

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 or guest minister in real life.

Welcome to First UCC in Second Life!

Wherever you're joining us from, we're glad you're here.
Because God's Spirit knows no borders! ¡Amén!

Today, we're doing something special!

I'm joining you LIVE from Brownsville, Texas,
as we practice our hybrid worship experience for Culto Cuir!

And I'm not alone!

One of our wonderful performers for the Culto Cuir, Jade, is here with me.

Let's give Jade a warm welcome! ¡Bienvenida, Jade!

We're also blessed to welcome Rev. Alba Onofrio and her team from Soul Force!

Today, she brings us a powerful message: “Who Is the Monster?”

Rev. Alba please join me up here and share with our church a little bit about you.

Rev. Alba - I am Reverend Alba Onofrio, an ordained Christian minister for the last 11 years.

I currently serve as a Global Presbyter for The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries(TFAM) in covenant with the United Church of Christ.

I am also blessed to serve as the Executive Director of Soulforce,
an international LGBTQIA+ nonprofit organization dedicated to ending Spiritual Violence
and confronting the ideologies of white Christian Supremacy that weaponize our faith.

They take the Gospel, which is supposed to be good news of great joy for ALL the people,
and turn it into a tool of violence that hurts and kills our people just as surely as guns and bombs.

I am so grateful to be with you all today here in Second Life,
and I send you warmest greetings from the Soulforce community and
Queer and Trans believers all across the world who are part of our global

ministries.

Rev. Yadi - Thank you my friend for being with us today and for this journey as we prepare for an amazing service on the 25th.

Sunday, October 25, at 7 PM Central—Culto Cuir!

We are promoting friends - One service, three ways to worship: live in Brownsville, in Second Life, and on Soulforce's YouTube channel!

We'll celebrate with music, performances, and baptisms—including opportunities for our transgender siblings to reaffirm their baptism with their affirmed names.

If you feel called to baptism or reaffirmation, please let us know!

We'll add you to our roster and follow up for a conversation as we prepare.
No pressure, just an open invitation!

¡No falten!
Everybody belongs!

Now, iglesia, we didn't gather just to attend another service.

We came to encounter the living God!

And let me remind you, familia—this may be a virtual space, but this is a real church, with real people, real faith, and a living God!

We are First United Church of Christ and Conference Center in Second Life, a recognized congregation 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.

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

worship together.

Let us pray

INVOCATION

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

Holy One we come before you believing that you are still moving, still healing, still restoring, and still making a way!

Holy One thank you for bringing us together across borders and digital worlds.

We thank you for our siblings, Rev. Alba Onofrio and her team.

Bless their ministry, anoint the Word they bring, and let your Spirit move through them today!

Holy One, thank you for opening new doors, new opportunities, and new ways to reach your people.

Because your love has no borders, and your Spirit needs no walls!

May those who have been rejected find welcome,
those who are hurting find healing, and those searching for hope find you.

¡Espíritu Santo, muévete entre nosotros! (Holy Spirit move within us)

Set our hearts on fire, open our minds, and remind us that we are not just attending church—

In Jesus name we pray,

Amen

And now for our gathering song and some church announcements.

Gathering Song -

Randy Newman - Monsters, Inc. (From "Monsters, Inc.")

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayMPmc0_2r8

Church Announcements

This season in morning meditation (Our Lectio Divina practice) we will be reading and practicing the exercise of the Saint Ignatius in Daily Life.

(The Ignatian Adventure- Experiencing the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius in Daily Life by Kevin O'Brien, SJ)

Meditation is on Monday, and Fridays at 8 am (all times Pacific)

Evening Psalter

5pm Tues, Wed, Thu, sometimes other days

SCRIPTURES

Today's reading comes from Philippians 4:4-8 (Inclusive Bible)
Rejoice in the Savior always! I say it again: Rejoice!
Let everyone see your forbearing spirit. Our Savior is near.

Dismiss all anxiety from your minds; instead present your needs to God through prayer and petition, giving thanks for all circumstances.

Then God's own peace, which is beyond all understanding, will stand guard over your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, my sisters and brothers, your thoughts should be wholly directed to all that is true, all that deserves respect, all that is honest, pure, decent, admirable, virtuous or worthy of praise.

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

SERMON - Who is the Monster?

(Monster Graphic) - And here we have gathered some of our favorite misunderstood monsters.

As you can see, we have the crew from Monsters Inc. Te Fiti from Moana. Shrek, and the dragons from How to Train Your Dragon.

Treebeard from Lord of the Rings.

And of course, no list of lovable monsters would be complete without the Muppet monsters from Sesame Street.

If you haven't already, put your favorite monster in the chat.

We want to make sure that everyone's beloved monsters are in the room with us.

You know I really love this gorgeous form that I get to take on here in Second Life.

This feels like what my soul looks like radiating from the inside.

I have a passion for the healing of our peoples from weaponized religion, and a fire in my belly fueled by righteous indignation that the name of God I love would be contorted and abused to cause so much harm and hate.

I'm hard-headed and stubborn and spiky, especially in the mornings, and with people I don't trust.

And then add to that the high heels and the rainbow stole... I just love it!

So am *I* the monster?

Is this what a monster looks like?

What do you think?

You know many would call me a monster.

Not just because of this particular Avatar, but because I am a Queer non-binary Femme.

Or maybe because I am a woman Pastor and a feminist.

Or maybe because I come from rural Appalachia in the mountains of Western North Carolina in the southeast of the United States.

Are there parts of you that have been demonized?

Called monstrosities just because of you are or what you look like or who you love?

I thought maybe we should look to the dictionary to find out what exactly is a monster?

And this is what Merriam-Webster had to say:

(Image 2) - Definition # 1. a strange or horrible imaginary creature.

You know, we are sold a lot of stereotypes and caricatures of people who are supposedly strange and horrible. Like our immigrant neighbors for example, who speak different languages or have different religions or cultural expressions or wear different clothes.

They have definitely been characterized as monsters, though the actual data of crime and economics does not support this accusation.

And then, of course, we have the Bible, which weighs in on what we should do about immigrants and refugees, doesn't it?

The Bible tells us no less than 140 times that we are supposed to be kind to the "aliens" and take care of the immigrants in our communities.

Okay, so that's that.

Let's check out definition # 2. something that is extremely or unusually large.

Well... most drag queens and kings are larger than life, so guilty-as-charged there....

But this definition uses "monster" in a positive way... as in "WOW, that Drag Storytime at the Children's Library was a monster hit!"

The waiting list for next month's event is a mile long."

So yes, drag queens and kings could be called monster performers and fashionistas!

Let's continue on definition # 3. a powerful person or thing that cannot be controlled and that causes many problems.

Well now, this is complex, because on the one hand, activist and social justice movements cannot be controlled, try as they might. And the problems we cause are problems for systems of power and domination that are murdering people, pillaging the Earth and all her resources. So yes to completing the definition, but I'm also going to put this in the positive tally for our people.

Now on the other hand, someone like Elon Musk or Donald Trump could also fit this definition of being out of control and causing lots of problems, to say the least, so I'll let you all be the judge on which way that definition goes.

(Image 3- Monster Def)- Next, definition # 4. an extremely cruel or evil person or a person who behaves very badly.

Okay. Now we are firmly outside the camp of the monsters from our graphic and much more in the territory of those who attack and hurt others for their own pleasure and gain.

When I think of extremely cruel and evil people, they are not those who are living paycheck to paycheck or the Queer and Trans kids living on the streets or the girls and women who wore short skirts, stayed out late, and went to a frat party.

Rather, those with power who abuse their positions as adults, as men, as priests and pastors, as parents and teachers, as therapists and social workers, as soldiers and cops... all those who make others' lives unlivable. That should be the definition of monsters!

Words like "sinful," "abomination," and "evil" should not bring to our minds people who are disenfranchised, marginalized, and stereotyped just like "a bad monster" does not bring up an image of Cookie monster or Toothless or Treebeard or Te Fiti.

Until words like "unforgivable" and "evil" are associated with greed, and people who hoard power, and consume massive amounts of resources that the rest of us can't live without--like clean water and air--we can easily fall into the trap of misunderstanding what is truly monstrous in the world around us.

In this topsy-turvy world, where wrong seems right, and terrible things happen to whole entire races

and communities of good people, and everything seems to be on fire--literally and metaphorically
--we can feel like we're the ones who are crazy, like we're the ones who are out of step with reality
when we have mental breakdowns or physical illnesses from the apocalyptic conditions of our everyday life. Sometimes we get sick from the stress of just being alive at this moment,
and trying to survive and figure out what to do to get by and be a good person in this hellscape we've found ourselves in.

So in case you need to hear it again, let me have the honor of reminding you today that
YOU are NOT the monster.

If you are struggling, you are not the monster.

If you are on a journey around your gender and sexuality, you are not the monster.

If you are trying to keep up physically or emotionally and not quite succeeding, you are not the monster.

If you feel like giving up, you are not the monster.

If you don't know which way is up, you are not the monster.

If you are broke, or divorced, or have had an abortion, or if you are undocumented, or homebound, or can't get out of bed some days... You also are not the monster.

Today's scripture gives us some good reminders of how to be in the world in the midst of all of this pain and tragedy.

First, it says to Rejoice!

Queer Joy is a thing, and so is black boy joy and black girl magic.

All of our communities have practices of resistance through gathering and enjoying each other's company and making our hearts glad in a time of so much sadness.

This is food for the soul, just like this congregation, Second Life UCC.

It is so so so important for us to find our people and live into our joy.

It also says to "let everyone see your forbearing spirit." Now for some, "forbearing" may mean not complaining about hard stuff when it happens.

Worse still, is that for some Christians, it means that we don't question authority or confront injustices.

That isn't what forbearing means to me.

It's more strategic than that. It means not rushing in hot-headed or discharging your frustration on the closest person when it's not their fault.

It's more like having patience and picking your battles, because your energy is precious and finite.

It means recognizing that everyone is going through something and knowing tenderness is a gift in this brutal world.

Most of all, it means making sure that we keep the enemy as the enemy and not turn on each other or create scapegoats.

Then it says to "dismiss our anxieties from our minds" and let God hold our burdens with us through prayer. It promises that if we do that, we will have God's peace, which is beyond all understanding.

Now that doesn't mean that our worries will be solved in a day or that we won't still struggle, a lot.

It just means that our hearts will be guarded.

We won't drink in the poison of weaponized religion.

We won't buy into the lie that WE are the problem, that WE are the monsters or that we are at fault for these natural and human disasters.

It basically promises that we will be spiritually indomitable, meaning that our spirits can stay clear and undeterred about who we are and whose we are, even while we are under attack.

The powers of domination have far more control when they conquer our minds and our hearts because then we become our own jailers, our own worst critics.

And then that spiritual violence that we internalize becomes inescapable.

Perhaps that's why this passage ends with a reminder to focus on what is true, what deserves our time, our attention, that we should be paying attention to: that which is good, and honest, and worthy of us.

There are so many things that are unknown, and so many questions I can't answer, even as a minister.

But there are a few things I know for sure. And one of those things I know to be true in the depths of my soul is that we are made in the precious beloved image of God, each and every one of us endowed with dignity, power, and love.

Let's finish with a short meditation reminding us of who we are. I want you to put your hand on your heart and repeat after me:

I am not the monster. I am the precious child of the creative living God. I am worthy of everything that I need. I am loved. I am more than enough just by being myself.

Amen

After Sermon Song -

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

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

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.

I Need You To Survive Cover - Hezekiah Walker

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2FAyIFnfkE&t=2s>

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

Oh, loving and mighty God!

We come before you with grateful hearts, carrying our struggles, our wounds, and our hopes.

And today, Lord, we heard your Word reminding us:

We are not monsters!

We are your beloved children, created in your holy image!

Holy One, we lift up our queer and transgender siblings, immigrant families, the rejected, the weary, and everyone wounded by religion used as a weapon.

Holy Spirit, move among us!

Where there is pain, bring healing!

Where there is fear, bring peace!

Where there is rejection, let your love break through!

Holy-One your Word calls us to rejoice, to show gentleness, and to trust in your peace that surpasses all understanding.

But God, don't just give us peace—give us holy courage!

Courage to confront injustice, to stand against cruelty,
and to love boldly in a world that desperately needs your light!

¡Enciende nuestros corazones, Espíritu Santo! (Light our hearts with your fire Holy Spirit)

And when the world tries to tell us we are less than worthy, let your Spirit rise within us and declare:

We are not monsters!

We are beloved!

We are worthy!

We are yours!

And all God's people say—

¡Amén, amén, y amén!

Music for the Journey

Monster Mash

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2PoSljk8cE&list=RDl2PoSljk8cE&start_radio=1

