

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 share that First United Church of Christ and Conference Center Second Life is a real UCC church with full standing in the Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ.

And as a real UCC church, we want you to know:
No matter who you are,
or where you are on life's journey,
you are welcome here.

Our service will be in both voice and text.
You can find today's bulletin or worship guide in the red book at the back.

The music will be on the media viewer,
so please be sure your voice and media are turned on.
If you're not sure how to do that, just let someone know and we'll gladly help.
There will also be a link in Nearby Chat so you can
watch in your browser if the viewer isn't working for you.

As a real UCC congregation,
we help support the wider church in prayer and in finances.
We're deeply grateful for any offering you feel led to share.
You can use the donation bowl next to the red book in the back or visit our website,
firstuccsl.org.

My name is Rev. Yadi Martínez-Reyna,
and I am one of the pastors in this community.
Anyone you see with a "Minister" tag is an ordained UCC minister in real life.

I'm really glad to be here today, and I want to thank my siblings for teaming up
with me—
being my co-conspirators with the One who calls us, and for covering for me while I
was away.

Because it turns out fixing up a house that was built in the 80's takes a whole lot
more than just a few weeks.
But I'm grateful to be back in SL—and especially grateful to welcome the New Year
with you.

Today is the Second Sunday after Christmas Day.
It is also the first Sunday of the month and we will be partaking in Holy Communion.

I invite you to gather the elements for after the Message of Hope to share together
in our sacred time of remembering Christ in the breaking of bread.

Gather something to eat, such as bread, a cracker, or a cookie.

As well as a cup of grape juice or wine to drink after we pray over the elements remembering our savior Jesus Christ with the ritual of Holy Communion.

INVOCATION -

Will you pray with me?

Creator, we come before you to thank you for another year above the ground.

I ask that you guide us, be with us and bless our time together.

Come Holy-Spirit and fill this place SL and RL with your divine presence.

In the one who called us children of God, I pray.

Amen.

And now for our gathering song.

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

GATHERING SONG

JP Cooper - Holy Water (Gospel Choir Version)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJbk4z754kk&list=RDpqraMomK7G8&index=3>

SCRIPTURES

Today's reading come from the Epistle of Ephesians 1:3-14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual
blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ
before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.

The Holy-One destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ,
according to the good pleasure of his will,
to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

In him we have redemption through his blood,
the forgiveness of our trespasses,
according to the riches of his grace
that he lavished on us.

With all wisdom and insight
he has made known to us the mystery of his will,
according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ,
as a plan for the fullness of time,
to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance,
having been destined according to the purpose of him

who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will,
so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ,
might live for the praise of his glory.

In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth,
the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him,

were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;
this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the
praise of his glory.

The Word of God for the People of God,
Thanks be to God.

Sermon – Chosen

Today, I want to start where our scriptures –by giving God praise for what has
already been done.

Ephesians 1 reminds us that before we ever got it together—or messed it up—God had a
plan.

I believe the Holy One chose us, loved us, adopted us into the family,
redeemed us through Jesus, forgave us, and gave us an inheritance in Christ.

And to make it crystal clear, He sealed it all with the Holy Spirit.

So as we step into a new year,
we're not walking empty-handed, familia—we're walking in already blessed.
But before we get into goals, plans, resolutions, and “new year, new me,” I
want to invite you to go deeper today into your identity in Christ.
Because some of us walked into this year carrying a question we might not say out
loud... but it still surfaces from time to time:

Do I belong?

Or am I always going to feel like the last pick... the maybe... the one who has to prove
they deserve a place?

And when we talk about being chosen.

What does that really mean?

I've shared before that my childhood and teen years were basically built inside the
evangelical conservative church.

Like, church wasn't just something we did—it was the center of my life.
But I can't stand up here and act like it was all bad,
because a lot of what I learned in that season shaped my life—my career, my calling,
even my character.

In fact because I got to see first hand how scripture were used not to heal but to
control that I have an inside track on how things can be for many stuck and hurt by

such places.

I got to see how spiritual manipulation works cloaked by morals and protection from the outside world is presented.

I grew up with this heavy weight about salvation, redemption, forgiveness.

As a young person I try so hard to stay in God's good grace.

Trying to make sure I was "good enough."

At church, I tried to fit in the way I knew how—learning Scripture, memorizing verses, showing up strong, winning every Bible competition I could.

But at school?

Oh familia... at school, I was the weirdo.

Long skirts.

Long hair.

Long everything.

Even my face looked like I was carrying too much.

And I hated P.E.—you know that moment when they line everybody up and start picking teams?

It felt like I was always the last one.

And honestly, being picked last wasn't even the worst part.

The worst part was watching people debate it—who wanted me, who didn't.

And sometimes it didn't even get that far.

Sometimes I'd just get told, "Nah... just sit over there," on the edge.

And when I look back now, I realize I've spent a lot of time on the margins.

But here's the thing: margins don't mean you're empty or forgotten.

Margins are often where you find your people—the ones pushed back, overlooked, treated like an option instead of a priority.

So when we talk about being chosen—especially in Ephesians—this isn't just some church word.

Just hold that for a moment... because some of us are still living like we're trying out for a place we were already given.

And Ephesians is about to remind us: in Christ, you're not the last pick.

You're not the "maybe."

You're not stuck on the edge hoping someone makes space.

In fact because we know what that feels like in all we do we try to make space for others.

As we enter this New Year of 2026, I want to ask you, did you make a New Year's resolution?

Many start the year with good intentions, maybe even a list to follow.

Because we see how many people are us do a list and really do try to keep it.

All you have to do is see how the parking lots in gyms are packed.

Diets begin.

New apps get downloaded—meditation, calm, motivation, productivity.

So, did you make a New Year's resolution?

If you did, are the goals too high?

And here's the deeper question: how much of our New Year energy is really about growth... and how much of it is about trying to finally be "enough"?

The scriptures we just read leads us to think about the ways we receive an identify through Christ.

See friends, the Holy-One has already given us through Christ our gift.

We are chosen.

We are loved.

We are adopted.

We are redeemed and forgiven.

We are sealed by the Holy Spirit.

Not because we performed.

Not because we earned it.

Not because we cleaned ourselves up.

The Holy-One has shown us through Christ "in Christ."

So "chosen" is not a trophy for the best people.

And it's not a participation ribbon either.

It's something deeper:

it's grace that gives you identity, and identity that gives you purpose.

You don't do your best to GET love—you do your best because you HAVE love.

Because you're alive with purpose.

Because you're not auditioning anymore—you're already in the family.

And let me tell you: when I start living and moving with that kind of purpose, I thrive.

Oh you will see a difference when you start living with the believe that you DO NOT have to impress the ONE who has chosen you and call you.

Let me lean into adoption and being chosen.

For me it's not just personal; it's communal, cultural, and liberating.
I see it when I walk alongside young people who have been rejected when they finally see they are loved, people do care for them and they are not alone.

I see it through the Holy Trinity, God, Jesus and Holy Spirit.

And one way I describe the Trinity is like this: the Trinity moves in perfect coordination, like a choreographed dance, where each person moves with their respective function.

And through this Trinitarian love, humanity—and I—are covered with redemption and grace:
gifts that move us from being slaves to fear, sinners trapped in shame, servants trying to earn a place... into children of God, transformed by divine adoption.

That adoption gives us the ability, like Jesus, to cry out: "Abba, Padre."

On a personal note, I have a youngling that my partner and I have been raising who wonders why his parents don't spend time with him or "chose him."
I see his longing, his fear of being abandoned.

Perhaps we don't carry that from our parents, perhaps we do.
But we certainly carry that when relationships fall, or when we lose ourselves in something that controls us.

Perhaps, we simply feel alone, rejected by a family or misunderstood.
For many of us family is everything.
For others it is a family of choice that brings us to that liberation and life giving space.

For many of us who returned to the church as refugees from internal wars and chaos a relationship with God isn't a small detail—it's central.

And the scripture in Ephesians reminds us that:
You are not outside the house looking in.
You are not an employee trying to impress the boss.

You are not a servant hoping for scraps.
In Christ, you are adopted.
In Christ, you are family.
In Christ, you are heirs.¹

And let me say it this way: we are liberated by the truth that we are heirs—adopted children—who no longer have to live as "less than."

So no matter the noise that comes from the government, or from hate groups, we belong end of discussion.

As a Latin person I see how many of our people work in the service industry, cutting

grass working at restaurants, among many other things.

During seminary I cleaned houses to make ends meet.
I cleaned some nice big fancy houses where I was asked to use the back door.
I was checked to see if I took something and some people would even place small items in different hidden places to see if you cleaned it.

I was always chill, what are they going to do to me?
I'll go find another job.

Yet I realized that although we did not use the word "master," many of my siblings tolerate abuse and mistreatment out of fear—
fear of losing work, fear of deportation, fear of more damage.

See the scriptures calling all of us heirs - is not just mind blowing but liberating!

Even us?

It means: you can work hard and still know your worth.

You can serve and still have dignity.
You can be humble without being dehumanized.
And moving from being a listener to an active participant in the Christian faith is an acquired skill.

And from a progressive, liberation-centered angle, this matters—because heirs don't live in fear.

Heirs live from belonging.

I believe that as heirs, we inherit the fruit and gifts of the Holy Spirit.
As an heir, I experienced the revealing power of love that broke barriers including those that kept me closeted in guilt and shame.

Did you hear that?

You have a super power of love that breaks barriers including but not limited to those that keep you closeted in guilt and shame.

Let me give you this guarantee that you can't lose!
Every time I get a warranty of some kind, I always lose the darn paper!

Thank God I don't have to search for it, it is mine, and it is yours!

Today, I am liberated because I learned what the life and ministry of Jesus truly means.

Through His life, Jesus showed us how to love, care for the least of these, and grow closer to God.

His life had meaning because whoever he came in contact with was transformed.

And that's not just theology, familia—that's an invitation: live like someone who belongs to God,
and let that belonging transform how you treat people.

As we enter this new year, I want to invite you to hold these words close:
The Holy One not only chose you—He also equipped you.

And because of that, no power, no hate, no weapon formed against you will prosper.

So believe that you are an heir of the Holy One.

Live authentically—free of shame, free of guilt, free of the anger and fear that steals your joy.

So this season, this New year I invite you to walk into this year really knowing—deep down—that you are chosen.
Not on the edge by your own.
Not the last pick.
Not the maybe.

CHOSEN

Amen.

SHARING GOD'S TABLE

And that's why we come to the Table today. Communion isn't a reward for the ones who got it right—it's grace for the ones God has chosen. So as we receive the bread and the cup, let it remind you: you're not auditioning, familia—you belong.

We have now come to the time to share in Holy Communion together and I invite you gather your elements.
Place them before you and let us take a moment to take a deep breath as we remember.

On the night Jesus was betrayed he shared a meal with his friends, his followers the people he called family.

At a simple table Jesus gathered with friends, he remembered the liberating story of the Passover,
shared the bread, passed the cup, and asked us to do the same, and remember – remember God's liberating work in the world – work embodied in Jesus.
We remember how the greatest gift he gave to us was very life.

This table is open to all who seek nourishment for the soul.

Join together in this holy communion
not because you must, but because you may
not because you are full

but because in your emptiness you are in need of God's mercy and assurance
come just as you are
It is the Lord's table
And it is spread for you.

I invite you to hold your hands over the elements as we pray:
God of liberation, with this bread we remember.

Let us pray
Come Holy Spirit upon these gifts of grape and grain.
Make them before us the life and love of Jesus, that we may
become the life and love of Jesus, for the world.

In Real Life, in Second Life,
We are connected to each other
Through our faith in you,
In and through this community,
we may find that your love
Is as real and tangible
As this bread and cup
We share.
Amen.

Now take the bread.
Feel it in your hand.
And let us remember another time, and another table,
when Jesus gathered in a upper room with his disciples,
his closest friends.
When he took the bread on the table for the evening meal, blessed it, broke it, and
shared it saying "This is my body, given for you. Take. Eat. And remember me."

Let us eat this bread of life together.

Now pick up your cup of drink,
Because at the end of the meal, Jesus took a cup of wine, the juice of the vine,
And said, "This is the cup of the new covenant, a new relationship in my blood.
Drink, and as often as you drink, remember me."

Let us drink this cup of blessing together..

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.

GOD SHOWING OUT | Pastor Mike Jr. (Lyric Video)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oN_XpnDxYeg&list=RDpqraMomK7G8&index=7

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.

If you feel comfortable where you are would you please join me as we come before the Holy-One in prayer.

Pastoral Prayer

Creator, and Holy Spirit you know many of us identify with the work of and love Jesus,

but we have been carrying church pain—pressure, fear, control, wounds that still echo.

Especially in today's political climate.

So I come before you to ask you to heal what religion tried to crush.

Break the lie that we have to earn Your love.

Restore the trust where it was broken.

Let Your Word be medicine again, not a weapon.

Remind each of us that we are chosen—not because we are perfect,

but because in your very nature you call us good.

In Jesus' name, I pray -amen.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

May God release you from the need to prove yourself.

May Christ anchor you in your identity as beloved and adopted.

May the Holy Spirit empower you to resist shame, reject fear, and walk in dignity.

Go as heirs—carrying grace into every room you enter.

Go in Peace!

Amen.

Music for the Journey

Let us dance...

Bon Jovi - New Year's Day

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_i5fBY3a5Q0&t=9s