

WELCOME

Thank you for coming!

We're so glad you've chosen to worship with us today

This is a sacred time, as we gather in community to open our hearts to God.

I invite you to light a candle,

As our candles are lit here in our sanctuary,

to remind us of God's presence with us,

and to set aside this as a time of worship for you.

Our service will be in voice and text.

Music will be on the media viewer, so be sure that you have media turned on. .

There will be a link in Nearby Chat if you want to view the video in your own browser.

I'm going to start our Gathering Music and run the rest of the announcements underneath.

GATHERING MUSIC

"You Will Be Found" - Virtual Choir from 31 Countries

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFZmT-LRMBM>

First United Church of Christ and Conference Center is

a church with full real life standing in the Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ (UCC).

And anyone you see with a "Minister" tag is an ordained UCC minister in real life.

As we like to say, it's good to be real in Second Life!

And as a 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."

If you would like a bulletin for today's service you can find it in the red binder in the back.

If there are any other announcements about the life of the church, please type them in Nearby Chat at this time.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

Most churches have a time of offering.

Making an offering,

sharing what you can in God's name,

is a spiritual practice.

If you would like to make a financial offering to support this ministry

there is a donation bowl by the door to the sanctuary,

or you can go to our website:

firstuccsl.org

We thank you for the blessing of your presence and your support.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

Our scripture reading for today comes from the Revised Common Lectionary and is a pair of parables from the Gospel of Luke.

The Pharisees are grumbling about the company Jesus keeps, so he tells a series of "lost and found" parables.

We'll read the first two about sheep and coins,

Both of which would have been recognized as items of great value in that culture.

The third is about a father who has 2 sons, and is usually read during Lent.

The second parable is the only one in the New Testament where Jesus presents a woman as a metaphor or allegory for God.

Let us listen to God speaking through the words of Luke, chapter 15, verses 1 through 10

LUKE 15:1-10

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:

‘Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them,

does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?

When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them,

“Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.”

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

‘Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them,

does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?

When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying,

“Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.”

Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.’

The Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God!

“Lost and Found”

Let us pray . . .

It’s been a tough week here in the United States,

Okay, a touch several weeks, months ...

There is so much broken, so much and so many lost,

Living in pain, fear, hunger, despair,

in our country, In our world.

We’ve seen on display the narrative in the dominant culture that some people are disposable,

That it’s US vs THEM

Our society has cracked wide open,

And the gulf between those two sides, however we define them,

Define who is IN and who is OUT,

That crack, that gulf, has never been wider in my lifetime.

The consequences are life and death

And too often Christianity has been used to make that crack even wider,

So it becomes a crevasse.

Chicana lesbian writer and activist Gloria Anzaldua described this space well.

She call it nepantla.

Nepantla is the Nahuatl, indigenous Mexican, word for “in the middle” or “in-between.”

It is a liminal space "where two or more worlds collide,
Leaving conflict and pain in their wake."
It is a place where different perspectives come into conflict,
Where you question your understanding of reality,
Or the stories you have been told, or have told yourself, about reality,
and "where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited
from your family, your education, and your different cultures,
Nepantla is the zone between changes where you struggle to find equilibrium
between the outer expression of change and your inner relationship to it."
Nepantla hurts.
Often, it hurts a lot.
Wow, does this sound familiar to me.
This is where we are.
But, says Anzaldua, when these cracks, these spaces of nepantla, appear, so do
Nepantleras,
Those who can stand in the crack and touch both sides.
Nepantlera's listen to members of both camps,
And attempt to look through their words and actions to their deepest, underlying,
perhaps even unconscious desires.
So often, those deepest desires are the same, no matter which side of the crevasse
we stand on,
Because we are human.
Working with those common desires, Nepantleras work to reframe the conflict,
shift the point of view, draw the two sides together.
Nepantleras are able to remind people of their common humanity,
which, from the perspective of Jesus, includes that all are beloved children of God.
That with God, no one is IN or OUT, it's not US vs THEM,
It's not I, it's WE.
No one is disposable. Every one matters.
They are more than mediators, they are healers, glueing the broken pieces back
together with love.
It seems to me that in a way, the shepherd and the woman with the ten coins act as
nepantleras in these two parables.
They touch both sides, accept both sides,
They don't shame the flock for kicking out the lost sheep,
or blame the sheep or the coin for getting lost.
They just go and find them, bring them back.
Remind us of our deepest identity, and that we belong together.
Then rejoice in the work of making whole what was broken.
Celtic Christian teachers tell us that Jesus is our memory, the one who helps us to
remember our deepest identity as beloved of God,
Which is how we heal individually and collectively.
John Philip Newell writes that "Humanity has forgotten itself to fears and falseness
and ignorance. . . .
Christ comes to reawaken us to our true nature. He is our epiphany.
He comes to show us the face of God.
He comes to show us also our face, the true face of the human soul."
And that is the truth that "the image of God is at the core of our being."
The face of God is of a shepherd who goes out to find each lost sheep and returns
them to the fold, rejoicing.

The face of God is of a woman who searches everywhere for any lost coin, and rejoices.

Jesus tells these parables, these stories so that we will remember.

"Story," says writer and storycatcher Mark Yaconelli,

"Is how we put together the broken pieces.

Story is how we identify and heal the suffering within and among us."

In the crowd surrounding Jesus were people convinced of their own purity and righteousness,

And those labeled by themselves and others as "damaged goods,"

\told they didn't belong

Those were the stories of their lives.

And Jesus told them other stories, parables, addressed to both.

In listening to the story they were brought together, made one community, whole.

Pieced together with Jesus' love and compassion in that moment.

Jesus as Nepantlera.

Through Jesus's stories, they were offered an opportunity to rewrite their own life stories,

To remember what they had forgotten about themselves and

It is when we begin to remember who we are, and who all people truly are,

that we will begin to remember also what we should be doing

and how we should be relating to one another as individuals and as nations and as an entire earth community."

For no community is whole without each piece.

We are all - the Pharisees, the scribes, the disciples, the tax collectors, the sinners,

we are all "sons and daughters of the One from whom all things come."

Mark Yaconelli tells the story of Morton Kelsey, who was

Morton "was born a 'blue baby' in rural Illinois in 1918.

Five weeks premature, Morton's skin was thin and transparent,

his head disproportionately large, his fingernails and toenails not yet fully formed."

He had a ridge on the back of his head caused by the use of forceps during his delivery.

Morton knew from old letter he found that "when his mother first saw him she rejected him,

called him 'hideous,'" and "'a monster.'"

She refused to care for him, rarely held him, and had to be forced to nurse him.

He was diagnosed with mild cerebral palsy, and drooled all the time.

Nearly deaf, his speech was slurred.

His parents were sure from the beginning that he was doomed.

Morton often said that his parents gave him "just enough love to keep [him] alive," all the while believing that he would die or at most lead an institutionalized life.

When Morton was weaned, his parents moved him from the main house where they lived with their other son,

and placed in a separate cottage on the property.

A 14-year-old girl from town was hired as a full-time live in caretaker for him.

Then when he was 4, a doctor recommended he be placed in a group home for disabled children.

During the intake process he was given a battery of tests and it was discovered that he was highly intelligent.

It was only then that Morton was brought home and accepted by his parents as a full son. However, those early years of neglect and rejection left their mark. As an adolescent and young adult Morton suffered from extreme bouts of depression and anxiety, and struggled constantly with thoughts of suicide. One day in his twenties, he gave into his feelings of worthlessness and self-hatred.

He took his father's rifle and walked up into the mountains, prepared to end his life.

When night fell, he lay on his back, looking up at the stars.

Just as he was about to take his life, a song came to him.

As Morton tells the story,

"It was not a song heard through the ears.

It was deeper than that.

It was a song that came from the rocks and trees and stars and earth.

It entered my body from all directions.

It was a sort of lullaby.

A song of love and comfort and warmth."

Hearing that song reordered his sense of self.

Disoriented and confused, but strangely buoyed by this experience, he sought out the priest of a local Episcopal church and told him this story.

Through the care of this priest, and a compassionate therapist, Morton found his way through the trauma of his early life.

He became himself a priest, husband, father, writer, professor, and spiritual teacher to many like Mark.

Years later, Mark picked Morton up at the airport and driving away Morton said, "Something extraordinary has happened."

Morton told Mark that he had recently gotten a letter from a woman named Clara.

She had read one of Morton's books, read about his early childhood experience and wondered where he grew up.

Within days of receiving his reply, Clara wrote back to tell him that she was the teenage girl who had cared for him as a baby.

She wrote, "When I was fourteen years old, your parents hired me to take care of you.

You were just an infant, but they placed you in my care, and together we lived in a detached cottage.

I felt like I was the luckiest girl in town.

Your parents provided a crib for you to sleep in, but unbeknownst to them, you never slept in that crib.

You always slept next to me.

Your parents rarely held you, but I loved to hold you constantly.

As you got older sang to you and told you stories.

For four years you were the center of my life. You were my best friend.

I have been looking for you my whole life, Morton. Please come and see me."

Morton called her, and a week after that, he and his wife flew out to visit Clara at her home.

She was now 91 years old, a retired librarian, and still bright and capable.

She had never married or had children of her own.

She pulled out photos of herself holding Morton as a baby and toddler.

She also remembered Morton's earliest years in vivid detail and could recount what he ate,

the toys he enjoyed, the books he liked to look at, and what he liked to wear. Towards the end of their time together the three of them stood in the doorway to say goodbye.

Morton's wife Barbara picks up the story, recalling that

"Clara leaned forward and hugged Morton.

She placed her head on his chest and began to sing.

It was a lullaby. . . .

Suddenly Morton began to weep. She sang and he wept these deep tears."

Barbara had no idea why he was so moved.

When the Clara finished her song, they said their good byes.

Driving away, Morton was silent for a long time.

Finally he asked his wife, 'Do you know the song Clara sang? The lullaby she sang to me as a child?

That was the same song that came to me in the mountains all those years ago when I was planning to end my life.'

Does the connection between that song and Clara make it any less the voice of God? I don't think so.

Suddenly, more than 50 years later, Morton had to change his life story.

Instead of a story about a child who was rejected and unloved,

how he had been shoved to the other side of the divide,

lived on the far side of a crevasse from family and love,

His was now the story of a girl who cared for him, loved him, refused to give up on him.

What a difference to know that all the time he was feeling lost, unloved, she had been searching for him.

He wasn't looking for her, didn't even know to try.

But even 50 years later, she was still searching for him and against the odds, she found him.

What was broken was glued together, with love.

Clare was Nepantlera for Morton.

She couldn't bring him back into his family's fold,

but she could bridge the gap between him and love,

by being love herself.

For the last seven years of his life, Morton kept Clara's high school photo by his bed.

"'This beautiful, kindly young woman is my image of love,' he later wrote.

This is also the image of God in Jesus' lost and found parables.

The shepherd who searches for his one lost sheep.

The woman who searches for his one lost coin.

I wonder what story you tell yourself and others about your own life?

I wonder what you may have forgotten over time of the song of God you were born with in your heart?

I wonder how it's sweet notes may have been lost, or obscured by the rejections, traumas or struggles of your life?

I wonder what difference it can make for us, when we are lost, as we all are lost sometimes, to know that someone is searching for us,

God is searching for us,

Won't give up on any of us,

No matter what,

And if we truly believe that, then we too can become Nepantleras,

Standing in the crack between the world,
Reaching out to those who are placed on the other side of whatever divide,
Doing, as Jesus did.

This parable doesn't just tell us about the character of God,
But about how we are called to live ourselves.

We can find, or write, a different story,
Instead of a story of hatred, or division, of exclusion,
We can help write a story of healing, of restoration,
Of connection, of love,
and all of us,

we can rejoice together,
When what was forgotten is remembered,
When what was lost is found.
And we are whole.
Amen.

"One" – Birdtalker

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Odlw8WdsZS8>

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Worship is a time when we,
as a community,
join our hearts together,
to connect to God and to each other.
So this time is the essence of what we do here together.
And now, 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, type it in Nearby Chat at
this time.

As people share their prayers in text
please read them prayerfully
and hold this space as sacred and safe
to open our hearts to God.
Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers.

Lord hear our prayers.
Those voiced here today.
Those spoken only in the depths of our hearts.
Those for which we have no words.
We lift them all to you, O Lord,
with faith in your boundless love and grace.
And we pray together the words Jesus taught us, saying
Our Father who art in heaven
hallowed be thy name
thy kin-dom come
thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil

for thine is the kin-dom and the power and the glory forever.
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.

“Your Love is Here” – the Many
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXrkBetfDXM>

GO IN PEACE