

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 Second Life is
a church with full real life standing in the
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 are in the season of Lent.
Today is the Fourth Sunday of Lent.
And the United Church of Christ has made available a resource for Lent
filled with spiritual substance to meet us where we are.
Here is the link if you would like to download a copy and follow along:

Link: <https://jointhemovementucc.org/jtm-resources/lent-2025/>

I want to also remind you that we will have a wonderful Easter Service so please
join us.

During Holy Week, on Maundy Thursday as it is called I will be here holding a
worship service or gathering for those who wish to stop by.

Then we will meet again on Sunday when we celebrate together the resurrection of Christ our redeemer.

The goal is to see what might the spirit lead you to think about, ponder, discern, pray about and wonder.

Will you pray with me?

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

May your wisdom as we ponder and reflect in today's readings nudge us towards a space of revelation and insight about ourselves, the system around us, and what is ours to do and what is ours to let go.

May this service and all we do be for your honor and glory and may your presence be within our space at our time.

Amen.

GATHERING MUSIC

Co. - Church (Take Me Back) [Official Lyric
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eT0crWu8mQ>

Today's reading comes from the gospel of Luke chapter 15:1-3, 11-32 (NRSV)

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.

And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable:

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons.

The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.' So he divided his assets between them.

A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living.

When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need.

So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.

He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to his senses he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!

I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;

I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”
' 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

“Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.

He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.

He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.'

Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.

But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.' ”

The word of God for the people of God

Thanks be to God

Sermon - It's Not Fair!

This story is a classic, yes?

We all have heard it before at one point or another.

The prodigal son!

The story of the prodigal son resonates deeply, much like the parable of the lost sheep, as it explores themes of redemption, forgiveness, love, family, and joyous reunions.

We can easily relate to Jesus sharing meals with tax collectors and sinners, prompting the Pharisees to remark, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them!” It's a reminder that we often recognize ourselves in those who exist on the margins of society.

After all, we pride ourselves on being compassionate individuals who would never turn anyone away.

Yet, the phrase often echoed by evangelicals, "Love the sinner, hate the sin," can leave a sour taste in our mouths.

However, this parable delves much deeper than merely associating with those on the margins; it tells a profound story of a lost child returning home to a father who embraces him with open arms and unconditional forgiveness.

I would like to encourage you to explore the intricacies of the prodigal son's story further.

What thoughts arise as you engage with this narrative?

For instance, what motivated his departure?

Was it a sense of boredom or perhaps a lack of interest in farm life?

The scripture notes that upon the son's return, his older brother was busy working in the fields, highlighting that there was certainly plenty of labor to be done.

One question that arises is why the father entrusted his son with the inheritance in the first place.

Although we didn't delve into this aspect, it's worth noting that the son requested his share of the inheritance and then lost it all.

I remember watching some church cartoons during Sunday school in my young evangelical days that depicted the prodigal son as someone who was unwilling to work, lazy, and instead asking his father for money.

The next scene was of him partying with bad people, girls, food and wine.

Eventually, his so-called friends depleted his funds and abandoned him.

The narrative then shifts to him in dire straits, eating with pigs and being rejected everywhere he sought assistance.

They showed his friends he had a party with them making fun of him and pushing him away like he was a filthy beggar.

The underlying message seemed to be that once you lose your wealth, those fair-weather friends will abandon you, and the only path to redemption is through returning to Jesus for forgiveness and salvation.

Simple right?

Yet, I've always wondered why the father chose to give him the inheritance.

Shouldn't the father have passed away first for the son to receive his portion?

What made him confident enough to trust him with his portion of the inheritance?

Clearly the boy did not like to work so why trust him!

As a parent of multiple children, you become intimately familiar with their unique personalities and capabilities.

My partner and I have raised four who are now young adults, including a set of twins—a boy and a girl.

The eldest is in his thirties, while the youngest is in his twenties.

The twins, despite sharing the same birthday, couldn't be more different; they often clashed like cats and dogs.

Their work ethics are also so different, one has built a career in the Navy, while the other is deeply immersed in the world of video games, which is a story in itself.

As a parent, I frequently heard the cries of “It's not fair!” echoing through our home.

Accountability and consequences were often the things they were seeking from each other.

Why does he get away with this and I did not?

Or why did she get this and we did not?

This insight of being a parent gave me a different perspective about this parable of the prodigal son.

If I have lost one of our kids, like the father I would be simply grateful to have his son return home, regardless of his past choices or struggles.

This sentiment resonates deeply, especially when I think of parents who have lost children to drugs, an unjust system, gangs, or cults.

Like that father, they stand at a distance, filled with hope and longing, praying for the day they can see their child coming home again.

I have also played the role of the brother, and perhaps you have too, especially when it comes to holding others accountable.

The scriptures illustrate a scenario where the brother returns, questioning, “Why?” He laments that he never received a celebration, while the one who squandered resources is welcomed back with open arms.

This raises a profound question: why do we celebrate the reckless while overlooking accountability and justice?

This theme resonates with the stories of tax collectors and those marginalized in society.

Why is that?

As I tune into NPR each morning, I witness the gradual dismantling of a system that took years to build, and I find myself crying out in frustration.

Why?

Cole Arthur Riley had some amazing insights on the reality of seeking justice and accountability in her book *This Here Flesh* spirituality, liberation, and the stories

that makes us see details.

I'm going to share three things that caught my attention, power, liberation and honesty.

"We cannot trust a society that makes judgments on the morality of a person without taking responsibility for how its own morality has instigated the conditions that call for such desperate decision-making." Cole Arthur Riley

The church has traditionally established a moral framework distinguishing right from wrong. Similarly, our legal system categorizes actions as either acceptable or unacceptable; for instance, theft leads to imprisonment.

However, the prison system operates as a profit-driven enterprise, with private companies benefiting financially from each inmate.

The realities of this system are far from straightforward. The complexities involved often blur the lines between right and wrong.

As Cole A. Riley points out, we frequently show more compassion for the system than for those who violate its rules.

This raises important questions: What drives individuals to hustle? What compels them to steal?

The margins are not pretty.

A hungry child at school will inevitably find ways to meet their needs, even if those methods aren't considered morally acceptable.

That hungry child who learned to survive will become that teenager that is mouthy and hustles for that money.

Such a teen often encounters the school system, facing detentions, suspensions, or even juvenile hall, where they pick up additional survival skills.

Eventually, this teenager transitions into adulthood, and the cycle may repeat with the birth of their own child.

However, this cycle can be disrupted by caring mentors, teachers, pastors, and community members who take the time to listen and offer guidance.

Simply admonishing with words like "don't do that" or labeling behaviors as wrong or evil does little to create real change.

The parable of the prodigal son explores themes of justice and injustice.

The father's act of welcoming his wayward child back with gifts like a ring, shoes, and fine clothes symbolizes a restoration of status and love.

If I were in his shoes, I might have felt joy at the reunion but would likely have insisted on some hard work in return.

Yet, as a parent, I realize that my emotions would probably sway me differently. What about you?

How would you have acted, or what have you done?

This also raises the question: where does the true power lie in this narrative?

Tupac Shakur, the iconic rapper, famously declared, "Only God can judge me!" He understood that greed and systemic oppression drive many actions. In the struggle for power, the influential often seize control, equating power with wealth.

Who can judge us?

Who really makes sure one is judge and held accountable?

Power is money.

Power is buying anything but justice.

This power manifests in the ability to purchase favors, appointments, and promotions.

It allows individuals to buy forgiveness, sidestepping accountability and erasing past transgressions.

Cole Riley says, "Even when demanding retribution, justice does not demean the offender's dignity; it affirms it." It communicates that what has been done is not what the offender was made for."

Liberation cannot progress without justice.

To the brother who watched his reckless sibling return home, a profound injustice unfolded before his eyes.

He works hard, fulfilling every expectation set by their father, while this brother squanders everything yet returns as if he's a hero. It feels deeply unfair and it does not add up!

Where is the justice?

Where are the consequences?

See church we assume people get away with things, yet we are unaware of the silent struggles they face at night, burdened by their choices.

But we are not there at night when it is all still and they lay in bed with whatever they have done weighing heavy upon them.

The true impact of our actions remains hidden from view, as Newton's third law reminds us that every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

It may seem that I possess the power to acquire anything I desire, but does that power come with loneliness?

While I might command authority, is it genuine respect or merely fear stemming from tyranny?

The illusion of enhanced productivity through substances may mask the inevitable crash that follows, leaving me to grapple with the aftermath alone.

The principles of action and reaction, along with the concepts of liberation and justice, play out in our lives, reminding us that freedom does not exempt us from consequences.

Liberation may allow us to move forward, but it often leaves us with scars; in time, we may heal or remain limping, yet we can still find peace within ourselves.

We can find wholeness again.

Justice church embodies the essence of prayers and faith in motion.

It manifests through writing letters, making phone calls, and engaging in activism, whether behind the scenes or on the front lines.

It involves extending a warm welcome to newcomers, reaching out to those we haven't seen at church, and checking in on our community members.

Justice, liberation, and faith in action reflect the embodiment of dignity and worth, as we engage with others in a spirit of understanding and without judgment.

Honesty emerges from the deep understanding that you are a passionate follower of Christ, often crying out in frustration, "How long?!"

It's a recognition that God embraces your raw truth—your belief, doubt, anger, and frustration—just as GOD welcomes you with joy, gratitude, and song.

Honesty is like singing through tears, remembering the God of our Biblical ancestors who forgave figures like Moses and David, using them as instruments of liberation and redemption.

It acknowledges our humanity, allowing us to voice our feelings of unfairness.

We may retreat to our rooms, much like the brother in the parable who hesitated to join the celebration.

The story leaves us wondering if he ever entered, but it highlights the father's response, reminding us of the unconditional love that awaits.

‘(PUT YOUR NAME HERE), you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours!’

Believe that the Holy one sees your work, dedication, and life.

Many of us understand what it means to struggle and juggle multiple jobs, raise children, face hunger, and hustle.

Our responsibility is to walk and move with a purpose , recognizing that we are inherently human—imperfect yet cherished, regardless of our past actions or future choices.

Redemption, freedom, and forgiveness are not contingent upon our deeds.

Cole A Riley says, “We are a people much concerned with ruling than loving. This is a mistake that positions us in places where we are no longer close enough to another person or thing to perceive its pain or need. To be human in an aching world is to KNOW our dignity and become people who safeguard the dignity of everyone around us.”

May you sense the warmth of your community here on SL through these digital connections, our conversations, and the moments we share.

Be aware that pastoral care and spiritual direction is available to you.

May you hear the words of the almighty telling you, what is mine is yours.

Perhaps it's a time to celebrate your return with a ring and shoes, or simply to enjoy a joyful gathering together.

In everything we do, let us remember that we are enveloped in love, with the Holy One reminding us that what belongs to them is also ours; we are cherished.

Embrace the love, redemption, and freedom within us as we strive for wholeness.

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.

Kirk Franklin - Just For Me (In-Studio Performance

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TD3zS_GxS3M&list=RDMM0ghyp0J6XW8&index=34

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 -

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.

MUSIC FOR THE JOURNEY

Crowder - Good God Almighty

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TzECToPYIk&list=RDEMedepV2RVtZstH12EtGbC1w&start_radio=1&rv=qxnZgM9YXy0