

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).

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.

Our service will be in voice and text.
A copy of our services today, our bulletin or worship guide can be found inside that
red book located in the back.
The 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.

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 donation bowl located in the back next
to the red book or 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.

Today is the fifth Sunday of Easter and our second day with our movie series which
we are calling, Sacred Conversations with Movies.
Together, we'll delve into select movies that resonate with our sacred texts,
theologians (people who write about God) and illustrate the concept of the Holy
Trinity, sparking meaningful conversations and reflections on how these themes
manifest on the big screen.

Last week we did Wish and this week we voted on the movie Shank Shank Redemption.

Because of its length we are going to jump right into the scriptures and sermon.
I have clips from the movie through my sermon.
I would like to take the time to apologize beforehand for the cursing in the clips.

And now I'll like to invite you to pray with me.

INVOCATION -

Come, Holy Spirit, and fill this space and our community with your divine presence. Touch our hearts, minds, and souls so that we may experience your love and light in our darkest moments, and find comfort during times of loneliness. May the film and discussion ahead nourish our hearts, minds, and bodies as we navigate the challenges that surround us.

I pray in the name of the one who calls us family and in Jesus name

Amen

SCRIPTURES

Today's reading come from the gospel book of Matthew 18:1-8 (The message)

Jesus told them a story showing that it was necessary for them to pray consistently and never quit. He said, "There was once a judge in some city who never gave God a thought and cared nothing for people.

A widow in that city kept after him: 'My rights are being violated. Protect me!' "He never gave her the time of day. But after this went on and on he said to himself, 'I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people think.

But because this widow won't quit badgering me, I'd better do something and see that she gets justice—otherwise I'm going to end up beaten black-and-blue by her pounding.'"

Then the Master said, "Do you hear what that judge, corrupt as he is, is saying? So what makes you think God won't step in and work justice for his chosen people, who continue to cry out for help?

Won't he stick up for them? I assure you, he will. He will not drag his feet. But how much of that kind of persistent faith will the Son of Man find on the earth when he returns?"

The Word of God for the people of God,
Thanks be to God

SERMON -Redemption or Perseverance

Many of my friends consider The Shawshank Redemption to be among their top five favorite films. Therefore, I wasn't surprised when it was selected for our movie and theological discussion series.(God talk)

When you read the title it gives you the impression that it is all about redemption.

Shank Shank Redemption, which was released in 1994.

Redemption defined by Webster's Dictionary says, "Redemption refers to the act of purchasing back something, or freeing them from captivity, or delivering them from distress or liability."

Well this makes sense since the movie is about Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) who is sentenced to two consecutive life terms in prison for the murders of his wife and her lover.

The movie takes place at the fictional place of Shawshank State Penitentiary in Main.

But in reality it was filmed in a prison on the Ohio State Reformatory in Mansfield Ohio.

Prior to my research for this sermon I had no idea there were so many cool facts.

For example, I did not know that this movie was based on Stephen King's novella Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption, which was published in his 1982 short story collection, Different Seasons.

Two other short stories in the collection were made into films: 1986's Stand By Me and 1998's Apt Pupil.

Here I thought King was just about horror movies.

Another fun fact was that in this story the character of Andy who knows he didn't commit the crimes forms a friendship with Red (Morgan Freeman) who was a white character in King's stories.

In Stephen King's book Red was white tall and Irish.

In the movie Andy asks Red why he's called Red, to which he quips, "Maybe it's because I'm Irish."

I could go on and on about these really cool facts but let me geek out on you about how these connect theologically (God talk).

This film is far from a depiction of a joyful setting; instead, it follows Andy, who is wrongfully imprisoned for a crime he did not commit, through some tough violent times.

Throughout his time in prison, he endures the harsh realities of life behind bars.

Although he eventually learns to adapt to his grim surroundings, it takes him a staggering nineteen years to find freedom.

But did he find redemption?

At first glance, the summary I provided seems logical: individuals enter prison, serve their time, and emerge redeemed after paying for their crimes.

However, this is far from the reality for many.

A good example from the film is Brooks Halten, an elderly man who spent 50 years behind bars and struggled to adapt to life outside after his release.

His inability to reconnect with society highlights the profound effects of institutionalization and the challenges faced by those who have been incarcerated for so long.

Our minds and bodies adapt to the various situations we encounter, reflecting the essence of our humanity.

This adaptability transcends physical confines, as it primarily occurs within the realm of our minds.

In environments like prisons or situations marked by violence and severe repercussions, individuals often find themselves compelled to conform and adjust to their surroundings.

The necessity to survive in such harsh conditions leaves little room for resistance, forcing one to navigate the complexities of their reality with resilience and adaptability.

Each of us in life we venture through our journey making the best with the hand we have been dealt with.

Life unfolds in unexpected ways, and we must either adapt to these changes or risk becoming overwhelmed by circumstances that weigh us down.

In the film, one particular element immediately captured my attention: the will to survive against all odds.

Andy expressed his desire for this tiny tool to work on his rock collection, sharing with Red his ambition to create a chessboard from stones.

He assured Red that his intention was purely constructive, promising to use this tiny hammer solely as a means to craft rather than as a weapon.

The word that came to mind was perseverance.

The perseverance to create something out of nothing and it all started with a tiny hammer.

What is your secret tool that keeps you going, creating, and finding your way to liberation?

What is your tiny hammer?

Today's scripture tells us the parable of a woman who went to the judge and kept at it bothering, calling, some might even say harassing the judge.

The scriptures tell us that this judge did not give God a thought nor did he care for nothing!

But this widow kept at it: 'My rights are being violated. Protect me!' and kept knocking and knocking at his door.

Now he kept ignoring her but finally he said, 'I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people think. But because this widow won't quit badgering me, I'd better do something and see that she gets justice—otherwise I'm going to end up beaten black-and-blue by her pounding.'"

In this film, we repeatedly witness Andy's resilience in even the most difficult place.

Despite the bleak environment, Andy manages to find a way to be of service, benefiting both himself and others.

By leveraging his mathematical skills, he becomes essential, assisting a guard in avoiding financial troubles with the IRS.

Additionally, he offers his expertise to fellow guards with their tax issues, which ultimately secures him a degree of protection from potential threats within the prison.

This protection quieted his mind, his fear and it was only then he was free to help others.

In the book *Living Resistance: An Indigenous Vision for Seeking Wholeness Every Day* by Curtice, Kaitlin B, says "Somehow, self-love and self-care become reciprocal with those around us.

Another way to imagine it is that every time you care for and heal yourself, a ripple emerges out of your being and reaches somebody else and encourages them to heal and care for themselves. "

That was Andy, wanting to show a better way through reading, education, books, and community.

Andy became so annoying like the woman in the scriptures and he kept writing and pounding on that door for justice in the form of education.

See my friends I Do believe that, "The pen is mightier than the sword"Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Andy wrote weekly letters to the state requesting funding to improve the library, and he finally got it.

He was asked to stop writing!

Then Andy started to write to the Maine state Senate for money for books.

(I apologize beforehand for the cursing in the following clip)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lKtbmzsc0m8>

Please please stop sending us letters!

The Judge in the scriptures says, I don't fear God but I fear her, please stop pounding on my door.

This scene concluded with Andy saying "it only took six years!"

Jesus says, "Do you hear what that judge, corrupt as he is, is saying?

So what makes you think God won't step in and work justice for his chosen people, who continue to cry out for help?

Won't he stick up for them?

I assure you, he will. He will not drag his feet."

In today's fast-paced world, six years can feel like an eternity, especially when we have instant access to news, groceries, media, and entertainment right at our fingertips.

This constant stream of information can make it difficult to recognize that such conveniences are not a universal experience.

Many people live in circumstances where access to these resources is limited,

highlighting a stark contrast to our own reality.

My young campers find it hard to believe that when I needed to conduct research, I had to visit a physical library, navigate through a card catalog, and search for Dewey Decimal call numbers to locate my books.

The convenience of Google is a luxury in this country alone.

And that is hard to imagine.

Six years of waiting seems forever to us but to someone who is waiting with nothing to lose it is not time wasted but rather time invested.

What are you investing your time in?

Persistence and a transformed mindset are ultimately what carry us through the challenges we face.

Paul to the church in Rome said, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." (Romans 12:2)

Renew your mind and listen to the words of the Holy-One: if even the corrupt can be swayed toward justice, imagine what I am capable of.

Andy exemplified unwavering hope, clinging to the possibility of transformation and a brighter future, even in the bleakest of circumstances.

When he received a gift for the library, the melodies of Mozart filled his spirit with joy, prompting him to share that happiness, even at the cost of two weeks in solitary confinement.

As you watch the upcoming scene, pay close attention to the faces and emotions portrayed on screen, all brought to life by the gift of music.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15ppqVbhs0c>

Any was reprimanded but he had a huge smile on his face because it was worth it. Andy's character says, "There are places in this world that aren't made out of stone.

That there's something inside... that they can't get to, that they can't touch. That's yours."

What is yours?

What do you hold on to?

Red said Hope is a dangerous state of mind because it is not a reality.

How do you feel about hope?

Do you believe it can drive you out of your mind?

Andy experiences how hope can be overshadowed by greed.

During his time on Earth, Jesus recognized the importance of hope and healing, frequently using parables to ask, "What do you need?"

This question resonates today: What does our church need?

What barriers prevent us from seeing hope and light in our lives?

Greed, with its insatiable thirst for wealth, can appear overwhelmingly powerful. Similarly, corruption and the desire for control act like weeds, suffocating the

growth of something beautiful.

But what do you do when you see the weeds choking the life out of plant?

You go work on that plant, giving it water and sunlight.

Andy finds himself in a dark hole literally and in his mind.

After finding someone who knows the truth about his innocence it is literally killed by greed and corruption.

Andy lost not only his chance to prove his innocence but also a dear friend.

Greed and corruption, the epitome of sin, will relentlessly strive to keep you trapped, mired in despair.

Your senses, smell, eye sight, mind is in a mess.

There are often times when we feel that we can't seem to make a way out.

I'm never going to fix it!

I'm never going to be anything!

I'm never going to...

It's important not to measure your worth against others or assume that God is dismayed by your struggles.

Instead, invite God into your life.

Tom Berlin, in his book *Restored*, Finding Redemption in our Mess, highlights that many people have a tendency to distance themselves from God precisely when they should be drawing closer.

In a poignant moment, Andy encourages Red to play the harmonica, suggesting that even in the darkest times, music can serve as a beacon of hope.

This theme of hope becomes particularly significant when Andy faces overwhelming despair, leading his friends to fear for his well-being.

Berlin continues "We may long for a better life...but we don't necessarily want God to give us something truly new and truly different."

Red accepted his fate, understanding that he was likely to die in the confines of his prison, finding a sense of peace in that realization.

In contrast, Andy spent 19 years grappling with his situation, deeply aware that he did not belong in such a place.

Red towards the end of the film says that Andy is like a bird who should have never been caged.

In the end Andy navigated the very system that sought to control him, transforming the chaos of their circumstances into a force for good.

He harnessed the greed and corruption around him, ultimately empowering himself to hold accountable those who wronged both God and their fellow man.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvPerZLPnm4>

Andy crawled through so much poop.

The length of 5 football fields in human waste which is shy of half a mile.

What will you crawl through for liberation?
Not freedom, liberation.
Can you persevere?

Can you seek perseverance to freedom?
Can you seek perseverance to liberation?

How many of us are walking free?
We look free because we are not in jail or behind bars?
Or are we just free physically but not spiritually or even mentally?

When you gaze out your window, do you see a world filled with hope, light, and endless possibilities, or are the bars on the window blocking it?
Are you willing to pursue your free state of mind, even if it means crawling through BS and uncomfortable truth seeking real liberation?

Liberation may not come easily or without cost, but it is ultimately yours to claim.

You have the strength to rise above your circumstances, drawing on the renewal of your mind and the profound significance of your Baptism, which symbolizes the waters of redemption and your path to freedom.
Embrace the journey to the water, where your redemption awaits.

Andy Dufresne crawled through a river of shit and came clean on the other side.

The widow in the scriptures must have looked like an annoying person banging on that judge's door, but by God you will get what you're looking for, do not stop asking!

Berlin concludes "I'm asking God to bless my mess not because I'm not going to do anything about it, but because sometimes we all need a little help."
If you ignore a mess in your lives it will take over.

That is the desire of God, NOT that we are free of sin but that we are perfected in love.
That is how you deal with lack of hope, and the mess we might be in.

We confront what is holding us back and become renewed and transformed by grace and the undeniable belief that we are loved!
Shank Shank Redemption is about the redeeming power of community, of friends, of perseverance, of crawling through poop to find liberation.

Above all it is about knowing that you have to get busy living or get busy dying.
Redemption or perseverance, what do you think?
Church may you find liberation in your journey.

May you make it across the border, the prison gates, an institutionalized mind of whatever separates you from the Love of God.
May you find hope and may it embrace you and help you keep in your mind the beauty of music and your passion to live.
And may one day you reach the one who already gave you salvation, liberation, grace

and freedom no questions asked, and not because of something you did or will do.

On that day may you get there and shake the Holy one's hand.
So live and live abundantly!
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.

SONG

Megan Woods - Prayer and A Bible (Official Lyric Video)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJsKSGpodyk>

COMMUNITY PRAYER

God only knows what you've been through and what you are going through.
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.

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

Let's dance!

Grace Got You

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmerCfxIqAc&list=RDMM0ghyp0J6XW8&index=36>

Go in Peace,

Amen.