

WELCOME

Grace and Peace be with you in the name of our Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. Whether this is your first time here or this community has been your spiritual home for years, we are grateful that you are here today.

Today we gather during Pride Month—a time to celebrate the beauty, diversity, courage, and resilience of LGBTQ+ people and communities.

Today we gather not only to celebrate, but also to worship the God who creates each of us in love, calls us by name, and delights in who we are.

Which is why this place is home for many of us.

This is a place not only where I can serve authentically it is a place that connects many to the divine.

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

A place that welcomes you and wants you to know that:

No matter who you are,
or where you are on life's journey,
you are welcome here.

In a world that too often tells people they must hide parts of themselves to belong,

we proclaim a different message: that God's love is wider than our fears, stronger than our divisions,
and big enough to embrace us all.

So wherever you are on your faith journey, whatever questions, hopes, joys, or burdens you carry today, know this: you are welcome here.

You are valued here.

You are loved by God.

Just a quick reminder that our music will on the 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.
And now friends, let us open our hearts to the Spirit's movement among us as we worship together.

A message from World Pride UCC Pastors and friends.
(PS I'm in the video representing our SL church)

The UCC at World Pride 2025
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTSV-y0nfgc>

INVOCATION

Come Holy Spirit and fill this place with your presence.
God of love, justice, and holy imagination,
We thank you for gathering us here today just as we are.
Open our hearts to hear your voice, open our minds to receive your truth,
and open our spirits to remember that every person is made in your image.

Bless this time together.
Let your love be louder than fear, your grace stronger than shame,
and your joy deeper than anything that has tried to silence us.

May the words spoken today bring healing, courage, and hope.
Amen

Gathering Song -

Jillette Johnson - Cameron
<https://youtu.be/5uQP7Fgk5T0?si=ytQluHAB17Fgfo7n>

SCRIPTURES -

Today's reading comes from the First letter of Paul to the Corinthians 4:9-16 (The Message)

It seems to me that God has put us who bear his Message on stage in a theater in which no one wants to buy a ticket.

We're something everyone stands around and stares at, like an accident in the street.

We're the Messiah's misfits. You might be sure of yourselves, but we live in the midst of frailties and uncertainties. You might be well-thought-of by others, but we're mostly kicked around.

Much of the time we don't have enough to eat, we wear patched and threadbare clothes, we get doors slammed in our faces, and we pick up odd jobs anywhere we can to eke out a living. When they call us names, we say, "God bless you." When they spread rumors about us, we put in a good word for them.

We're treated like garbage, the leftovers that nobody wants.

And it's not getting any better.
I'm not writing all this as a neighborhood scold to shame you.

I'm writing as a father to you, my children. I love you and want you to grow up well, not spoiled.
There are a lot of people around who can't wait to tell you what you've done wrong, but there aren't many fathers willing to take the time and effort to help you grow up. It was as Jesus helped me proclaim God's Message to you that I became your father.
I'm not, you know, asking you to do anything I'm not already doing myself.

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

When I started thinking about a Pride service, I researched all kinds of gospel stories to share.
I looked at readings from past Pride services I had attended, and I kept wondering, "Is this the scripture to share?"
It felt like a puzzle piece that just would not fit.
Then this scripture came up in my spirit, and I thought, Paul? Really?
If you are like me, Paul can bring up a complicated love-hate relationship. There are the letters he wrote, and then there are the letters he did not write but that were attributed to him and given to the early church.
You know how Paul is often quoted.
People use verses about women not being able to be in ministry.
People use verses about homosexuality, often taken out of context, to hurt others.
So again I thought, Paul? Really?
This particular letter from Paul was written to the church in Corinth.
The whole chapter is about doing what is right, even when those around you do not care for you – or worse, when they mock you and ignore you.
The scripture we read reminds me of a Star Wars series I watched called The Bad Batch.
The Bad Batch is about a group of clone troopers who did not come out as expected when they were cloned like the others.
These clone troopers were genetically given enhancements because the Empire wanted superhuman armies.
When Order 66 was given to all the clone troopers, commanding them to kill the Jedi, this group did not work as expected.
Their inhibitor chips did not work, and they started to question the Empire.
Worse yet, they looked different.
One was huge and strong, but still, he did not fit the mold.
Another was super smart, almost like a computer, but he was scrawny-looking.
And the list goes on.
In the Star Wars universe, the clones are eventually replaced, killed off, and exchanged for human-trained assassins.
Despite the Empire's quest to destroy the clones, the Bad Batch survives.
And worst for the empire they become a group that helps others, the rebels, those trying to stand up against them.
They become the Empire's worst enemies.
So what does this have to do with today's sermon, Yadi?

Everything.

When I think about today's scripture, especially the part that caught my attention, I think about how sometimes we are treated like a show no one wants to buy a ticket to see.

We are like the Messiah's misfits.

We are quirky.

We are super smart.

We are on a spectrum of all shades and colors, with mental capacities beyond human understanding.

We are queer.

And I know that word lands differently depending on who is hearing it.

For some of our younglings, queer is a word of freedom.

It is a word that gives them room to breathe, room to explore, room to say, "I do not have to fit inside the boxes the world built for me."

But for some of our elders, that word carries pain.

Because there was a time when being called queer was not safe.

It was used to shame people, threaten people, beat people, arrest people, and push people out of families, churches, jobs, and communities.

So we cannot blame our elders who hear that word and flinch.

They remember what it cost.

They remember the fear.

They remember the silence.

They remember having to survive in a world that told them to hide.

But here come the younglings, taking that same word and reclaiming it like a badge of honor.

What was once used to wound is now being used to name freedom.

What was once used to shame is now being used to build community.

What was once whispered in fear is now being spoken with joy.

And maybe that is what Pride does.

Pride does not erase the pain of our history.

Pride says, "We survived it."

Pride says, "We are still here."

Pride says, "The Empire did not get or will get the final word."

Yesterday, I was at a farmers market with a tent and a banner promoting the nonprofit I founded, Color Splash Out.

We had trans flags, rainbow flags, and the Progress Pride flag flying around us.

I was there to talk to parents and community members about sending their younglings to a queer summer camp.

I never in a million years imagined I would be doing this in Brownsville, Texas, the place where I was born and raised in a highly conservative environment.

I never imagined I would be standing there, not passing out tracts telling people they were going to hell.

Not telling people to repent and come to church.

But standing there talking to people about sending their kids to camp.

Talking about creating wholesome family environments – places free from the stigma society has placed on us.

Places without drugs, without the oversexualization of our younglings or our bodies, and without alcohol being required in order to have a good time.

A place where we can build community.

The night before, I attended a gathering to discuss what it would take to raise

funds for a queer community center.

Later that night, I was invited to a Pride church service that got rained out.

Again, these people did not have a gathering place.

But they still stood out there in the rain having church.

The worship group stood under an awning so their speakers would not get wet, and they kept praising God.

I looked around that field and saw people under canopies, sitting in lawn chairs, worshipping in the rain.

Just having church.

And now here we are today.

Because we will continue to gather.

The phrase God's misfits has stuck with me as I have sat with this Bible verse.

Especially today, when we see political leaders in the highest offices of the land hiding behind a distorted "Christian message," saying there is only one way to belong, one way to believe, one way to live, and one way to be loved by God.

But just like the clone troopers, I believe the Empire will eventually have enough of those it uses and discard them.

And it will be the Bad Batch – the queers, the misfits, the ones who do not fit into a particular way of thinking – who will not only survive, but thrive.

Think about our history, friends.

When has the Empire ever truly won?

If there is one thing we know from our history, it is that our God cannot be boxed in, no matter how much the Empire tries to package God, brand God, or rebrand God. There have always been people and institutions willing to trade the gospel for power.

There have always been religious leaders willing to bless the Empire if it gives them influence, comfort, or control.

In Germany, there were churches that aligned themselves with the Reich. Some wrapped nationalism and violence in religious language and called it faithfulness.

But people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer stood tall and reminded the world that it was not the gospel being represented. It was branding. It was empire. It was a message God did not endorse.

And for that, Bonhoeffer died.

So this week, I want us to ask ourselves: what does it mean to stand with God's misfits?

Because not everyone in this room may identify as queer.

Not everyone here may know what it feels like to be called that word, to fear that word, or to reclaim that word.

But every person here has a choice.

Will we be people who watch from a distance?

Or will we be people who stand close enough to be counted?

Allyship is not just wearing the shirt, waving the flag, or saying the right words when it is easy.

Allyship is asking, "Where is my voice needed?"

It is asking, "Who is not safe in this room, in this church, in this family, in this workplace, in this city – and what can I do about it?"

So this week, I invite you to do one intentional act of allyship.

Check on someone who may feel alone.

Speak up when someone makes a harmful joke.

Learn the history you were never taught.

Support a queer-owned organization, ministry, or community group.
Tell a young person in your life, "You are loved. You are not a mistake. You are made in the image of God."
Because allyship is not about saving people.
It is about standing with people.
It is about using whatever privilege, access, voice, or safety we have to make room for someone else to breathe.
And for those of us who are queer, maybe our action item this week is to receive the love we have been told we do not deserve.
Maybe it is to rest.
Maybe it is to stop apologizing for the way God made us.
Maybe it is to look in the mirror and say, "I am not the Empire's mistake. I am God's beloved."
I am proud to be queer because I am made in the image of God.
Unlike before, when I grew up with fear of condemnation, self-hate, and self-doubt, I now embrace the misfit label.
And I proudly say, "Yes, I am the Messiahs misfit."
I do not conform to this world.
My mind has been renewed.
So today, I ask you:
What does Pride mean to you?

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 Joke" – Brandi Carlile

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5r6A2NexF88>

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:

God of love, God of justice, God of every color, every body, every story, and every beloved child,

We come before you today with open hearts.

Some of us come with joy.

Some of us come tired.

Some of us come carrying wounds from churches, families, communities,
and systems that told us we were too much, not enough, or not welcome.

But you, O God, have never called us a mistake.

You formed us in your image.

You breathed life into us.

You called us good.

You called us beloved.

So today we pray for every queer person who is still learning how to love
themselves.

For every youngling who is trying to find language for who they are.

For every elder who survived in silence.

For every person who had to hide in order to stay safe.

For every family still learning how to love better.

God, cover them with tenderness.

We pray for those who have been harmed by religion.

For those who were told your name was against them.

For those who were pushed out of pulpits, pews, homes, and communities.

Heal what shame has wounded.

Restore what fear has stolen.

Remind us that your love is not fragile, conditional, or small.

We pray for our allies.

Give them courage that does not disappear when things get uncomfortable.

Teach them when to speak, when to listen, when to stand beside, and when to make
room.

Let allyship become more than words.

Let it become action, protection, friendship, and holy solidarity.

We pray for our communities.

For safe spaces, for queer youth, for families, for churches, for organizers,
for teachers, for leaders, and for every person building places where people can
breathe.

Bless the work of creating community centers, summer camps, ministries,
and tables where all your children can be fed.

And God, when the Empire tries to brand your love, box in your Spirit,

or use your name to harm your people, give us the courage to resist.

Make us bold enough to tell the truth.
Make us gentle enough to care for one another.
In your holy and liberating name, we pray.
Amen.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

May you go from this place today believing that the Holy One's love is with you
always.
May we leave this place renewed in mind, strengthened in spirit, and rooted in love.

Peace be with you!

Happy Pride!
Music for the Journey

Mary J. Blige - Just Fine (Official Music Video)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6ZjBPXSmnE>

Go in Peace
Amen