

WELCOME

Grace and Peace be with you in the name of our Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit.

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 I rejoice to be the one to welcome you to worship.

Wherever you are joining us from today—near or far, in Second Life or beyond the screen—
we are glad you are here.

Today we come together to listen for the Holy One, to be challenged by the Gospel,
and to remember that faith is not only about comfort.

Sometimes faith calls us to truth.
Sometimes love calls us to courage.

And sometimes the Spirit calls us to be holy troublemakers.
So bring your whole self today: your questions,
your weariness, your joy, your doubts, your hope, and your sacred stubbornness.

May this time open our hearts, strengthen our spirits,
and remind us that we are called not to protect the empire, but to protect people.

Welcome to worship.
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.

Just a quick reminder that our 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.

Today is also our first day of the month so 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.

And now friends, let us open our hearts to the Spirit's movement among us as we worship together.

INVOCATION

Come Holy Spirit and fill this place and wherever this worship service is being tuned in with your presence.

We ask at this moment that you infuse the wifi waves with your peace and joy.

And may our time together be one that fills our cup as we begin a new week together.

In Jesus name we pray,

Amen

Gathering Song -

Common, John Legend - Glory

[youtube.com/watch?v=HUZOKvYcx_o&sttick=0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUZOKvYcx_o&sttick=0)

Today's reading comes from the gospel of Matthew 14:1-12 NRSV

At that time Herod, the ruler of Galilee and Perea, heard reports about Jesus.

He said to his attendants, "This is John the Baptist. He has risen from the dead! That is why he has the power to do miracles."

Herod had arrested John.

He had tied him up and put him in prison because of Herodias.

She was the wife of Herod's brother Philip.

John had been saying to Herod, "It is against the Law for you to have her as your wife."

Herod wanted to kill John.

But he was afraid of the people, because they thought John was a prophet.

On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for Herod and his guests. She pleased Herod very much.

So he promised to give her anything she asked for.

Her mother told her what to say.

So the girl said to Herod, "Give me the head of John the Baptist on a big plate."
The king was very upset.

But he thought of his promise and his dinner guests.
So he told one of his men to give her what she asked for.

Herod had John's head cut off in the prison.
His head was brought in on a big plate and given to the girl.

She then carried it to her mother.
John's disciples came and took his body and buried it.
Then they went and told Jesus.

The Word of God for the People of God

Thanks be to God

Marked by the Waters, Called to Truth

I often share, for those who don't know me,
that my lens is one from the borderlands,
from the margins, from work with boots on the ground,
and more often than not, from living on the margins myself.

I was raised conservative evangelical,
so it took me a minute in seminary to work through my embedded theology.

I had to open it all up, lay it on the floor, wrestle with it some more,
and slowly move toward where I am today:
on a journey to seek and see the Gospels by placing them on a kind of balance.

Does this interpretation lean toward helping the people?

Or does it lean toward taking away from the people?

I say all this because I can share with you the Gospels, the stories from the
lectionary,
and my own writings through this lens—not proclaiming it as the only lens,
but rather inviting you to journey through the Scriptures with me through this view.

I have never known riches, but I have known comfort.
I have never known power, but I have known boss status.
I have never known excess, but I have often tried to balance what I had with
scarcity.

I say this because these readings before us, in today's world, bring up questions
about power,
status, and the choices we make for the sake of self-preservation.

We might or might not know riches.
But we might know what it feels like to have control,
or to be one step above someone else.

We might or might not know power.
Yet we might have experienced it from the giving end, when a choice we make helps us
at the expense of another person.

And I know that wherever you are on the spectrum of life,
you and I both know how to balance the odds in our favor.

We know how to make decisions that help us look okay,
hopefully not at the expense of another person.

Because no one likes to be ridiculed.
No one wants to look bad.

Certainly, no one wants to sound, or be seen, as a bad, selfish,
or terrible person—regardless of who we are.

Those are the things to consider with the Scriptures we just read together.
The characters in this reading are simple.

A powerful man: Herod.
A woman connected to scandal and survival: Herodias, his brother's wife.

A daughter, pulled into the drama, wanting to please her mother and dancing before
this powerful tyrant.
And then there is John.

John the legend.
John the one who prepared the way.

John the disciple who was not willing to shut up just to save his own skin.

Did he consider what it might bring to him and his life to criticize openly the life
and choices of such a powerful man like Herod?

See, Herod was upset about John the Baptist talking about him but he was also smart
about it.

Herod did not want to upset the crowds, so he did not want to kill John the Baptist.

Really?

This is the family system of Herod.
This is empire energy.
This is the kind of power we remember from the Christmas story,
where Herod the Great ordered violence against children because he was afraid

someone might take his throne.

Same family system.

Same fear.

Same empire.

Same “protect my power at all costs” behavior.

And now we are supposed to believe that this Herod is suddenly saying,
“Oh no, I do not want to kill this guy. The crowd might be upset.”

Ay, please.

Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor who presided over the trial of Jesus and ordered his crucifixion,

This very much parallels the same behavior that Pontius Pilate the Roman governor who presided over the trial of Jesus and ordered his crucifixion behaved.

They deflect the blame onto others.

John’s death was caused by that girl I promised anything to.

Jesus’ death was caused by the crowds who wanted him dead.

Deflection.

Church, why deflect?

Why not own their choices?

John the Baptist was a troublemaker for Herod because of what and who he represented.

Writer and theologian Paul Galbreath, when speaking about baptism, says,
“The enduring power of Baptism is not limited to a moment in time.
Instead, the baptismal waters trace across the arc of our lives to mark us as God’s own.”

There was something that happened in those waters.

There was something that happened when John spoke, when people were invited to reflect on their choices and make new ones.

The people who followed John, and consequently Jesus, were thirsty for living water.
Something real.

Something that moved beyond a feel-good message.

Something tangible.

Herod was not a good person, and he was not doing good things.

The last thing he needed was this man who had people feeling good, doing better, responding differently to life, and starting to ask questions about his own choices.

When the Gospels, when the Scriptures, do not align with people’s actions, we create

unjust narratives, false pretenses, and harmful actions.

So Herod had to shut this man out.

So ask yourself: why do you think truth-tellers can be seen as troublemakers?

And who comes to mind when you think of a truth-teller in your life?

What did the water of Baptism mean to you or how did they change you?

Through this story, it becomes clear: John has to go.

So here is a woman who is not Herod's wife, who uses her daughter to gain favor and ask for violence:
the sanctioned murder of a man of God.

The Scripture says Herod felt bad, but what could he do?

He had promised this girl he would give her anything she asked for.

My friend Rev. Ashley Dargai recently wrote about these Scriptures in a way I had not thought about before.
See, we think about John.

We think about Herod.
We might even think about Herodias, the mother.

But have we thought about the daughter?
The daughter is his niece.
She is the daughter of his brother's wife.
The wife he is not supposed to be laying with.

Rev. Dargai, in her writing, invites us to think about how these two women played a part in the death of John the Baptist.

But also, what kind of world were they living in?

Did they see any life beyond Herod's influence and protection?

Did they feel so trapped inside that system that anything threatening Herod's power also felt like a threat to their own survival?

And if so, what does that say about the way POWER pulls people in?

What does it say about the way the empire uses people, even family, even women, even children, to protect itself?

Because this story is not only about one violent ruler.

It is about what happens when power, fear, shame, and self-preservation sit at the

same table.

What if the niece had chosen to use her one genie-in-a-bottle request to free, feed, or help others in need?

But perhaps her family system was threatened, and she had to use that request to secure her mother's place as the mistress.

Kill the messenger.

Secure our status.

Protect what little safety we think we have.

These are tough decisions.

These are tough choices.

A few years ago, the nonprofit I founded, and I lead Color Splash Out, lost funding.

We went from being able to host a group of 50+ to questioning if camp was going to be possible. (2024 CSO 1)

The political climate changed.

The nonprofits that were supporting us lost funding, and the domino effect hit little organizations like ours hard.

But I believe in the mission of creating safe and brave spaces for LGBTQ+ youth and their ally friends, so I chose to keep going while working to fund the work myself.

I am a seasoned youth pastor.

You give me land, a water hose, and a few folding tables, and I will make something happen.

Maybe not fancy, but sacred?

Absolutely.

And so we did.

A year ago, we held a summer camp on a friend's ranch. (2025 - CSO 2)

Cramped and cozy, but we made it happen.

This year, we went a little bigger but still not where we used to be. (2026 - CSO 3)

During this season of trying to find funding, someone I knew came to me and said, "We have \$25,000 for you."

She told me, "I sit on a board on a friend's foundation."

I have pitched your organization to them, and told them that I personally had

witnessed such an amazing place for young people.

So they love the idea and they want to give you \$25,000 this year to start and it could go higher in future years, but they have one request.

The request was this: you must remove anything that says transgender from your website and programming.”

She said, “Yadi, use it as you wish. Trans the dollars all you want, but take it out of the site, friend, a

nd you will have a check for \$25,000 in your bank account tomorrow.

It is only for a year. Think about how much you can do right now with \$25,000.”

As I sat in that meeting, I looked at her and said, “No.”

She asked if I had to take it to my board.

And I said, “No.”

See, friends, we are sometimes blinded by how the ends can justify the means.

But the truth is, no amount of money can do good if I have to erase our trans sacredness from our site, from our marketing materials,

from our programming, and from our very own language just to please one donor.

This request felt like blood money, how many lives would be affected by this request?

One must sit down one day and see what your moral compass is.

One has to have non-negotiables in life.

And friends, anything that erases or diminishes another person is non-negotiable.

Here is another picture, friends, of this year’s camp. (2026 - Group photo)

We might not be many, but those young people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and their ally friends.

And they had a great time.

They had fun canoeing, swimming, playing games, creating memories, and building community.

And that, to me, is the calling.

Perhaps I am a troublemaker.

Are you?

Friends, what are your non-negotiables?

In this story, the actions of a young person listening to her mother led to the violent death of a man.

So I wonder: did they bring the platter with John’s head right there, in the middle of the party?

Did that young person rejoice?

Or did she feel sick to her stomach, realizing she had become an instrument of violence?

Friends, I often wonder what the story was like for these women after this happened.

A powerful man was made comfortable again.
His status was protected.
His shame was covered.
His fear was quieted.
And it all happened at the expense of someone's life.

Does that resonate in today's world?

People are still asked to protect the comfort of the powerful, even when it costs someone else their dignity, their safety, or their life.
So here is an action item, church, to consider this week:

Notice where you are tempted to protect your comfort instead of telling the truth.

Notice where you are tempted to stay quiet because speaking up might cost you something.

And then choose one small truthful act.

Name one thing clearly.

Refuse to erase someone.

Defend one person's dignity.

Support one truth-teller.

Have one hard conversation with love.

Because the Gospel does not call us to protect the empire.

The Gospel calls us to protect people.

And if that makes us troublemakers, then by the grace of God, may we be holy troublemakers.

Amen

SHARING GOD'S TABLE

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 and 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

Friends, 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.

"Stand Up" - Official Lyric Video - Performed by Cynthia Erivo
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sn19xvfoXvk&list=RDsn19xvfoXvk&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 One,
Meet us today with courage and compassion.

Be with those who are tired, afraid, grieving, or carrying more than they can name.

Strengthen the truth-tellers, protect those pushed to the margins,
and soften the hearts of those who have forgotten how to love their neighbor.

Help us notice where power harms, where silence protects injustice, and where your Spirit is calling us to speak, act, and care.
Make us brave enough to tell the truth, gentle enough to lead with love, and faithful enough to become holy troublemakers for your kin-dom.
Amen.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Go now with courage and compassion.
May the Holy One give you eyes to see where truth is needed,
a heart brave enough to love your neighbor,
and a spirit strong enough to refuse silence when silence protects harm.

May you protect people, not empire.
May you walk in justice, mercy, and grace.
And may you be, in your own sacred way,
a holy troublemaker for love.
Amen.

Music for the Journey

Sara Bareilles - Brave (Official Video)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUQsqBqxoR4&list=RDQUQsqBqxoR4&start_radio=1

Go in Peace

Amen