

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.

We are in the season of Lent and my former seminary professor Will Gafney wrote this:

"Lent is a wilderness carved out in space and time with prayer...
There is more than one kind of wilderness. There is the wilderness of the soul,
an often lonely, aching place.

There is the wilderness of the world,
a place where words of love are everywhere yet people hunger for love
because the imitations of love that perfuse our society leave us empty, aching,
hungry." –Dr. Wilda C. Gafney

Will you pray with me?

INVOCATION

Come Holy Spirit and fill this place and wherever the digital connections with your presence.

Holy-One of deep hunger,
We thank you for being a God who is unconcerned with spiritual practices

that don't affirm the dignity of the most vulnerable.

Keep us from shallow spiritualities that are more concerned with obedience to ritual than how that ritual should bring about justice and restoration in the world.

Retrain our appetites toward healing and liberation.

If we fast this Lent, let it be in that ancient way, which gives our portions to the hungry and oppressed.

And if we have need, let this be a season of reclamation, that we would accept what is owed to us,

that we would take all that our dignity demands.

Grant that we would find our own healing magnified as we participate in the healing of the cosmos.

And let our darkest nights amplify the light, that we would look up and see no less than the very face of God in one another. (Black Liturgies By Cole Arthur Riley)

Amen.

Before our gathering song just a quick reminder that we are gathering on Mondays and Friday mornings at 7 a.m. (Pacific time) at the Peace Grove Circle where we are reading and reflecting on the book based on

Kat Armas book "Sacred Belonging" a 40 day devotional on the liberating heart of scriptures. "

Gathering Song -

Awesome God/God Only Knows (ULTIMATE MIX) A week away cast, for KING+COUNTRY, Dolly Parton, Echosmith

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0nQNWno9eE>

Our reading today comes from the Gospel of John 9:1-12; 30-41 (The Message)

Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth.

His disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?"

Jesus said, "You're asking the wrong question.

You're looking for someone to blame.

There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do.

He said this and then spit in the dust, made a clay paste with the saliva, rubbed the paste on the blind man's eyes, and said, "Go, wash at the Pool of Siloam" (Siloam means "Sent").

The man went and washed—and saw.

Soon the town was buzzing.

His relatives and those who year after year had seen him as a blind man begging were

saying,

“Why, isn’t this the man we knew, who sat here and begged?”

Others said, “It’s him all right!”

But others objected, “It’s not the same man at all. It just looks like him.”

He said, “It’s me, the very one.”

They said, “How did your eyes get opened?”

“A man named Jesus made a paste and rubbed it on my eyes and told me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ I did what he said. When I washed, I saw.”

“So where is he?”

“I don’t know.”

The man replied, “This is amazing! You claim to know nothing about him, but the fact is, he opened my eyes! It’s well known that God isn’t at the beck and call of sinners, but listens carefully to anyone who lives in reverence and does his will.

That someone opened the eyes of a man born blind has never been heard of—ever. If this man didn’t come from God, he wouldn’t be able to do anything.”

They said, “You’re nothing but dirt! How dare you take that tone with us!” Then they threw him out in the street.

Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and went and found him. He asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

The man said, “Point him out to me, sir, so that I can believe in him.”

Jesus said, “You’re looking right at him. Don’t you recognize my voice?”

“Master, I believe,” the man said, and worshiped him.

Jesus then said, “I came into the world to bring everything into the clear light of day, making all the distinctions clear, so that those who have never seen will see, and those who have made a great pretense of seeing will be exposed as blind.”

Some Pharisees overheard him and said, “Does that mean you’re calling us blind?” Jesus said, “If you were really blind, you would be blameless, but since you claim to see everything so well, you’re accountable for every fault and failure.”

The Word of God for the people of God

Thanks be to God

Sermon - From Blindness to Courage: You Can’t Unsee What You’ve Seen

My nine-year-old, G, is a very curious little guy.
He is full of questions: who, what, where, when, why, and especially how.
He is a special kind of little guy.

My partner and I have raised four kids who are now adults—three boys and one girl.
The youngest of those is now twenty-three.
Then we started all over again, and now we have a nine-year-old.
All four of our older kids were, for the most part,
chill—chess, video games, outdoorsy things, music, calm personalities.

This one is completely different.
He bounces off the walls like Tigger. He has two speeds:
fast, or chill with an iPad or something electronic that keeps him connected for a
bit.

Explaining things to him can be frustrating if I don't prepare myself with patience,
because lots of questions are coming.

He is what we call on the spectrum.
And I am grateful for my friend Rev. Melissa Ashmore, who guided me in ways to
journey alongside my young boy's world.

See, he is not trying to be difficult.
He is just wired differently.
He has ADD—which I can totally relate to—
but then there is some extra neurospiciness that I'm still learning to navigate.

One day I was trying to explain to him why Roblox,
a very famous and by far his favorite gaming platform, was something to be careful
about.

I had heard on NPR—one of the few media systems I listen to—
that Roblox has not done enough to keep young children safe from major risks.

For example, adults can contact kids through in-game chats or friend systems.
Predators sometimes move conversations to Discord or other apps after connecting
through Roblox games.

Some games contain sexual roleplay or “condo” environments that attract kids who
think it's just a game.

Because of how difficult it is to verify age groups and monitor user-generated
content,
it is nearly impossible to fully safeguard a child who is simply playing a game.

Now try explaining that to a nine-year-old on the spectrum who loves Roblox.

So I started with this idea:
You can't unsee what you have seen.

In other words, once you see something,
it is very hard to ignore it. And by then, you are affected by it.

For him, it was a conversation about guarding his eyes,
his heart, and his mind against people who do not care if he gets scared, upset,
annoyed, or emotionally hurt.

For adults, not much has changed.
Can you unsee someone shot in the face?

Can you unsee violence?
Can you unsee hurt, pain, or an accident?

For seven years, in another life,
I worked as an assistant director of security at a shopping center near the DFW
airport in Dallas-Fort Worth.

The shopping center was surrounded by streets where drivers were supposed to go 30
mph,
but often ignored the speed limit.

For the longest time, I wanted a motorcycle.
Until I responded to an accident.

A young man had lost control of his bike and slid across the street.
The road had peeled off much of his leg. Bone and muscle were exposed, hanging like
cloth.
You can't unsee something like that.

So let me ask you:
What have you seen in your life that you can't unsee?

What have you experienced that people might question or doubt?

For example, I will not go into a haunted house with a ghost hunter and a video
camera.
No thank you.

I will not go to the cemetery at night for kicks and giggles.
My abuelita told me too many stories growing up. I don't need to investigate those
things myself.

I will not leave a camera on at night in a place where someone says there are
ghosts.
No way, señor.

Do I believe in ghosts?
Ah... I believe there are spirits.
And we won't go down that rabbit hole today.

But what I do know is this: you and I have had experiences that can be debated, questioned, and doubted—yet we stand by what we have seen.

And that is exactly what today's gospel story is about.
The man in today's gospel was blind.
Jesus spits on the ground, makes mud, and places it on his eyes.
Then he tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam.
And just like that—voilà—he can see.

Now you would think the story would end there.
But it doesn't.

The Pharisees begin interrogating him.
Over and over they ask him what happened.

And he keeps telling them the same thing:
I was blind.

Now I can see.

They bring his parents in.
“Is this your son? Was he born blind?”
Now these parents are smart.

They basically say:
Yes, that's our son.
Yes, he was born blind.

But anything else—you ask him. He is of age.
John tells us why they answered that way—
because they were afraid of being thrown out of the synagogue.

So again they question the man.
Finally he says,
“He is a prophet.” (v.17)
They question him again.

And he answers with one of the most powerful testimonies in scripture:
“I don't know nothing about that one way or the other.
But I know one thing for sure: I was blind... I now see.” (v.25)
And for saying that truth?

They throw him out.
But here is the beautiful part of the story.

Jesus goes back for him.
The Gospel says that when Jesus heard he had been thrown out, he went and found him.

Who Gets Thrown Out Today?

The Gospel could not be more alive than it is today.

How many people are being thrown out of congregations?

How many people are being called sinners?

How many times have we heard the same question the disciples asked at the beginning of the story:

Who sinned?

There are still does who think that bad things happen because one has sin equating punishment from God.

Poverty = sin.

Illness = sin.

Sickness = sin.

Bad luck = sin.

I remember when I came out as gay.

I thought that was the reason my relationship had failed, my career had collapsed, my life had fallen apart, and I was losing custody of my son in a divorce battle.

I was told the sin had caught up with me..

I believed I deserved to be punished.

To lose everything.

To the point that the only way out felt like saying, "Thanks world, but I'll see you later."

Religion, the messages of my well-intended family, and my understanding of a God who hated me led me to a bottle of pills and a goodbye note to the world.

Little did I know that it was all the control, the well intentions of a belief of sin, a hateful and vengeful God.

The truth is The Creator loved me beyond my imagination.

My life was and IS worth it.

The sin was not in who I loved.

The sin was in the systems and voices pushing me to the margins—toward guilt, shame, and despair.

It took years.

Therapy.

Spiritual direction.

Deep work unpacking my embedded theology as an evangelical conservative.

But eventually I found peace.

Hope.

And the United Church of Christ.

I could not see the Holy one beyond my guilt, fear and self imposed heaviness.

I can't tell you how it happened.

I can't explain the science behind it.

But I can tell you what God has done for me.

I could not see grace, love, hope, and those around who believe differently and are still sacred,

still community, still made in the image of God.

I was told the world worked through the lens of hate,

Christianity masked in arrogance, and shame.

And somehow...

Jesus did something to my eyes, told me to go wash in grace, the price had been paid.

And voilà... I can see.

I can't explain it to my nine-year-old neurospicy kid why I believe in God.

But I can tell him this:

I can see.

I can see the goodness of life despite the ugliness.

Because yes, I have seen evil too.

I can't unsee a woman shot in a moving vehicle.

I can't unsee a man wrestled to the ground, disarmed, and shot.

I can't unsee hatred in this world.

But I also cannot unsee people despite being afraid and cold, using their phones to record history, their breath to whistle to warn others, their bodies to be witness and their actions of helping others beyond good thoughts and prayers.

Fred Rogers known as Mr Rogers neighborhood famously said,

"When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news,

my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"

He shared this advice to comfort children during crises,

emphasizing that even in tragic situations, there are always caring people providing help.

And the Gospel tells me that when people are thrown out, Jesus goes looking for them.

Look at the helpers Jesus embodied through them.

Near the end of the story, the Pharisees ask Jesus:
“Are you saying we are blind?”

And Jesus responds,
“If you were really blind, you would be blameless,
but since you claim to see everything, so well, your accountable for every fault and
failure.” (v.41)

You can't unsee when the Imago Dei—the image of God—is gunned down and trampled.

Don't believe the narrative that blames the victim.

Do not look away.

Do not pretend you are blind.

The Gospels are alive today.
And we must speak for those who have no voice.

Theologian James Cone reminds us in *The Theology of the Oppressed*:
“Jesus Christ is not a proposition, not a theological concept which exists merely in
our heads.
He is an event of liberation, happening in the lives of the oppressed people
struggling for political freedom.”

And Cone continues:
“There to know him is to encounter him in the history of the weak and the helpless.
That is why it can be rightly said that there can be no knowledge of Jesus
independent
of the history and culture of the oppressed. It is impossible to interpret the
scriptures correctly
and thus understand Jesus unless the interpretation is done in the light of the
consciousness
of the oppressed in their struggle for liberation.”

This is not about right or left.
This is about following Jesus into the margins.

So here is the question for us today.

Where are you in this story?

Are you the parents—afraid to speak up?

Are you the blind man—trying to explain an experience no one believes?

Are you the Pharisee—trying to protect tradition but missing the miracle?

Or are you willing to be like Jesus?

To go find the one who has been thrown out.

This week, I want to invite you to do something simple but powerful:

Refuse to look away.

When someone is pushed aside—see them.

When someone is silenced—listen.

When someone is excluded—welcome them.

Because once you truly see the image of God in another human being...
you can't unsee it.

And when you see it,
you have a responsibility.

To speak.

To act.

To love.

To welcome.

Just like Jesus did.

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.

The Greatest Showman Cast - This Is Me (Official Lyric Video)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjxugyZCfuw&list=RDCjxugyZCfuw&start_radio=1

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 and loving God,
You are the One who opens eyes and softens hearts.

In a world where it is often easier to look away,
give us the courage to truly see.

Help us see the pain of those who are suffering.
Help us see the dignity in those the world overlooks.

Help us see your image in every human being.
Heal the places where we ourselves have been blind—
to injustice, to suffering, to the quiet cries of those around us.

And when people are pushed out, rejected, or forgotten,
give us the compassion of Christ to go find them.

Open our eyes, Lord.
So that we may see your love already at work in this world.

We pray in the name of the one who calls us, in the name of Jesus.
Amen

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Go into this week with open eyes and open hearts.
See the world the way Jesus sees it—
not through fear, not through judgment,
but through compassion.

And when you encounter someone who has been pushed aside,
remember the Gospel.
Jesus went looking for the one who had been thrown out.
May you have the courage to do the same.
Because once you see the image of God in another person,
you cannot unsee it.
Go in peace.
Amen.

Music for the Journey

U2 - Beautiful Day (Official Music Video)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=co6WMzD0h1o>