

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 – across screens, time zones, homes, and hearts – we are glad you are here.

In this Second Life space, we gather as real people seeking real grace, real connection, and real hope.

So bring your whole self: your questions, your joy, your weariness, your laughter, and your sacred sparkle.

May this time remind us that the Holy One meets us here too – in pixels, in prayer, in community, and in love.

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.

Holy One,

Thank you for gathering us here across screens, time zones, homes, and hearts.

Meet us in this sacred space with grace, courage, and love. Help us bring our whole selves before you: our joy, our worries, our questions, our grief, and our hope.

Remind us that this community is real, this connection is real, and your presence is real here too.

Open our hearts to your Spirit, and help us leave this time a little more grounded, a little more brave, and a little more ready to love.

Amen.

Gathering Song -

Dolly Parton - Light of a Clear Blue Morning ft. Lainey Wilson, Miley Cyrus, Queen Latifah & Reba

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McaD2PG8jOE>

Church Announcements:

Soul Force and First UCC in Second Life will host a live (RL) and In SL service on October 25th at this same time and in this amazing place. Please circle this day and invite friends!

Rev. Alba from Soul Force will be visiting us in early October to preach and meet our church.

Meditation is on Monday, and Fridays at 7am (all times Pacific)

This fall month we will be focusing on the writings of Mark Nepo, Seven Thousand Ways to Listen: Staying Close to what is sacred.

Evening Psalter

5pm Tues, Wed, Thu, sometimes other days

Today's reading comes from the letter of the Apostle Paul to the new believers in Rome.

Romans 12:9-21 (The Message)

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it.

Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good.

Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame.

Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant.
Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder.

Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.
Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath.

Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down.
Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up.

Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.
Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone.

If you've got it in you, get along with everybody.
Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do.
"I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry,
go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink.

Your generosity will surprise him with goodness.
Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

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

SERMON - Love From the Center, Sparkle From the Margins

This week, the world lost Dolly Parton: an artist, a songwriter, a country singer,
and beyond all that glamour, a remarkable human being who touched many lives.

Some of her charity and philanthropic work is well known, but I imagine much of it
remains unknown.
And being the queer Pastor that I am I just had to honor her life and write a sermon
surrounding this.

Now I live in Texas at the tip of Brownsville and Matamoros, MX.
I was born and raised there.
So my health care is really Matamoros care, meaning I go across the border to see my
doctor.

This past week I was just running across to get some blood work done.
I went with some friends and just as we are about to enter the halfway point of the
bridge I get stopped by the border Patrol customs agent.

Many times, I have been able to come and go with my birth certificate and Real ID,
as we call it here in the States.
But this time, the officer refused to look at my credentials and simply said, "Nope.
Go get in line."

You don't have an active Passport we need to verify credentials go back in line.

I remember looking back at a line that extended way into Matamoros and sighing, "You've got to be kidding me."

My friends continued on looking back as I reassured them I would be fine.

In reality I stood there pondering, should I complain? And quickly realized, as I saw a man jump the line and get chased and tackled by customs agents, that I would go ahead and get in line.

As I stood there I realized might as well read this weeks lectionary and the letter to Romans caught my attention.

I realized that we have been given libre albedrío – free will. We have been given by the Holy One the right to choose what to do, the freedom of choice.

Our minds have the capacity to decide if we comply when given orders, or if we disregard them and face whatever consequences may come.

For example, I can choose to wear a seat belt, or I can gamble that if I am in an accident, I will not fly out the window.

But I bet that rule took a moment for people to follow. I say this because as soon as we went into our ranch in Mexico, seat belts became a choice.

Ay, suddenly everyone had "faith."

What other rules might come to mind for you?

The Apostle Paul writes to the early Christ-believers in Rome, a mixture of new Jewish believers and Gentiles, meaning non-Jewish people.

There were tensions between these two groups because of differences in dietary laws and religious customs.

Paul's letter is trying to foster mutual unity, a resolve to be supportive of each other as newfound siblings in Christ.

In this particular Scripture, which we read from The Message version, Paul's words are broken down into a few guidelines.

One: Love from the center.

What does that mean?
From the belly. From the inside of your core.

The kind of love that calls upon you to feel it deep down, not just go through the

motions.

Sadly, my friends, this can often get confused with tolerating passive-aggressive and abusive behavior.

“Oh, one must love deep regardless!”

But Dr. McClure (M.Div., PhD), in my pastoral care class at Brite Divinity School, surprised everyone one day when she said, “My love is NOT unconditional.”

There are conditions to my love.

You will not shame me.

You will not insult me.

You will not use me.

You will not dehumanize me.

Fill in the blanks.

To love from your center also means to love yourself.

Weigh your behavior, your actions, and your beliefs with the reality behind your motive.

Is it just?

Is it at the expense of someone else's demise?

Two: Do not burn out.

Ja! Is the Holy One talking to me?

How do you keep yourself fueled?

How do you become cheerful and stay cheerful?

Dolly Parton often spoke of her spiritual base, of faith, joy, and keeping herself grounded beyond the stage lights and rhinestones.

Then Paul keeps going:

Three: Bless your enemies.

Four: Laugh with your friends when they are happy, and share tears when they are down.

Five: Get along with each other.

Six: Make friends with nobodies; do not be the great somebody.

Seven: Do not hit back.

Oh Lord, this one is hard.

Eight: Do not insist on getting even.

Nine: If you see someone hungry, feed them – especially someone who did not expect it. If it is your enemy, surprise them and maybe surprise yourself too.

Ten: Do not let evil get the best of you.
Get the best of evil by doing good.

Dolly Parton lived a full life.
<https://youtube.com/shorts/bgX2aXFFe5I?is=1W-xld6JuLf7irt4>

We remember Dolly Parton in our community for using her voice to stand with us when many would shy away or walk away.

Larry King Live once asked her if she was not afraid of all the negativity she was getting with supporting the LGBTQIA+

She responded with a laugh a big no and asked those Christians calling on her and spending her energy on her to use it for good not to judge people.

When the Trans community and the bathroom bills came up she said “oh let people go pee. If I have to go Pee I’m going to go pee!”

But she did not only stand in the foreground but also in the background sending resources to LGBTQIA+ youth centers, trans communities and beyond.

When asked how she felt that the queer community follows her she responds “I have a huge gay and lesbian following and I’m proud of ‘em, I love’em”

Dolly also said many times “If I was not born a girl I would have been a drag queen! I love them!”

Dolly chooses to bring joy.

So what makes us click and become the kind of people whose lives follow good and who bring joy to others?

I have always believed we have a choice in shaping how close we follow Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book The Cost of Discipleship, said, “The only way to handle the Sermon on the Mount is to go and do it.”

Rev. Dietrich Bonhoeffer died a day before the allies came in to Germany to free people from the Nazi terror.

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Bonhoeffer died because he opposed openly this regime of terror.

Friends, I believe that when we read the Gospels, when we see the light of the world, when we feel deep in the center of who we are, the love and sacredness of others, we become disciples of Christ.

Not just religion.

Not just Christianity.

And Lord, not Christian nationalism – that oxymoron.

But Christ.

The human and divine model that calls us to stay true.

Loving and carrying the least of these.

Inviting people to the table and letting them sit at the front.

Inviting those who will give you no points, no power, no status, and nothing for your social standing.

I believe that, in her own way, that was Dolly Parton's life.

Countless musicians had their break because of her.
Think Whitney Houston.

Books, schools, uniforms, literacy programs, and countless other things we may never fully know about were touched by her generosity.

She was also business savvy.

Recently on June 24, 2026, she open a Dolly themed travel center gas station exit 22 off interstate 65 in Cornersville, Tennessee.

This place has a dog park, food, gas, you name it.

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She said "I'm sure some of you are wondering why I wanted a truck stop-well, I couldn't leave it to beavers!" Pooking fun at a Beever theme gas station.

Dolly was creative.

James Patterson and Dolly Parton co-wrote the 2022 bestselling thriller novel Run, Rose, Run.

Dolly was creative, funny and sparkly.

And very human.

I want to share some Dolly quotes:

<https://youtube.com/shorts/KKjtNWUSoOU?is=AqDfREf7YM09ti4->

So here is the action item for this week:
Live your life with a little Dolly energy.
Rise up, but do not forget where you came from.

Let yourself grow, let yourself shine, let yourself become who the Holy One created you to be – but do not climb so high that you forget the people still trying to make it up the hill.

Use your voice to lift those who have known struggle.
Use your resources to open doors for someone else.
Use your joy as resistance.
Use your kindness as witness.
And sparkle in your own way.

You do not have to have rhinestones, a stage, or a country music career to make a difference.

Sometimes your sparkle is a phone call.
Sometimes it is a meal.
Sometimes it is checking on somebody.
Sometimes it is standing up when someone is being pushed down.

Maybe your sparkle is not loud.
Maybe it is not big hair, big music, or a stage.
Maybe your sparkle is quiet.

Maybe it is the way you keep showing up for your family, family of choice, or friends.

Maybe it is the way you make someone laugh when the room feels heavy.
Maybe it is the way you give without needing your name on a plaque.

Maybe it is the way you remember where you came from and refuse to close the door behind you.

Love from the center.
Do not burn out.

Self care, self care is not a choice. Don't wait till your body gives up and makes you care for yourself.

So this week, ask yourself:
Who can I help rise?
Who needs my voice?

Where can I bring a little light, a little humor, a little kindness, and a little holy sparkle?
Because the Gospel does not call us to shine for ourselves alone.

It calls us to shine in a way that helps others see the way home.

And I believe that is what we are called to be too: our sacred human selves, with kindness, with courage, with love, and maybe with a little shine – sparkling like Dolly’s rhinestones, but grounded in the Gospel of Jesus.

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.

Dolly Parton - What's Up? ft. Linda Perry
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ruw0_o-tWzk&list=RDRuw0_o-tWzk&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 today from different places, different homes, different stories, and different seasons of life.

Some of us come with joy.

Some of us come tired.

Some of us come grieving.

Some of us come carrying questions we do not know how to say out loud.
Meet us here with tenderness.

Remind us that even in this virtual space, your presence is real, our prayers are

real, and this community is real.

We pray for those who are hurting in body, mind, or spirit.

We pray for those who feel lonely, unseen, rejected, or afraid.

We pray for those who are grieving losses, carrying heavy decisions, or trying to keep going when life feels overwhelming.

Holy One, give us courage to love from the center.

Help us rise without forgetting where we came from.

Help us use our voices to lift others.

Help us open doors, share kindness, and bring a little holy sparkle into places that feel dim.

Teach us to care for the least of these, to welcome those pushed aside, and to follow Jesus in ways that are brave, joyful, and full of mercy.

May our community strengthen us for the road ahead.

And may we leave this space ready to shine—not for ourselves alone, but so others may find their way home.

Amen

Blessing for the Journey

Go now, beloveds,
with sparkle in your spirit
and love in your bones.

May the Holy One help you rise
without forgetting where you came from.

May your voice lift somebody,
your kindness open a door,
and your joy remind the world
that goodness still has a song.

Go in peace.
Go in love.
Go with holy sparkle.
Amen.

Music for the Journey

Dolly Parton & Patti LaBelle – “Up Above My Head” | ‘Dolly’ Episode 4 (1987) (2K 60FPS)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysvrCDqZxFw&list=RDysvrCDqZxFw&start_radio=1

Rest in Peace Dolly

Go in Peace friends