

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 March we enter the season of Lent.
Today is the First Sunday of Lent.
Yesterday we celebrated womens International Day.

The United Church of Christ has supported reproductive justice issues since the
1960's.
As a human rights issue, reproductive justice promotes the rights of people to bear
children they want to have, to not bear children, to raise the children they do have
in safe and healthy environments, and express their sexuality without oppression.

Here is a link for resources and a connection to the UCC Reproductive justice
website.

<https://www.ucc.org/reproductive-justice/>

Here are other resources:

<https://www.rcrc.org/prayers/>

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 this service be a blessing to your people.

“O God, you who are closer and more loving to me than I am to myself:

I pray for your blessing as I join this sisterhood of difficult choices.

As I sort out my feelings, lead me in the path of healing and resurrection.”

Amen.

GATHERING MUSIC

Megan Woods - Prayer and A Bible (Official Lyric Video)

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

SCRIPTURES

Today’s reading come from the Gospel of Matthew 6:1-

“Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don’t make a performance out of it.

It might be good theater, but the God who made you won’t be applauding.

“When you do something for someone else, don’t call attention to yourself.

You’ve seen them in action, I’m sure—‘playactors’ I call them—treating prayer meeting and street corner alike as a stage, acting compassionate as long as someone is watching, playing to the crowds.

They get applause, true, but that’s all they get. When you help someone out, don’t think about how it looks. Just do it—quietly and unobtrusively.

That is the way your God, who conceived you in love, working behind the scenes, helps you out.

“And when you come before God, don’t turn that into a theatrical production either. All these people making a regular show out of their prayers, hoping for fifteen minutes of fame!

Do you think God sits in a box seat?

“Here’s what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won’t be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.

Thanks be to God.

SERMON - After the Ashes

This past Wednesday, churches conducted services to remind their congregates of the biblical truth that they are made from dust and will ultimately return to it.

Ash Wednesday serves as a reflection of our mortality.

This season, I shared on Face book during a day when Texas was presenting a bill aimed at criminalizing Transgender identities, highlighting my acute awareness of mortality, which feels like an ever-present reminder.

And yet, lent is still my favorite season of the year.

Lent, derived from the Latin term "Quadragesima" and known as "Cuaresma" in Spanish. Lent is a period dedicated to reflection, sacrifice, and commitment, mirroring the 40 days and nights that Jesus spent fasting in the desert while facing temptation.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke recount these pivotal moments as Jesus embarked on his public ministry.

Lent to many is the time to stop, take inventory of their faith, their lives, and vow to give something in turn to symbolize sacrifice.

Some people give up chocolate.

Some give up drinking, eating meat on Fridays and the list goes on.

My son once had a relationship with an Orthodox Christian from Croatia, and during Lent in particular they followed strict dietary rules, abstaining from certain foods and drinks while fasting from sunrise to sunset until Easter.

This experience made him see my own Christian practices as quite relaxed in comparison, and he never brought up the length of our Easter service again.

Each family had a tradition to prepare for Easter or to encounter the divine during this period even if our traditions were different. We both saw the beauty of preparing, doing something to symbolize sacrifice,, and welcoming Easter Sunday.

What does your tradition look like?

As we enter this Lent season, have you considered what you might choose to let go or give up?

What will your personal commitment look like during this reflective period?

You might be considering spending more time with the scriptures or engaging in fasting.

If you're interested in exploring a unique Biblical practice, I recommend a Lent

study by C.S. Lewis called "The Delightful, Diabolical Daring of Lent."

This study offers a refreshing approach, blending playfulness with thought-provoking insights and encouraging action.

Take a look and see if it resonates with you, as it presents a comical yet meaningful exploration of Lent.

Here's the link for you to explore further:

(https://static1.squarespace.com/static/51f1353be4b0d85124aa05d1/t/65aeaf9701f37019d3dd8381/1705947031464/SALT_Lent_CSLewis_Digital.pdf?)

Whatever you decide to do this lent season do it with mindfulness and intentionality. .

Today's scriptures remind us that when we engage in practices like fasting, giving up certain comforts, or making sacrifices, we should be careful about seeking recognition for our efforts.

In Jerusalem during this period, the synagogue served as a central gathering place for the community.

The Jewish population busily engaged in preparations for the Sabbath and the celebration of Passover, immersing themselves in a variety of rituals and religious ceremonies that underscored their faith.

These practices of purification held significant meaning, reflecting a deep reverence for tradition and spirituality.

It was within this vibrant atmosphere that Jesus observed the profound importance of these rituals, recognizing their role in the lives of the people around him.

The Pharisees, Sadducee's, and other religious authorities each had distinct responsibilities, rituals to uphold, and the laws of Moses to adhere to.

Their devotion was clearly reflected in their offerings, the garments they wore, and their practices of fasting.

Jesus, having grown up surrounded by these experiences, understood their significance deeply. Much like our own childhoods, we too recognize the impact of our upbringing.

For instance, I could always tell when one of the deacons was observing a fast. She donned black attire, her face appeared drawn, and she looked as if she might faint at any moment.

Moreover, she made sure to remind us of her fasting status at every opportunity. My friends and I at Sunday School would warn each other, saying, "Don't cross her; she's exceptionally holy this weekend and could smite you like the prophet Elijah with fire from above!"

Yes I was a biblical geek.

But how else will people know if you were doing something holy if you don't talk

about it?

Today's scriptures start with the warning "BE...especially careful when you are trying to be good."

Danger, will Robinson..danger.

The reality is that deciding to do good, be good and upright is difficult.

The warning comes at the reality that at every turn in our lives we are going to have to decide if we can do it.

In the words of Tyler Perry's character Madea, if you get got, YOU GOT to them back!

Can you commit to not doing that?

Or a better way of thinking about committing to a practice is the act of dieting.

How many can recognize those difficult times of trying to stay true to a diet?

And then there are so many practices to consider. .

There is the Mediterranean diet,, the Intermittent Fasting, the Low calories deity, Indian Vegetarian Diet and the Keto diet to name a few.

If I am honest the only diet I have been true to all my life is the ta-quito diet but that's another story.

See unless one carves a plan, an extensive idea on how to make it through life with whatever diet you decide to follow, failure is around the corner.

If you want to succeed in following a diet, you have to dedicate yourself to planning your meals, prepping, organizing your day, or choosing dining options that align with your dietary goals.

I have a colleague I admire who consistently brings her own food to our in-person gatherings on Fridays, regardless of the menu.

She insists that restaurant foods contain too many preservatives and prefers to cook at home, where she knows exactly what she's eating.

I watch her with admiration as I munch on my Takis and sip my diet soda. Her commitment is truly inspiring, and I tell her that I plan to start my own journey next month; February felt too short to fully commit and March well it came too soon.

We are urged, my friends, to heed the messages from the Holy One that caution us to be vigilant and prepared if we choose to do good.

If you decide to pursue goodness, remember that you have two paths: one leads to earthly recognition, praise, and celebration, while the other offers rewards in heaven, so there's no need to call for attention.

Jesus made it abundantly clear: avoid the temptation to seek attention for your good

deeds.

When you do something for someone else don't call attention to yourself.
WHAT?!

When you help someone out, don't think about how you look, just do it.
WHAT?!

When you come before God don't turn it into a theatrical production?
What do you mean?
Like how are people supposed to know we are doing awesome and being good?
Then what am I supposed to publish on social media?

The scriptures say, "The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant."
THat is a new one for me.

Prayer-ignorant.
Like what on earth?!
LIke there is a formula that is not being followed?
Yep.

The initial thought that arises is the prayer outlined in Matthew 6:9-13, where Jesus shares a model for prayer.

In today's message the how and where formula is added.
It starts with finding solitude, whether in our own rooms or in a tranquil place, to deepen our relationship with God.

It's important to avoid the temptation of seeking attention for our good deeds, as some might do by loudly proclaiming their generosity or blessings.
We should reflect on the idea of humility, steering clear of the need to showcase our actions to others.

As we enter this Lenten season, the scriptures remind us to prepare our hearts, resisting the urge to boast or exaggerate our contributions.
Instead, we are invited to embrace moments of quiet reflection, allowing us to assess our spiritual journey and deepen our relationship with the divine.

The Psalmist tell us in Psalm 51:17, that the sacrifice that the Holy One asks of us is one that, "Iis a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart..." One that God will not despise.

And I don't know about you but I'm there so many times this season.
Going back to my corner and yelling up to the sky, "are you kidding me? "

Or something like "HOW LONG?! How long will you let this go down and all the good we accomplish slide off to dangerous levels? How long, God?!"

I can cry, and be angry, and even yell up to the sky all while knowing that my

contrite heart will not be despised.

I will not be despised!
I have to believe that!

God is not asking for a sacrifice that distances you from the divine and causes you to lose your identity.
The true sacrifice, the commitment, and the covenant God seeks from you is rooted in love.

Yes, love. Love yourself so that you can love God and those around you.
This can often be more challenging than it appears.

When the Holy One invites you to embrace a life of piety, self-sacrifice, and holiness, it's an invitation to invest in your own well-being.

Just as starting a diet isn't solely about fitting into old jeans, or at least its the start but not the whole reason. It is about recognizing that unhealthy habits can lead to complications in your health and life.

I KNOW that if I don't stop eating Takis, soft drinks, and all kinds of junk food I will end up gaining more weight that will complicate my heart, my diabetes, my life, and my sleep!
This in turn will mess up my head, my creativity, my ability to stay focused and complete tasks.
If I ignore the need to change my eating habits, I risk harming myself rather than nurturing my well-being.

This Lent, let's embrace the chance to contemplate and move steadily toward wholeness,
recognizing that although we walk this path together, each journey is uniquely crafted between you and the Divine.

Currently, Christian Nationalism is insisting on allegiance to God, Guns, and Country, often prioritizing two of the three.
However, if you find yourself needing to proclaim your Christianity loudly for others to recognize it, you may want to reconsider your approach.

Robert Ellsberg, in his book Learning to be Still said, "Prayer has been described as an active silence in which one listens acutely for the still small voice, as if prayer were not asking and getting through to God but becoming so composed that God might come through me."

Our still small voice gets crowded by the world and the hectic things going around us.
It gets drowned out by our own minds and our DOING and not BEING.

This Lent season hears the Holy One inviting you to laugh, to find joy, to see our at times fragile selves
and remember we are dust and we are loved until and beyond to dust we return.

This Lent season, may we reward our alms giving, pious lives, and prayers with the knowledge that recognition from above is the reward and not grandstanding.

May our quest be to find peace, hope and overflowing joy.
May we use this as the compass that guides every one of your actions.

May it be so, Amen.

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.

Riley Clemmons - Broken Prayers (Official Video)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBDt_-tIfLI

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 -

(The act of praying with and for someone at an often difficult time of decision is a reminder that one doesn't have to journey alone; it is an act of companionship and love precisely at a time when women and their families may feel very much alone.

The prayers below are from our partners at the Religious Coalition of Reproductive Choice.

They cover numerous topics and come from many different faith traditions.
We hope you'll find one that speaks to you.)

For Women with Problem Pregnancies |

“We pray for women who know that life is beginning within them, who face the agony of wondering what to do when they do not know if they can cope...”

For Partners |

“... It might not be my body, It might not be my decision, But I am here: Because she matters to me, Because I care, Because no one should have to do this alone...”

For Men | “... We ask that you would help them be all that you have created them to be. Help them to see themselves as whole persons...”

For Those Who Choose Adoption |

“We pray for birth mothers. We ask for informed maturity, compassionate ears and shoulders, and tough love to help them make good choices for themselves and their children...”

For Providers of Women’s Health Care |

“Gracious Provider of Care and Protection, we remember and stand with health care professionals who furnish health care for women.”

For Women Coerced and Forced Against Their Will |

“God of our lives, help us to find ways to break the silence that perpetuates the cycles of sexual abuse and violence...”

For Women Who Are Immigrants and Seek Refuge |

“Gracious God, you who guided Naomi and her family to look for bread in Moab, a foreign land, protect the women everywhere who have to leave behind their home or homelands so that they and their families can survive...”

A Chaplain’s Prayer | “... Promise yourself, whether or not others understand, you will always be true and faithful to your own deepest self...”

Amen

(<https://www.ucc.org/reproductive-justice/>)

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.

Now lets dance!

Kirk Franklin - Revolution

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

