

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.

I’m really glad you’re here today.

Whatever kind of week you’ve had, whatever you’re carrying, and however you showed up today – fully ready, barely holding it together, curious, tired, hopeful, or somewhere in between – there is room for you here.

Today we’re spending time with a tender word: forgiveness.

And before we go there, I want to name this clearly:
this is not a space where anyone has to rush their healing, fake peace, or pretend everything is okay.

We come as we are.

We bring our real selves before God

– our joy, our questions, our grief, our anger, our hope,
and even the things we are still trying to find words for.

Here, we trust that God meets us with mercy.

So take a breath.

Let your shoulders drop.

Let your spirit arrive.

As we move into worship, may we become aware of the Holy One already present – in the silence, in the music, in the Word, and in one another.

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 -

Andra Day - Stand Up For Something feat. Common [Official Music Video]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2GhY7qXGx-0&list=RD2GhY7qXGx-0&start_radio=1

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

Scriptures:

Today's reading comes from the gospel of Matthew 18:21-35 Common English Bible.

Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?"

Jesus said, "Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times.

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

When he began to settle accounts,
they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand bags of gold.

Because the servant didn't have enough to pay it back, the master ordered that he should be sold,
along with his wife and children and everything he had, and that the proceeds should be used as payment.

But the servant fell down, kneeled before him,
and said, 'Please, be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.'
The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan.

"When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins.
He grabbed him around the throat and said, 'Pay me back what you owe me.'

"Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt.

"When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were deeply offended.
They came and told their master all that happened.

His master called the first servant and said, 'You wicked servant!
I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me.
Shouldn't you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?'

His master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners,
until he had paid the whole debt.

"My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don't forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

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

SERMON

Forgiveness- Holy Release, Not Unsafe Return

This is one of the hardest lessons to learn and talk about for me.
Not because I do not believe in forgiveness.

I do.
I believe forgiveness is holy.
I believe forgiveness can heal.
I believe forgiveness can set people free.

But I also believe forgiveness has been misunderstood, misused, and sometimes abused.

So let me say the heart of this sermon from the beginning:
Forgiveness is holy release, not unsafe return.

It is not pretending harm did not happen.

It is not giving someone unlimited access to hurt you again.

It is not reconciliation without repair.

It is not a command to stay in danger.

Forgiveness can loosen the grip of what should no longer rule your spirit.

Reconciliation is shared repair, and shared repair requires truth, accountability, changed behavior, and safety.

Church, that is not easy work.

I have seen passages like this used to control, silence, and manipulate people.

So before we go further, let me offer a pastoral word.

If this topic touches a tender wound for you, take what is helpful.
Leave what is not for today.

Breathe.

Step away if you need to.

Reach for support from someone safe.

Nothing in this sermon is meant to rush your healing, pressure your forgiveness, or send you back into harm.

Our central passage today is Matthew 18:21-35.

Matthew 18 is about community.

It is about care for the vulnerable.

It is about accountability, repair, and learning to live together without destroying one another.

So when Peter asks about forgiveness, he is asking a community question:

How do we keep living after harm has happened?

How do we practice mercy without ignoring accountability?

How do we release what is too heavy without pretending the wound was not real?

Peter asks Jesus:

“Lord, if another person sins against me, how often should I forgive?
As many as seven times?”

In other words:

“Jesus, how far does this forgiveness thing go?”

Jesus answers:

“Not seven times, but seventy-seven times,” or as many of us learned it: “Seventy times seven.”

Then Jesus tells a parable.

Peter asks for a number.

Jesus tells a story.

Peter asks about limits.

Jesus teaches about mercy.

Peter wants to know when forgiveness can stop.

Jesus shows what happens when mercy is received but not practiced.

One servant owes a debt so large he could never repay it.

The king forgives the debt completely.

The servant is released.

But then that same servant finds someone who owes him much less.

Instead of showing mercy, he grabs the other person by the throat and demands payment.

Now, a parable is not always a simple one-to-one equation.

So I do not hear this parable saying:

“God is just like this king, and you better forgive or else.”

I hear Jesus exposing a contradiction.

A person receives mercy but does not let mercy change them.

A person is released from crushing debt but turns around and crushes someone else.

That is the heart of Matthew 18:

Mercy is not just something we receive.

Mercy reshapes how we live.

A forgiven debt becomes an invitation to transformation.

Peter is not asking whether harm matters.

Of course harm matters.

He is asking:

“When harm has happened, and I am still carrying the weight of it, how far does forgiveness go?”

Seven times?

You bet I’m keeping a record about this.

The United Church of Christ teaches that forgiveness is an act of releasing a debt and letting go of bitterness, rooted in God’s grace and mercy.

Peter says, “Seven?”

Jesus says, “Seventy times seven.”

That means 490 times?

Okay then, let the record show we are at number one.

But maybe Jesus is not giving us a math problem.

Maybe Jesus is saying:

“Stop keeping score like forgiveness is a punch card at the raspas (snack that sells shaved ice) stand.”

Because unforgiveness can become like luggage we carry with us.

It hurts our minds.

It affects our spirit.

It follows us everywhere we go.

And before we get too holy about it, let's be honest.

When somebody hurts us, most of us do not respond like calm, prayerful saints.

Pues no.

We replay the conversation.

We imagine the perfect comeback three hours later.

Some of us want distance.

Some of us want revenge.

Some of us say, “I’m fine,” while carrying that hurt into every room.

Can I tell the truth?

Sometimes we do not want healing first.

Sometimes we want payback first.

That is why I want to pause with a wonderful Madea character for a moment.

And not because Madea is the model for forgiveness.

Madea is the mirror.

She names the part of us that says:

“If they hurt me, I want them to feel it too.”

The part that keeps score.

The part that calls revenge “common sense.”

So we are not watching this clip for the Gospel answer.

We are watching it to recognize the starting point.

Before the Spirit moves us toward release, we have to be honest about what we are carrying.

Here is a clip where Dr. Phil asks Madea about anger and forgiveness.

As you watch, pay attention not just to Madea, but to yourself.

Where do you laugh because it is ridiculous?

And where do you laugh because it feels a little too true?

Let us watch this:

Madea and Dr. Phil

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JajMEUi1vuM>

Now, church, that clip is funny.

But it is also honest.

Madea says out loud what many of us are too churchy to admit.

Sometimes we say we want justice, but underneath it, we also want payback.

Sometimes we call it closure, but what we really want is control.

That is not something to shame.

That is something to notice.

Because if we cannot name where we are starting, we cannot recognize where Jesus is inviting us to go.

So the question is not:

“Was Madea right?”

The question is:

“Where do I recognize myself?”

Am I the one who needs to get even?

Am I the one who avoids the whole thing?

Am I the one who forgives but keeps ending up in the same place?

Madea names the reaction.

Jesus invites us toward freedom.

In *Soulful Spirituality: Becoming Fully Alive and Deeply Human*, Dr. David G. Benner says:

“Healthy spirituality is not simply believing in God or going to church, but having the zest for living...” (Benner, 21)

Dr. Benner also names three things human beings often crave:
Control.

Approval.

Security.

As it is (this is the way) church, that makes sense to me.

When someone wrongs me, I want the apology.

I want them to recognize what they did.

I want someone to say, “Yes, you were right.”

And if they hurt my body, mind, or spirit, I want to feel safe again.

That is not wrong.

That is human.

So let me be clear:

Needing safety is not a lack of faith.

Wanting distance from someone who harmed you is not a failure to forgive.

Needing protection, therapy, legal help, community care, or time is wisdom.

Forgiveness is about what happens inside your spirit.

Safety is about what happens around your life.

Those two things belong together.

Anger has something to teach us too.

Anger can tell you where harm happened.

Anger can tell you where a boundary was crossed.

Anger can tell you where something sacred inside of you said:
“No. This is not okay.”

But anger cannot be the only one driving the car.

Somebody knows what I mean.

Anger can point to the wound.

But anger alone cannot heal the wound.

For me, forgiveness has taken years of therapy and spiritual direction.

To forgive does not mean I forgot what happened.

It means I choose not to let what happened dictate how I live my life.

That also includes forgiving ourselves.

How many times do we blame ourselves?

"I should have known better."

"Why did I trust again?"

"I should have seen it coming."

We may need to offer ourselves mercy again and again.

Not because everything was okay.

But because we are beloved.

We are human.

We are worthy of healing.

Dr. Benner gives the example of being robbed.

You do not welcome the violation.

You do not welcome the harm.

If you have been diagnosed with an illness, you do not welcome the sickness in your body.

You do not say:

"Thank you, illness, come on in, mi casa es su casa." (my home is your home)

No.

The harm itself is not what we welcome.

What we welcome is the Spirit's invitation to choose how we will respond.

Will it be despair?

Will it be bitterness?

Will it be revenge?

Or will it be seeking wholeness again?

We cannot change every circumstance that happens to us.

But with God's help, we can seek wholeness.

In Matthew 16, Jesus speaks about losing life in order to find it.

I do not hear that as an invitation to disappear, accept abuse, or stop caring for ourselves.

I hear it as an invitation to release the false life built around fear, control, bitterness, or revenge, so we can receive the deeper life God longs for us.

To know whose you are is to value the life God gave you.

That means you can say no when something does not feel right.

You can say:

"I forgive you. I will not carry this with me.

But in order for me to live abundantly, you need to stay away from me."

And beloveds, if someone is actively harming you, the invitation is not to forgive harder and stay quiet.

The invitation is to get safe.

Tell someone you trust.

Seek help.

Let professionals, advocates, pastors, counselors, or legal supporters stand with you if needed.

Your safety matters to God.

Your body matters to God.

Your peace matters to God.

Your life matters to God.

Can the church say amen to that?

And that brings us back to Matthew 18.

Jesus is not telling victims to stay in harm.

Jesus is not saying, "Just forgive and forget."

Jesus is not erasing accountability.

Jesus is asking whether mercy will change us.

The servant received mercy, but he did not practice mercy.

He was released from a debt he could not repay.

But he walked out and kept living in the old world:

The world of scorekeeping.

The world of control.

The world where someone always has to pay.

And Jesus invites us into another way.

The kingdom of heaven is not mercy received and violence repeated.

The kingdom of heaven is mercy received and mercy practiced.

That is the theological center of the parable.

Mercy interrupts the cycle of harm.

Grace teaches us a different way to live.

We are forgiven.

May we learn mercy.

And this is where we have to be clear:

Forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same thing.

Forgiveness can happen in your spirit.

Reconciliation has to be rebuilt between people.

Reconciliation requires truth, accountability, changed behavior, and safety.

So yes, you can forgive someone and still say:

"You cannot come any closer."

And if someone tells you forgiveness requires you to go back into harm,

I do not believe that is the voice of Christ.

I believe that is control dressed up in religious language.

Because I, too, am a child of the Holy One.

Because I, too, deserve peace.

Because I, too, was made for abundant life.

So here is the invitation, church.

Take a breath.

If it feels comfortable, place one hand over your heart or open your hands in your lap.

Quietly name one piece of luggage you have been carrying.

Not the whole closet, pues...nope

Just one.

Hold it before God and ask:

What is my next faithful step toward freedom?

Release?

Boundary?

Help?

Self-mercy?

Now let this be our simple prayer:

Holy One, help me put down what is too heavy and walk toward freedom.

Church, the hurt mattered.

Accountability matters.

Reconciliation is not automatic.

But your soul was not created to be a storage room for pain.

You were created for mercy.

You were created for peace.

You were created for abundant life.

So I want to close with this response.

When I say:
Forgiveness is holy release,
you say:
Not unsafe return.

Forgiveness is holy release.

Not unsafe return.

Mercy received.

Mercy practiced.

Christ calls us.

Toward freedom.

Peter asked for a number.

Jesus gave a way of life.

The servant received mercy, but had not yet learned mercy.

So leave the record book.

Put down what is too heavy.

Take the next faithful step.

Forgiveness is not pretending it did not hurt.

Forgiveness is refusing to let the hurt become your home.

Forgiveness is not crawling back into danger.

Forgiveness is walking with God toward freedom.

Because Christ does not call us into forgiveness so we can be destroyed.

Christ calls us into forgiveness so we can be free.

And whom Christ sets free,
is free indeed.
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.

TobyMac - Forgiveness [Lyrics] ft. Lecrae
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfkqhpl81NA&list=RDxfkhqpl81NA&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 here with mercy.

For the places in us that are tired, bring rest.

For the places in us that are hurting, bring tenderness.

For the places in us that are angry, bring wisdom.

For the places in us that are ready to heal, bring courage.

Help us release what is too heavy to carry.

Help us honor the boundaries that protect life.

Help us receive your grace and practice mercy with one another.

May this time of worship open us to your presence, your truth, and your peace.
Amen.

Benediction -

Beloveds, as we go from this place,
may we go with our heads lifted,

our corazones grounded,
and our spirits held by the mercy of God.

May we leave behind what is too heavy to carry.
May we keep the wisdom that protects our peace.
May we remember that forgiveness is holy release,
not unsafe return.

And as a community,
may we become a people who practice mercy,
not just with our words, but with our lives.

May we be a familia of truth-telling and tenderness,
a people who make room for healing,
a people who protect the vulnerable,
a people who choose repair when repair is possible,
and boundaries when boundaries are holy.

When the road gets hard,
when old hurts try to follow us home,
when our spirits say, "Ay, I'm tired,"
may the Holy One meet us there with grace.

Go knowing you are loved.
Go knowing you are not alone.
Go knowing we belong to God and to one another.

And may the peace of Christ walk with us –
in our homes,
in our work,
in our familias,
in our neighborhoods,
and in every frontera we cross.

Go in mercy.
Go in courage.
Go in peace.

Amen.

Music for the Journey

Now lets dance!

Aretha Franklin Slays "Think" | The Blues Brothers (1980) 4K
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Co963GXmyA&t=87s>