

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.

Wherever you are joining us from—and whatever kind of week you have had—there is room for you here.

You do not have to arrive with everything figured out.

You do not have to pretend that your faith is perfect, your life is organized, or your spiritual greenhouse is full of healthy tomatoes.

Some of us are barely keeping a cactus alive.

And still, aquí estamos—we are here.

Today, we come before the Holy One with our honest selves: our joy and weariness, our faith and questions, our growth and glorious messiness.

So take a breath.

Let your shoulders come down.

Release the pressure to perform.

You are seen.
You are loved.
You belong here.
Come as you are.
Bring what you have.

Trust that God will meet us here and help us grow from where we are.

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 together.

Meet us in our joy, our questions, and our beautiful messiness.

Open our hearts to your grace, quiet what weighs upon us, and help us receive what we need today. May everyone gathered here know they are seen, loved, and welcome.

Amen.

Gathering Song -

Myammee - This What it Look Like (Official Music Video) | Gospel Rap & Christian Hip-Hop |

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hz_08dkNfDg

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 gospel of Mark 12:38-44 (Common English Bible)

As he was teaching, he said, "Watch out for the legal experts.
They like to walk around in long robes.

They want to be greeted with honor in the markets.
They long for places of honor in the synagogues and at banquets.

They are the ones who cheat widows out of their homes, and to show off they say long prayers.
They will be judged most harshly."

Jesus sat across from the collection box for the temple treasury and observed how the crowd gave their money. Many rich people were throwing in lots of money.

One poor widow came forward and put in two small copper coins worth a penny.

Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I assure you that this poor widow has put in more than
everyone who's been putting money in the treasury.

All of them are giving out of their spare change. But she from her hopeless poverty has given everything she had, even what she needed to live on.

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

Messy Faith and an Honest Offering

Last Sunday
Last Sunday, we talked about forgiveness.
We asked the Holy One to help us put down what has become too heavy to carry.

We said forgiveness does not mean the hurt did not matter.
Accountability still matters.
Reconciliation is not automatic.

And your soul—mi gente, your soul—was never created to be a storage room for pain.

You were created for mercy.
You were created for peace.
You were created for abundant life.

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.

Christ does not call us to forgive so that we can be harmed again.
Christ calls us toward forgiveness so that we can be free.

But after sitting with that message, another question kept coming back to me:
What does it mean to be a good Christian?

What does it mean to be a good disciple—or even just a good person?

Because many of us quietly wonder whether we measure up.

That is a loaded question, isn't it?

A good person

Years ago, while I was renovating my home, I hired a carpenter who was amazing.

This man had so much energy he would jump in and out of windows.

I would show up in the morning and discover that he had worked all night—putting up walls, fixing things, making progress while the rest of us were sleeping.

One day he told me, very plainly, 'I'm not a good person.'

As we got to know each other, I learned about his addiction and his constant struggle with his demons.

I tried to encourage him. I tried to support him.
Then one week, I paid him for all the work he had completed—and I did not see him again.

The work was half finished.
My deadline was coming.
I could not reach him.

I was left with a mess, and not the cute kind of mess you can hide when company comes over.
This was an electricians, carpenters, plumbers, somebody-call-everybody kind of mess.

Gracias a Dios, an uncle on my mother's side stepped in and loaned me enough money to finish the house.

Eventually, the work was completed.

Then, out of nowhere, I saw my former contractor at a gas station.
I greeted him warmly, like an old friend—even though inside I had a whole novela ready to come out.

Weeks later he contacted me and said, 'I told you I wasn't a good person.'
And I answered, 'Who is?'

Maybe I should have said something more pastoral.

Maybe I should have offered a beautiful three-point response with a benediction.

But what came out was, 'Who is?'
And honestly, I still think there was some truth in it.

We speak now. I have even hired him to trim dangerous branches over my roof before storm season.

But I will not hire him again for a major renovation—not even if he tells me he is available, able, and ready to start tomorrow.

Is that because I believe he is a bad person?
No.
It is because forgiveness and trust are not the same thing.

Mercy does not require amnesia.

Love can be real while boundaries are also real.

After many chances, he showed me that he was not reliable for that kind of work.

Naming that truth is not cruelty; it is wisdom.

Somebody needs to hear this today:
You can forgive somebody and still not hand them the keys to your house.
Amen?

In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks about religious leaders who love to walk around in impressive robes, receive respectful greetings, take the best seats, and offer long prayers so that everybody can see how holy they are.

They look good.
They sound good.
They know how to perform goodness.

But Jesus says that while they are performing holiness,
they are also devouring widows' houses.

Their public image does not match the way they treat vulnerable people.

Then Jesus sits across from the treasury and watches people give.

Many wealthy people contribute large amounts.

A poor widow comes forward and puts in two small coins—almost nothing by the world's accounting, yet everything she has to live on.

We often hear this story as praise for generous giving,
and there is courage in what she offers. Jesus sees her when society does not.

But the story also carries a warning.

It comes immediately after Jesus condemns religious leaders who consume widows' homes.

He may not be praising a system that takes a widow's last coins; he may be exposing it.

Church, God does not need vulnerable people to be emptied out so that powerful institutions can look successful.

Jesus is not asking us to destroy ourselves to prove our faith.

Jesus is teaching us to see what religious performance tries to hide.

The scribes offer an image.

The widow offers the truth.
And Jesus pays attention to the truth.

That brings me back to us—to the people who do not have it all together.

I am not a flawless pastor.
I curse more than I should.
I have ADHD, which means my mind can travel one hundred miles an hour in several directions at the same time.

Sometimes I speak before I should.
Sometimes I overextend myself because I do not want to disappoint anybody.

God bless Pastor Chris, who has served as my spiritual director for years—my own Master Yoda—guiding me and, when necessary, giving me a holy little ear-pull back toward wisdom.

Who is that person for you?
Because we all need someone who can keep us honest.

So what makes you and me good Christians?

At most, friends, we have what Mike Yaconelli calls 'messy spirituality.'

He writes that messy spirituality exposes the myth of flawlessness and calls Christians to stop hiding and pretending.

Can I get an amen from all the messy people?

The rest of you can keep pretending until the benediction.

Yaconelli compares spiritual life to a greenhouse: a place where things are growing and where Jesus meets us in the middle of that growth.

How many of you are good at growing things?

I am trying.

Truly.

But plants see me coming and begin preparing to meet Jesus.

Growing anything takes time, patience, attention, and another attempt after something dies.

Faith is like that. Spirituality is like that.

Yet we convince ourselves that we must arrive before we can approach God:
I will pray when my greenhouse is full.

I will come closer to God when my tomatoes finally grow.

I will serve when my life is organized.

I will belong when I read the Bible enough, pray enough, heal enough, behave enough,
and become spiritual enough.

But, mi familia, that day never comes.

We do not meet the Holy One after the greenhouse is perfect.

We meet the Holy One while carrying a dead plant, with dirt falling everywhere,
saying, 'I could not make this grow.
Can you help me?'

And the good news is that Jesus is not afraid of the dirt.

Jesus meets us there.

Four truths about growing

Yaconelli's work gives us four truths worth carrying.

First, spiritual growth is a lifetime of decisions.
Think of the choices you made when you were younger—some wise, some not so wise, and
some we hope never make it into the church newsletter.

One decision did not finish your story.

God has been working through a whole lifetime of choices, detours, recoveries, and
new beginnings.

Second, spiritual growth looks different for each of us.

Forget the beautiful graph with one straight line climbing toward perfection.

My graph has peaks, valleys, loops, and flatlines.

Sometimes Jesus has to arrive with the spiritual defibrillator: 'Clear!'

Then—boom—grace gets the heart moving again.

If your path is not straight, that does not mean God has left you.

Third, give God the honest portion you have. Yaconelli provocatively says, 'Give God 60 percent.'

Now, I know what somebody is thinking: 'Pastor, doesn't Scripture say to love God with all your heart and all your soul?'

Sí. It does.

But your honest all today may not look like somebody else's all—or even like your own all from five years ago.

If 60 percent is all you can honestly bring today, begin there. God can work with honesty.

Pretending to give 100 percent while hiding your real life is just another impressive robe.

Fourth, reluctant growth is still growth.

You may not leap into every faithful step shouting, 'Hallelujah!'

Sometimes obedience looks like dragging your feet while the Holy Spirit gently pulls you forward.

If you still take the step, that is growth.

Slow growth is growth.

Awkward growth is growth.

Reluctant growth is still growth.

Some churches speak about lifetime membership.

Galileo Church in Mansfield, where I often worship online and participate in a book group, invites people to become annual 'co-conspirators'—people who renew a covenant to prioritize the church's mission for that season of their lives.

Here, we speak of being Friends of First UCC in Second Life.

Perhaps there is a conversation for us in that language—food for thought.

But the larger point is this: We can be honest about where we are, and we can offer what we truly have.

For one person, faithfulness may look like joining the Monday meditation.

For another, it may be coming to Evening Psalter once in a while, worshiping on Sunday, attending Lectio Divina, or simply stopping by for a bulletin because that is all the connection they can manage today.

Wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here—not because you have perfected your faith, but because grace has made room for your real life.

Jesus says of the widow, 'She, out of her poverty, has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'

Jesus sees what she brings, and Jesus sees what it costs her. He sees the truth that everyone else overlooks.

So do not give from guilt.

Do not serve from shame.

Do not let religious pressure empty you until there is nothing left.

Bring God the truth.

Bring the prayer you can actually pray.

Bring the time you can faithfully offer.

Bring the boundary you need to keep.

Bring the little bit of hope that survived the week.

God is not asking for your performance.

God is asking for your presence.

Here is our action for this week.

Take one small piece of paper and write these two sentences:

'God, this is what I honestly have to offer this week: ____.'

'God, this is what I need permission to stop carrying: ____.'

Choose one faithful action from your first answer—one prayer, one act of care, one worship gathering, one apology, one boundary, one phone call—and do it before next Sunday.

Then release one burden from the second answer. Y

ou do not have to renovate the whole spiritual house this week.

Just repair one room with Jesus.

Your spirituality may be messy.

Your greenhouse may have one brave tomato and three plants already singing 'Nearer, My God, to Thee.'

Your faith may still need work.

Mine does too.

But messy does not mean meaningless.

Imperfect does not mean unfaithful.

Reluctant growth is still growth.

And the small, honest offering you place before God matters more than the grand performance you cannot sustain.

Come as you are.

Give from where you are.

Grow from where you are.

Because Jesus sees you—not the robe, not the performance, not the polished version.

Jesus sees you. And grace says, 'Mi familia, bring me what you have. We will grow from here.'

And all God's beautifully messy people said:
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.

Maverick City Music - Jireh (MultiTracks Session)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hx5X19i9ww&list=RD3hx5X19i9ww&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 bring you our joys, our worries, and the burdens we have carried too long.

Hold those who are hurting, comfort those who are grieving, strengthen those who are weary,
and guide those facing difficult decisions. Remind us that we do not have to be perfect to be loved.

Help us trust your grace, honor our boundaries, and take one faithful step toward healing and freedom. In the name of Jesus, we pray.

Amen.

Benediction

Go now with messy faith, honest hearts, and healthy boundaries.

Love boldly. Forgive wisely.

And remember—you can follow Jesus without giving everybody the keys to your house.

Go in peace, familia. Amen!

Music for the Journey

Now let us leave with some worship music

Kirk Franklin - Love Theory (Official Video)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3aD80K07iIY&list=RD3aD80K07iIY&start_radio=1