

## 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](http://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.

Today in the United States it is Super Bowl Sunday.  
It is a big deal to many an event watched by approximately 127.7 million people.

It is also The 2026 Milan Cortina Winter Olympics in Paris, with over 5 billion people across the globe watching and 11.2 million visitors there.

It is my prayer that both events filled with people from around the world and nations be safe,  
fun and exciting.

We are also in the time of Epiphany here at our sacred space.  
A time of manifestation, a welcoming of the Holy One into our space and a time to rejoice in community.

We are the United Church of Christ, a congregation that raises the sounds of liberation not with a whisper but with a shout.

We move beyond private practice to engage in bold and prophetic public witness.

And I was grateful to read this week from our UCC sermons seeds (link attached -

<https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-remove-the-yoke/>) the following:

“If our fasting does not enable us to discern God’s will more clearly,  
If our prayers do not stir us to address unmet needs around us,  
If our blessings do not compel us to bless our neighbor,

If our sacramental rites do not move us to solidarity with the marginalized,  
If our praise of the abiding of Creator does not lead to care and respect of all  
creation,  
If our confession does not spur us beyond absolution to repair,

If our assurance of God’s grace does not lead us to extend mercy,  
Then why would the Holy and Just God even participate in it?

Yet, if we remove the yoke among us...  
If we seek justice, speak truth, and love abundantly,  
If we embrace the immigrant among us,

If we make space and consideration for the ignored and isolated,  
If we lend our voice for the persecuted, defamed, and disenfranchised,  
If we stand up to corruption and bear witness to wrongdoing,

If we raise our voice and move beyond our discomfort,  
Then we too may receive the promise of the covenant and the Holy One’s declaration  
of “Here I am.”

INVOCATION -

Will you pray with me,  
Come Holy Spirit...  
Breathe upon our fasting, our praying, our worship,  
that they may open our eyes to Your will

and soften our hearts to the needs before us.  
Strip away every hollow ritual  
and bend us toward justice, mercy, and repair.

Teach us to welcome the stranger,  
to stand with the ignored and the wounded,  
to speak truth, love boldly, and care for all creation.

Move us beyond comfort and silence,  
so our lives may bear faithful witness.

Then, O Holy and Just God,  
may we hear again Your covenant promise  
and know Your living reply:  
“Here I am.”  
Amen.

Gathering Song -

Sherwin Gardner - Find Me Here (Blessings Find Me) - [Official Music Video]  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vuRRNvGlybs&list=RDMMFCSccawRno0&index=5>

## SCRIPTURES

Our reading today comes from the Gospel of Matthew 5:13-16 (Common English Bible)  
You are the salt of the earth.  
But if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again?

It's good for nothing except to be thrown away and trampled under people's feet.  
You are the light of the world.  
A city on top of a hill can't be hidden.

Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket.  
Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

The Word of God for the people of God

Thanks be to God

Sermon - YOU ...

During this time in Jesus' ministry, he's in the region of Capernaum and the Sea of Galilee.

And in Luke 6, before what we often call the Sermon on the Mount, it says Jesus spent time alone in prayer.

And I love that detail.

Because it reminds us that this sermon didn't come from a random moment.

It came out of a deep place.

A prayed-through place.

And you know this sermon.

The one where Jesus blesses people in a way that was different—aimed to give words of hope and life to those who were persecuted, poor, and probably not used to being talked to with a blessing.

In fact, before our reading, Jesus says this in verses 11 and 12:

Blessed be you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me.

Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven.

In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.”

That is not cute.

That is not sentimental.

That is Jesus looking straight at people who are carrying burdens—people who are targeted, talked about, dismissed, and harmed—and saying: you are seen.

You are not forgotten.

And then Jesus moves into identity statements that are still relevant today:

You are the salt of the earth.

You are the light of the world.

And I need you to notice something:

They both start with YOU.

Not “they.”

Not “those people.”

Not “the spiritual elite.”

YOU.

So that’s the question I want us to sit with today:

Who is this “YOU” that Jesus is addressing?

Because the crowd Jesus is preaching to wasn’t made up of the polished, the powerful, the ones with perfect theology and clean reputations.

Jesus was blessing the poor.

Blessing the grieving.

Blessing the persecuted.

Blessing the ones society would rather ignore.

And that’s why this sermon—spoken so long ago—still rings true today.

A gospel alive to bless those that most might not see.

How we read: slowing down with the Word

On Monday and Friday mornings, we sit around the Peace Grove and we engage in careful reading of a text in the form of Lectio Divina.

We read through the text once, and then we let a phrase—or even a single word—nudge us to think beyond what is right in front of us.

Because of time, we only read once before meditating and then sharing reflection.

But true Lectio Divina has movements—steps that guide us beyond intellectual study and into encounter:

Lectio (Reading) – listening to the Word with the heart

Meditatio (Meditating)

Oratio (Prayer)

Contemplatio (Contemplation)

Actio (Acting)

This way of reading helps us not rush.

It helps the text read us.

And sometimes “acting” is not dramatic.

Sometimes acting is simply becoming aware—  
of what we do, how we react, what we carry.

Feeling the nudge of the Spirit encourages us to see differently,  
feel differently, live differently.

So today, I invite you to wonder with me into these scriptures by breaking them  
down:

You are the salt of the earth.  
You are the light of the world.

And again—both start with YOU.  
YOU are the salt of the earth.

And yeah... you.  
Have you ever felt out of place?  
Out of bounds?  
Out of comfort?  
Yes, you.

When Jesus spoke blessings over the poor and the grieving and the harassed,  
I’m confident there were people in that crowd who had never heard anything like that  
before.

People who had never seen the poor blessed, or the ones who cry, or the ones who  
feel low—called “happy.”  
Jesus was often one that made no sense to the systems around him... but the message  
was always about the least of these.

But why compare us to salt?  
Back in ancient times, salt was a commodity.  
There was no fridge back in Jesus’ time.

Salt preserved food.  
It seasoned things.  
It was used medically.

Salt had real value.  
It was such a high-value resource that it could be used to barter,  
and it even shows up in the language of wages.

So when Jesus says, “YOU are the salt of the earth,” he is not calling you  
disposable.  
He’s calling you valuable.  
And we still carry that in our sayings.

How many of you have heard the phrase:  
“Worth your salt!”

In Roman times, soldiers were paid in salt rations or they were given a salt allowance called a "salarium."

This word gave us the English salary, meaning wages, so that a person who does a good job is "worth his/her salt."

Totally makes sense Jesus saying:

"YOU are the salt of the earth!"

And we also know the other phrases.

"Don't be salty."

In the 1930s this term of being salty was used to refer to sailors who were angry or bitter.

I have been salty!

Or:

"Take it with a grain of salt."

That British vibe: don't take it too serious, mate.

Or:

"Rub salt in the wound."

Has anyone done this before?

Maybe not on purpose.

But you've had that moment—small cut, you're salting your food—oh it hurts.

So yes: salt can be used negatively.

But Jesus isn't using salt here as a weapon.

Jesus is talking about salt as what enhances.

Preserves.

Brings out what's already there.

Makes what's bland come alive.

And it's also holy language in the tradition:

Salt was used as an paraphernalia of ancient sacrifice and extraordinary status (Lev 2:13).

So hear it clearly:

Salt is small... but it matters.

Salt is simple... but it changes things.

Salt is common... but it's precious.

And Jesus says: that's you.

No matter if you're angry, bitter, upset, tired, doubting, overwhelmed—  
you are still salt.

You are still it.

YOU are the light of the world

Yes you, "You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden."

Light is an image of service that makes a big difference.

Because we all know what happens after the sun goes down.

Shadows move in.  
Darkness starts to take over.  
And sometimes the darkness isn't outside of us—sometimes it's within us.  
But then you light a candle.  
And even one flame changes the whole room.  
One of my favorite Advent memories back in the Dallas area was on Christmas Eve.  
Before the midnight hand stuck, we lit the candles, and we passed the light.  
My little guy—he's nine—had his first candle to hold and pass the light to someone else in the circle of people around the church as we sang carols and welcomed Christmas Day together.  
That imagery of passing the light is powerful.  
Because many of us know what it is when shadows overtake us... when the darkness around us becomes too thick to see.

So Jesus says:  
Don't hide it.  
Don't cover it.

Let your light shine before people.  
And what is that light?  
Jesus makes it plain:  
The light is your good deeds.

Good deeds done when no one sees it.  
Good deeds done when no one is going to praise you.  
Good deeds done when no one is around to witness it.

That is you taking your lamp and sharing the light.  
And sometimes that light looks like a smile.

Sometimes it looks like kindness.  
Sometimes it looks like checking in.  
Sometimes it looks like refusing to dehumanize someone.

Sometimes it looks like telling the truth.  
Sometimes it looks like showing up.  
Our identity is a way of life that brings flavor and brightens places taken by shadow.  
And it all goes back to YOU.

Our identity in God: held, even when we're not okay  
And this is where I want to connect the dots clearly:  
Jesus is not only describing what we do.  
Jesus is naming who we are in God.  
Because sometimes we struggle to believe we're valuable.

Sometimes we struggle to believe we belong.  
Sometimes we don't even know how to pray.  
Sometimes we're angry.  
Sometimes we feel like we've lost ourselves.

And here is where this quote anchors us.  
Theologian Jürgen Moltman in his book *The Source of Life* said:  
“Even if I’m lost to myself, I am never lost to the Faithful God.

Even if I give myself up, God never gives me up.”  
That is God’s nature.  
To love.  
To forgive.  
To care for us—even when we can’t pray,  
or we’re angry, or we’re exhausted.  
So in the end, yes, it’s about you—  
and the God of your understanding—  
and the sacred truth that you are held.

Bringing it home: your flavor, your light  
So Jesus reminds us: we are valuable.

And we are needed.  
Because when life is unflavored, it leaves a bad taste.  
When everything feels shadowed, people lose their way.

And Jesus looks at ordinary, hurting, searching people and says:  
You salt the way. Give it some flavor.  
And I think about my own flavor.

My quirkiness.  
My Mexicanness.  
My Chicano vibes.

What is yours?  
And I think about my light:  
I am a light that cannot be hidden or turned  
off because that just makes no sense.  
I’m a queer non-flamboyant but surely rainbow light shining like a kaleidoscope.

And here’s the beauty:  
Both my flavor and my light are different from yours—  
and yours—  
and yours—  
and that’s what makes us so amazing together.

Church as community here in Second Life means we bring our gifts and our talents to  
this place.  
We don’t have to agree with each other—but we must respect each other’s sacredness.  
So don’t cover that light.  
Don’t choose to disappear.  
Don’t let anyone convince you you’re useless.  
And don’t become like salt that gets tossed out—not because you  
weren’t worthy, but because you forgot who you are.

Because Jesus has already named you.  
YOU are salt.  
YOU are light.

YOU are highly favored before the Holy-One.  
Believe it.  
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.

Terrian - He Sees You (Official Lyric Video)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3tA080K7-g>

#### 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

Holy One, Faithful God—  
we come to you just as we are.  
Some of us feel full today, and some of us feel empty.  
Some of us walked in with joy, and some of us walked in carrying heaviness we can't name.

Some of us feel steady, and some of us feel like we're barely holding it together.  
And still—you meet us here.

Bless the "YOU" in this room: the real people behind the avatars, the real stories behind the smiles.  
Bless the poor in spirit.

Bless the grieving.

Bless the exhausted, the anxious,  
the misunderstood, the ones who feel out of place.

Remind us of what is true:  
even if we are lost to ourselves, we are never lost to you.

Even if we give ourselves up, you never give us up.  
God, make us salt again—  
when life feels bland, season us with hope.  
When our hearts feel worn down, preserve us with peace.

And when we've been "salty"—angry, bitter, reactive—meet us with mercy, not shame.  
Teach us to be salt that brings life, not salt that harms.

And God, be light for those walking through shadows.  
For those living with depression or anxiety.  
For those grieving, afraid, or overwhelmed—  
light a candle when the darkness feels too thick.

Give us courage to keep showing up, and tenderness to care for one another.  
Make us a people who don't hide our light—  
not for attention, but for service:  
kindness when nobody sees,  
generosity without applause, truth spoken with compassion.  
Bless our flavor, God—our cultures, our quirks, our identities, our stories.

Teach us to respect each other's sacredness, and to be a community that makes room.  
And as we leave this time of worship, don't let us forget who we are:  
When we feel small, remind us: YOU are salt.  
When we feel hidden, remind us: YOU are light.

When we feel unworthy, remind us: YOU are beloved.  
When we feel alone, remind us: YOU are held.

We pray in the name of Jesus,  
who blesses the overlooked and calls the ordinary holy and extraordinary.  
Amen.

#### BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

May you go knowing you are salt—  
bringing flavor where life feels bland, preserving hope when things feel thin.

May you go as light—shining with quiet goodness that pushes back the shadows.  
And may the Holy One hold you close—today, tonight, and always.  
Amen.

Music for the Journey

Justin Timberlake - CAN'T STOP THE FEELING!  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ru0K8uYEZww>