbrook in the book Injustice and the Care of Souls, "Oppression is never rooted in one thing. For we are not free until all are free."

We cannot claim to oppose racism while tolerating sexism, classism, heterosexism, and other forms of discrimination.

Advocating for all individuals means actively providing resources, support, and encouragement, including those facing mental health challenges.

Many congregations proclaim their progressive and justice-oriented values, offering prayers and positive thoughts, yet they fail to take meaningful action.

Faith without action is meaningless.

While we may believe that things will improve, we must ask ourselves what steps are we taking to bring about that change?

It is important to be accountable.

To do a self inventory on the progress we are making as the body of Christ to address racism, transphobia, homophobia, ageism, and in today's climate, anger.

It's important to recognize that while you can't tackle every challenge at once without losing your focus we must be intentional about what it is that we want to accomplish.

When I first started in ministry in the North Texas area, a former pastor who was my supervisor told me that if you're passionate about supporting young people, that I should make it my life mission.

He said I would go in circles accomplishing very little if I tried to tackle every injustice in the world or even just around me.

However if I committed to my mission of fostering safe, and brave spaces for youth I would make a difference in other areas too because one day they would grow and hopefully pay it forward.

This resonates deeply with my work in teaching self-confidence, sexuality, and empowerment within the community.

Through this, I address critical issues like AIDS awareness, mental health resources, and future support, which I also touch on themes of class and sustainability.

We may not be able to solve every problem, but we can stand firm against injustice and offer a compassionate ear to those who may feel unworthy of love.

If each of us would do what we are passionate about then we can move faith to action.

For example, if we are passionate about caring for our planet then planting trees is a call to action.

If it is gardening then we might address food insecurities around us.

If it is through art then let us create something brighter that brings joy around us.

If each of us would do a part together we will intersect the lives of many.
But often we feel that we are not good, brave, or smart enough to create change.

The scriptures say that upon “Simon seeing the miracle before him drop down and said I’m not worthy!”

How many times do you and I feel unworthy?

We all have had those doubts that we don’t deserve the prosperity given to us, the extra help, the resources, for we are not enough.

But Jesus did not and does not do things because we are worthy or enough.

The essence, the deep down root of who these three entities are is love.
Creator, Son and Holy Spirit who are upon you to remind you that you are worthy, and deserving of all good things.

Yes, you deserve love.
You deserve a relationship where you are not talked down or treated with such disrespect.

YOU are a child of God, an heir to the one who created all beautiful things.
You are worthy.
This is the body of Christ.

The wholeness within you might take time to reach a state of being well with our bodies, our minds, our physical state but that does not mean that while your transforming and becoming God is not elevating your mind and your heart to be filled with joy.

See that is one of the many things I love about second life.
We don’t see the color of our skin.
We don’t know the actual inabilities or challenges we each have unless we choose to show it in our avatar.

BUT regardless of being able to see or not see this we are grounded in justice.
For however our avatar is before each other, we believe in being real in second life treating each other with much love and respect.

And It is treating everyone around us as children and beloved people of God not using them or being used.
That is faith in action.
It is believing, doing, and imagining possibilities.

Believing that you are loved beyond your wildest imagination regardless of whether you feel worthy or have done something to deserve it.

It is persevering like the fisherman to keep fishing.
It is recognizing that everyone deserves the right to eat good food, have clothing, a place to rest and the opportunities to try to live life beyond survival mode.

It is like what we do here friends.
Together we are creating spaces for morning meditation, spiritual direction,
pastoral support along with Psalter in the evenings and the upcoming book study
during lent season.

It is offering space to feel and be safe while we let our minds wander, ask
questions, and explore things.

It is login in to know you are home.
It is logging off and still knowing we are a click or message away from each other
regardless of our geographical locations.

This is our community.
This is our home.
This is perseverance despite and in-spite of whatever is out there.

This is the faith in action from Simon and our people of faith who still believe in
the message of hope, love, joy and peace.

May we like Simon believe enough to listen, persevere despite challenges and believe
enough to try again and again.

May we like Simon reach out to the people around us to come and share the blessings
we have.
And may we continue to have faith even if it comes with questions.

Like Simon may we respond "Yes, If you so" and then have the courage to believe just
enough to keep on trying.

May it be so.
Amen

SHARING GOD'S TABLE

We have now come to the time to share in Holy Communion together and I invite you
gather your elements.
Place them before you and let us take a moment to take a deep breath as we remember.

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

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.

PRAYER PREPARATION:

We have come to the time where we come together in prayer.

Let us give thanks for the gift of this day
and pray for the life of the world.

If you have a prayer of joy or concern that you wish to lift to God, and have supported by the energy of those gathered here, we invite you to share.

As this song plays, in the silence of our hearts or type your request in the nearby chat.

Chris McQuiston - This Is My Prayer (Official Music Video)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpN4Lmk0GZk>

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.

PASTORAL PRAYER -

Under the shadow of your wings in this hour
may we find rest and strength, renewal and hope.

We ask this, inspired by the example
of your disciple, Martin Luther King, Jr.,
and in Jesus' name. Amen.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Our worship is over
our ministry to the world is just beginning.
The world is waiting.
Go in peace, come again in hope.
Amen.

Let's Dance!

MUSIC FOR THE JOURNEY

Jamie Grace - Dream Big (Official Audio with Lyrics)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAvIMPxhuh0>