

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 gather around a strange little image from Jesus: yeast.
Something small, hidden, and easy to overlook, but powerful enough to change the whole loaf.

So as we worship, I invite you to bring your whole self: your questions, your weariness, your hope, your doubts, and whatever has been shaping you from the inside.

May this time help us notice what kind of yeast we are carrying, what kind of love God is growing in us, and how mercy, justice, and grace might rise in our lives.

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.

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.

May today's message of Hope helps us reflect on our lives through the lens of your grace and Mercy.

In Jesus name we pray,

Amen

GATHERING SONG -

Jon Reddick - Holding On (Praise God) [Official Music Video]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdakpgtyJWA&list=RDgdakpgtyJWA&start_radio=1

SCRIPTURES

Today's reading comes from the gospel of Matthew 16:1-12 The Message

Some Pharisees and Sadducees badgered him again, pressing him to prove himself to them. He told them,

"You have a saying that goes, 'Red sky at night, sailor's delight; red sky at morning, sailors take warning.'

You find it easy enough to forecast the weather—why can't you read the signs of the times?

An evil and wanton generation is always wanting signs and wonders.

The only sign you'll get is the Jonah sign."

Then he spun around and walked away.

On their way to the other side of the lake, the disciples discovered they had forgotten to bring along bread.

In the meantime, Jesus said to them, "Keep a sharp eye out for Pharisee-Sadducee yeast."

Thinking he was scolding them for forgetting bread, they discussed in whispers what to do. Jesus knew what they were doing and said, "Why all these worried whispers about forgetting the bread?

Baby believers! Haven't you caught on yet?

Don't you remember the five loaves of bread and the five thousand people, and how many baskets of fragments you picked up?

Or the seven loaves that fed four thousand, and how many baskets of leftovers you collected? Haven't you realized yet that bread isn't the problem?

The problem is yeast, Pharisee-Sadducee yeast.

"Then they got it: that he wasn't concerned about eating, but teaching—the Pharisee-Sadducee kind of teaching.

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

SERMON - When Religion Sours the Loaf

This week, I could not help but notice the conversation around yeast.
I had to look it up to understand it better.

Because we need yeast in order for bread to rise and to add a certain flavor to it.

Maybe?

I mean, I am not a baker, friends.
I am just trying not to burn the toast.
Let's dive in.

Today's scripture has the team doing their thing.

They are going around proclaiming the good news, traveling, and bringing along their food.

Somehow, the disciples forget the bread they were supposed to bring.

That is such a Pastor Yadi move right there.
I am always forgetting or missing something.
I have learned that not even a list works for me anymore.

Because I will forget even where I put the list.
Today, alarms work better for me to remind me I have to get things done.

But back then, I think maybe someone in the Twelve was supposed to get the bread, and that someone, like me, had an ADD brain going in twelve directions.

Anyway, Jesus starts talking about bread—or more than that, he starts talking about yeast.
But what prompted it?

The disciples forgot their bread, of course.

Nope.

Notice the religious people before him: the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the interactions that happen before this moment.
Scripture tells us that these highly educated, highly visible leaders of theology—God talk and God study—are asking Jesus to prove himself.

Jesus basically dismisses them and tells them,
“You look at the sky and know what the weather might look like, so why can't you look around and see all the good things happening as a sign?”

So he tells them, “I am not wasting my time with this. Pay attention.”

But then he tells the disciples, “Keep a sharp eye out for the Pharisee-Sadducee yeast.”

Yeast, friends, is small, but it does not stay small.
Yeast’s job is to eat sugar and make gas.
Without yeast, bread stays flat and dense.

With warm temperature, yeast wakes up and starts to work, eating sugar and releasing carbon dioxide gas.

That gas makes the bread rise.

Have you ever seen recipes that say to use warm water?

That is why.

Too cold of a temperature will slow the yeast down. It does not die, but it takes more time to rise.
Too hot of a temperature can kill the yeast, and then the dough barely rises—or it may not rise at all.

And honestly, that is the story of our lives.
Too much of something can hurt you.
Sex, alcohol, food, TV, internet—insert whatever thing here.
We all have our thing.

Writer Matt Bellace, Ph.D., wrote a book titled *A Better High: Laugh, Help, Run, Love... and Other Ways to Get Naturally High!*
I read this book back in 2012 when I saw it at a progressive youth ministry conference.

I found this book to be inspiring and a very good resource for ministry with teens.

Because here is the deal there has to be something positive that can balance the negative that can help us get through life.

Over the past few months, I started walking alongside young people who are court-ordered to fulfill their community hours.
These young people do not want to be there.

And when they first come to my program, they are not happy campers.

But with time, and within the amount of hours they have to fulfill, I have the opportunity to connect with them and hopefully influence them toward a good outcome in their lives.

They are there with me because they messed up.

They entered the legal system because they made a mistake.

But now we get an opportunity to pivot and make changes.
Some might say these are bad kids, terrible younglings.
And sometimes their attitude, behavior, words, and actions might make it look like those people are right.

Yet you and I know it takes grace.

It takes God's healing power.
It takes restorative justice practices and real opportunities to help make a positive change.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees were known as religious people who had rules and ways of doing things.
And sometimes, those rules were placed above the people.

Think about some of the subjects religious people are clashing over today.

Could you name them?

You have pastors who are also ICE agents.

You have clergy who sit on committees and hold influence while supporting bans or lobbying against women in need of reproductive access, young trans people being denied medical care,
and immigrant communities being denied access to health care and safety.

Reports from advocacy groups indicate that deaths in ICE custody since January 2025 have surpassed 50,
with concerns including overcrowding and inadequate medical care.

So what does it mean, then, to follow God?

What does it mean to be Christian?

Because supporting these kinds of actions, or trying to justify them with religion, is not the way of Jesus.

The Pharisees and Sadducees sought to show themselves as religious people of God.

So, in a way, it makes sense that they asked Jesus to show them a sign, because to them, what Jesus was doing did not look God-like.

This Jesus does not follow every purity rule the way they expect.

This Jesus wants us to love people who are questionable.

This Jesus asks us to carry more, believe more, and become part of a new way.
And to someone who is all about religious performance, that makes no sense.

But to us who live in the margins, who know what it means to need mercy, who know what it means to see the Jesus way of loving your neighbor and going beyond religious rules and religious nonsense—this makes sense.

That is where the yeast comes in.

In this passage, the “yeast” of the Pharisees and Sadducees is their teaching, attitude, and spiritual influence.

It is the kind of religion that can look holy on the outside but quietly spread fear, control, pride, hypocrisy, exclusion, or hunger for power.

So the warning is not, “Yeast is evil.”

The warning is this:

A little bit of toxic religion can spread through the whole community.

Yeast is not the problem.

The question is: what kind of yeast is it?

Healthy yeast helps the bread rise.

But toxic yeast can sour the whole loaf.

So when Jesus says, “Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees,” he is saying, “Pay attention to what is shaping you from the inside.”

Because bad religion spreads.

Fear spreads.

Exclusion spreads.

But so does mercy.

So does justice.

So does love.

The question is:

What kind of yeast are we letting into the dough of our lives?

So here is the action item for this week:

Pay attention to your yeast.

Notice what is shaping you from the inside.

What are you listening to?

What are you watching?

What voices are forming your spirit?

What kind of religion, news, fear, anger, or pride is working its way into your dough?

And then choose one thing to change.

Remove one toxic influence.

Mute one voice that keeps feeding fear.

Step away from one thing that makes your spirit heavy.

And replace it with something that helps you rise.

Read something that grows mercy.

Listen to someone from the margins.

Encourage one young person.

Practice one act of restorative grace.

Do one thing that helps love rise in you and around you.

Because the question is not only, "What kind of yeast are we letting in?"

The question is also, "What kind of yeast are we becoming?"

Are we helping people rise?

Or are we making the whole loaf heavy?

Are we spreading fear?

Or are we spreading mercy?

Are we protecting power?

Or are we practicing love?

Because the Gospel does not call us to be impressive-looking bread that is hollow inside.

The Gospel calls us to be changed from within—until justice, mercy, and love rise through the whole loaf.

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.

God Only Knows [Timbaland Remix] by for KING + COUNTRY & Echosmith (Official Live Music Video)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyXpX4fuS0E&list=RDLYXpX4fuS0E&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,
We come before you carrying all that has shaped us this week: our worries, our anger, our grief, our hope, and our love.

Help us notice what is rising within us.

Remove the yeast of fear, pride, and exclusion, and grow in us the yeast of mercy, justice, compassion, and courage.

Be with those who are tired, afraid, detained, rejected, hungry, grieving, or alone.

Surround them with care, protection, and dignity.

Make us people who help others rise, who choose love over control, and who follow the way of Jesus with open hearts.
Amen.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Go now with eyes open to what is shaping you from within.
May the Holy One remove what feeds fear, and exclusion, and grow in mercy, justice, courage, and love.

May you be yeast that helps others rise,
bread that nourishes the weary, and a witness to the way of Jesus.

Go in peace, go in justice, go in love.

Amen.

MUSIC FOR THE JOURNEY

JP Cooper - Call My Name (Gospel / Live)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41M2q_U8oIk&list=RD41M2q_U8oIk&start_radio=1