

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.

Now let us breath in and breath out as we prepare for todays service and welcome the
Holy Spirit to meet us where we are.

If there are any announcements about the life of the church, please type them in
Nearby Chat during our Gathering Music.

GATHERING MUSIC

Jordan Feliz - Beloved (Official Lyric Video)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgJFUW3VenY>

SCRIPTURES

Today's reading come from the gospel book of Luke 13:10-17 (NRSV)

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath.
And just then appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years.

She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.
When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."

When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd,
"There are six days on which to work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day."

But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites!
Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it to water?"

And out not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from his bondage on the Sabbath day?
When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him.

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

SERMON - RULES

As an artist, I had relocated to the Dallas area in my twenties to focus on my passion for art.
After earning an associate degree, I faced a setback when I was laid off from my first marketing position.

This experience prompted me to seek a more stable career, leading me to consider fields like law enforcement and mortuary services, which seem to always have a steady stream of clients.

I considered the whole undertaker job but I could not stomach the smell of the liquids so that did not work.
Instead, I found myself working security at a large mall, where I gained valuable experience in public interaction and management, this aligned closely with law enforcement.

After diligently saving from my three jobs, I decided to hire a trainer to help me get in shape.
I printed out the rules and guidelines from the police department's recruiting website and set to work.

A month later, I felt ready and took the police department test, along with the physical and psychological evaluations, passing them all with flying colors!

During my final interview, I faced a panel of seven personnel, including police officers, sergeants, and lieutenants, who grilled me for hours. Despite the intense grilling, I emerged approved for hiring, marking a significant milestone in my journey.

So I became a recruit 9009 and to the Police Academy I went.

That was truly a unique experience.

Rising at 5 a.m. to log several miles of running before the 8 a.m. marching and check-in was intense.

Alongside the physical demands, I also had to immerse myself in studying for exams on city ordinances, policies, and the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE) exam, not to mention the civil service exam.

If you know me in person you will see that I am at an astounding height of barely 5 feet.

So often I would be told if you want to command respect at your height you must DEMAND It with your tone, your outstanding uniform, and your face.

By cultivating a strong demeanor, a positive attitude, and unwavering confidence, I can ensure that others think twice before they dare to mess with me.

I remember the Sergeant saying, every rule in this book (the Department's three inch binder on rules) has a story on why it was created.

And sure enough we would randomly pick one rule and he would tell us a story and so on.

Every Law we must enforce and demand the public do so or consequences will follow.

So every rule has a story.

The Sabbath was a rule with a story.

What is that story?

Why did the Israelites honor the Sabbath?

Well, it was a command by God to rest, to reflect on the covenant relationship with the sacred.

It was a reminder of God's care when they fled Egypt as slaves.

The Sabbath was God's way of emphasizing trust and renewal.

What can be wrong with that?

The Sabbath like many other rules or statutes are there to help people follow a way of life that honors everyone.

Or at least that is what the main point of it is.

My experience with the Police Department was largely positive, shaped by my

upbringing as a Mexican child, I was good at following rules and to think on my feet, having dodge flying chancas (flip flops) when I mis spoke. Add to this how I grew up in a conservative, fundamentalist environment instilled in me a respect for rules, with no questions asked.

However, as I began to embrace a new perspective on faith and liberation, I found myself facing unexpected challenges.

After enduring three grueling weeks and a pivotal day of reckoning, I made the decision to resign.

But I did not resign right away.

I decided to wait until Monday to officially leave, ensuring that my departure was not dictated by the intense pressures of "hell day" that took place on Friday.

See "hell day" was designed to make you break and people from all over the police department would show up to watch recruits walk away.

But the truth was, I found myself more curious about the reasons behind the teenager's theft than in simply sending them to juvenile detention.

Similarly, I was drawn to understanding the story of the homeless man shouting at passersby, rather than dismissing him as a nuisance or arresting them.

My focus was on whether they were hungry, struggling emotionally, or in need of mental health support, rather than resorting to incarceration.

I walked away from the police department with my head held high on a Monday, leaving behind a trail of surprised colleagues who couldn't believe why I was doing it after "making it."

Rules, procedures and reasoning behind concepts make sense to me.

The Sabbath is truly a wonderful concept!

And as someone who struggles with self-care practices, I must admit, being sent to rest is not all bad.

Because traditionally, the Sabbath symbolizes renewal and a designated time for rest.

It also showed in this reading how animals were cared for on the Sabbath which was a comforting thought.

Yet noticed why Jesus calls those who are upset about him helping someone on the sabbath hypocritical.

He says, are the animals more important than this woman?

What a question to ask on this time where women were probably disregarded and treated as property.

I also want to call attention to how reading scriptures with rigidity and taken out of context can have a bad theological (God talk) influence on people and their behaviors towards others.

For example, in Luke 13:11, we read about a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years due to a spirit.

This kind of interpretation can lead preachers to approach individuals in wheelchairs, attempting to exorcise demons or questioning them about their sins.

Even the disciples echoed this sentiment, asking Jesus what sin had caused a person's suffering (John 9:2).

While such reasoning may seem logical, it is fundamentally flawed and has created harmful beliefs.

A person using a wheelchair, living with a chronic illness, or possessing a body that may be perceived as “different” is inherently valuable and whole.

Their existence is shaped by a multitude of influences, such as relationships, self-advocacy, and community support.

The take away for me in these scriptures is that peoples, their needs, and their body regardless of anything is sacred, loved, and welcomed by Jesus.

In this passage he points out the need for this woman to be liberated from a heavy spirit that cripples her to the point of walking bent.
So Jesus calls her and set her free.

The scripture tells us that this woman had been walking for 18 years looking at the ground, listening to voices while staring at peoples feet.

Stay with that image will you, and look down at your feet.
How many of us have walked this way most of our lives, if not all?

For me, It wasn't the uniform, the stern demeanor, or the authoritative tone that ultimately earned me self-respect and, by extension, the respect of others.

The role of a law enforcer or a strict rule follower did not bring me closer to God either.

Despite embodying these traits, I often found myself looking down, too afraid to lift my gaze and walk confidently.

I carried shame and pain, burdened by a spirit that fueled my self-loathing—my queerness, my goofy smile, my height, and more.
Growing up in poverty, surrounded by rigid rules that dictated my worth, instilled a mentality of scarcity that made it feel impossible to gain approval from God or those around me.

Perhaps I too walked around bent down with the heaviness of all this, looking at peoples feet, unable to look at their eyes, unworthy, unclean, un.....(Fill in the blanks).

See when this mindset takes control of your life, you become fixated on what you lack—money, time, emotional support—which spirals you into stress and poor decision-making.

This focus breeds anxiety, neglect, and depression, causing you to feel increasingly

diminished and disconnected from those around you.

How much can be heavy in your life to force you down body, soul and spirit so heavy you can only see the ground.

Then, Jesus arrives, urging the woman in this reading to look up, stand tall, and embrace freedom.

Church, will you believe he is asking you to do the same, right now, be free!

I invite you church to wake up every day and focus on the goodness in your life. Walk by faith and speak truth.

Wake up being thankful for a roof, a shingle, a cardboard over your head, and a meal or two.

Don't focus on the negative, it will bend you lower and lower.

But Jesus says, be free!

Rules and guidelines are imperative for a reason, we will have mayhem if we did not have them.

But ask yourself when you're following them what or how it betters life, yours or others.

For example, I often complain about the light system in the states (U.S.) until I go to another country and people drive like they are suggestions and I am in a Walking Dead movie trying not to die.

The emergence of movements like #MeToo and #Blacklivesmatter serves to illuminate societal issues that can no longer be ignored.

The #MeToo movement, in particular, shed light on the pervasive sexual harassment and intimidation faced by survivors at the hands of those in power, prompting voices from Hollywood to resonate across various communities.

In a similar way, the United Church of Christ has established the Ministerial Excellence, Support, and Authorization (MESA) program, which ensures that ordained ministers are thoroughly prepared for their roles.

My experience with the Committee on Ministry mirrored the rigorous process of the Police Department, and I am genuinely thankful for their thoroughness.

Unlike the police, however, this committee requires candidates to articulate their calling and intentions in writing, presenting their stories and motivations for pursuing ordination before a panel.

I must acknowledge that without the support of Pastor Dr. Christine Ng, navigating this challenging journey would have been significantly more difficult.

There is also a COM, or Committee on Ministry that deals with clergy misconduct and it is handled at a regional level by the Associations minister and a team of people.

Accountability is necessary.

Rules are necessary.

Jesus exemplifies this by calling a woman to him, defying the Sabbath rules and calling on their hypocrisy of putting their animals before her.

I often share a guiding principle with the teens I mentor: if an action is not immoral, (and who determines that so look more into it), unlawful, (again what law is this your following) or harmful to oneself or others, it is likely acceptable, though many factors should be considered in each situation.

Until December 6, 1865, the law protected slave owners.
It was the law to treat another human being as your property.

Until 1938, FLSA (Fair Labor Standards Act) children would be sent to work regardless of their age, hazardous conditions in the U.S.

Laws are enacted, yet they are not infallible.
As a follower of Christ, it is essential to evaluate each law and guideline against the principles embodied in the fruits of the Spirit.
This reflective process helps ensure that your actions align with your values and beliefs.

Love, Joy, Peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)

If that is hard to remember then hear Jesus telling you, "whatever you did for one of the least of these you did to me." (Mathew 25:40)

Rules and guidelines are there to protect us, but are they there to hurt us and others too?
Reconciling this is having a moral compass to compare your decisions and your actions.

Jesus ask, "And ought not this woman, be free from this bondage?"
Jesus asks you, "is it not time to be free from shame, guilt, and anything else holding you down?"

Hear Jesus saying, "come here, what is that you need?"

Can you name it?
Can you see what that liberation might look like?
Can you write a game plan, a way to move forward to whatever might be in the way?
It might not be right away but you're moving towards something.

Today, I encourage you to explore the essence of liberation through Christ and embrace your role as a disciple.
This journey involves not only following His teachings and asking meaningful questions but also standing resolutely in your beliefs, regardless of any laws that may be enacted against the vulnerable.

Sin, shame, guilt, has no place in a heart that bears the fruits of the spirit and the gifts of the spirit.

So today I want you to extend your hands.

I'm re-gifting a box of gifts from the Holy Spirit with many little boxes.

In this gift you will find Wisdom and the ability to see things from the perspective of sacredness.

The gift of Understanding, search for a deeper meaning in your faith.

Don't be boxed in, ask questions, pray those questions, journal if you can and connect with me if I can journey with you, send me a note card if you wish.

The gift of counsel, this is a free line to the Holy Trinity, no appointment needed this will give you access to compare if your choices aligned with God's will.

Again, pray, ask, seek.

The gift of fortitude. This little box here gives you the courage to stand firm despite challenges. You're not alone.

If you feel alone, take this box out.

The gift of knowledge.

Yes faith is the act of believing but that does not mean you can't ask questions.

Your faith can not be so flimsy it will break if you question it.

So seek knowledge, read, I have plenty of ideas where you can read and be aware of God's plan.

I just got a book by Rachel Evans (RIP) It is called Inspired.

Start there.

And finally the gift of piety.

If you have reverence to the sacredness around you this one is to remind you that it includes you.

And the last gift is the fear of the Lord.

Oh this one is a red box for you.

This one might have been used to scare you or hurt you.

But I want you to reclaim it.

Take it out of the box and put it in another one, the one that tells you that to fear the lord your God is simply to respect you, others, and God's creation.

Do not fear the one who calls you, but find hope, and use this when the challenges of life, and the enemy or whatever shadows want to overcome you.

Pull this out and say, fear my creator, I am loved, I am enough, I am sacred.

Fear...my GOD for I know whose and whom I am.

Church, may rules guide you but not define you.

May rules help you be safe but not be made unwell.

Today, I pass on these gifts to you, hoping they bring you joy, love, peace, and abundance in times of need.

May their presence enrich your life and support you through every challenge.

May it be so
Amen.

Jon Reddick - No Fear (Official Music Video)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYtUec8mzak>

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.

Jon Reddick - No Fear (Official Music Video)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYtUec8mzak>

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

Let's dance!

Don't give up!

Shakira - Try Everything (Official Video)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6rP-YP4c5I>

Amen.