

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.
I’m so glad you’re here today.

However you are arriving—centered or scattered, hopeful or tired, full of faith or full of questions—there is room for you here.

This is a space where you do not have to have it all together.
You do not have to perform.

You do not have to hide the real stuff you’re carrying.

Today, we gather around a God who meets us with love, not shame; with grace, not pressure; with good news that still has power to heal, welcome, and set us free.

So take a breath. Settle in. Bring your whole self.

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,

And now friends, let us open our hearts to the Spirit’s movement among us as we worship together.

INVOCATION

Holy One, living God,

We thank you for gathering us in this place today.'

We thank you for breath in our bodies, for grace that woke us up, and for mercy that keeps meeting us right where we are.

Come, Holy Spirit. Move among us.

Stir our hearts.

Open our ears.

Shake loose what needs to be released, and make room for your love to rise up in us.

Meet us with power and tenderness.

Meet us with healing and truth.

Meet us with good news that sets captives free and reminds every soul here: we are loved, we are seen, and we belong to you.

Bless this worship.

Bless the word.

Bless the songs, the silence, the prayers, and every person gathered here.

And let the church say:

Amen.

If there are any news in the life of the church please do not hesitate to share with us while our gathering music plays.

Gathering Song -

Crowder - In The House

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3lDxE-Vb88&list=RDD3lDxE-Vb88&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 John 3:1-16

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader.

He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him."

Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it's not possible to see God's kingdom."

Nicodemus asked, "How is it possible for an adult to be born?"

It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?"

Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom.

Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Don't be surprised that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.'

God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes.

You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going.

It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said, "How are these things possible?"

"Jesus answered, "You are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things?

I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don't receive our testimony.

If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life.

The Word of God for the People of God

Thanks be to God

SERMON - No Sales Pitch, Just Good News - Reclaiming Evangelism Through John 3

Church, today I want to talk about evangelism.

And before we get too far into the story, I want to name where this sermon is going.

Because for some of us, evangelism is a heavy word.

It carries memories.

It carries pressure.

It carries church hurt.

It carries bad theology dressed up like good news.

So today, I want us to walk through one Spirit-led movement in three parts:

From fear to love-bearing witness.

From John 3 as a test to John 3 as good news.

From recruitment to embodied love.

That is the road we are walking:

from fear to love,

from exclusion to grace,

from religious pressure to holy presence.

And we begin that road with Nicodemus.

In John chapter 3, we meet Nicodemus.

Nicodemus is an important Jewish leader, a teacher, a respected person in his community.

And he comes to Jesus at night.

Not in the middle of the day.

Not out in public.

Not where everybody can see him.

He comes under the cover of darkness.

Gail R. O'Day describes Nicodemus as a historical Jewish leader whose action reflects that of a disciple, even though he comes in secret.

Maybe Nicodemus is curious, but cautious.
Maybe he believes something about Jesus, but he is not ready to say it out loud.
Maybe he knows a public confession could cost him something.

So privately, in the dark, Nicodemus says to Jesus:
"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God."

Do not miss that.
He does not say, "I know."
He says, "We know."

That means there may have been others watching Jesus and wondering, "Is something of God happening here?"

Nicodemus does not come with everything figured out.

He comes with questions.
He comes in the dark.
And Jesus meets him there.

That matters to me.
Because John 3 is not just a passage I read.
It is a passage that was handed to me.

It was placed in my memory.
It was tied to salvation, urgency, mission, fear, and love all at the same time.

So when I hear Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night, I hear the echoes of the church that raised me.

I hear Brownsville in my bones.

I hear Matamoros, Mexico in the background.

I hear the sound of a leader raising her hand and a whole room lifting their hands too.

I hear "God so loved the world" preached as good news,
but sometimes carried like a warning.

Because for some of us, just hearing the word evangelism makes our shoulders tighten.

Evangelism.

Ay, Dios mío.

I was raised in a fundamentalist church where evangelism was grounded in John 3:16 and the act of being born again.

After church services, Bible studies, prayer gatherings, and missionary visits to the border, we would recite John 3:16.

So before I can talk about reclaiming evangelism, I have to tell the truth about the evangelism I inherited.

At every gathering, everyone waited for our leader to raise his hand.

And when he raised his hand, we raised our right hands too.

Then we recited it loud and proud, almost like a pledge:
“For God so loved the world...”

And there was a pause.

A sacred pause.

A dramatic pause.

Between “all who believe in him” and “will not perish.”

That pause mattered.

As a teen, I was paired with an older person to pass out tracts in downtown Brownsville or in the plaza of Matamoros, Mexico.

There I was, a young missionary in training, learning the script.

And the message was clear:
People are dying in sin.
We have the solution.
And the solution is Jesus.

The story of Nicodemus was used to remind us that Jesus said:
“You must be born again.”

How many of you were taught that evangelism means telling people to accept Jesus into their hearts so they can be born again?

How many of you were taught that the church’s job was to find the lost, bring them in, and get them saved?

Now Nicodemus, bless him, is confused.

Jesus says you must be born again, or born from above,
and Nicodemus is trying to figure out how a grown person can go back into their mother’s womb.

And as good evangelists, we would explain:

“You need to be reborn.

You need to be free from sin.

You need to give your life to Jesus.”

And church, that sounds holy.

But it can also sound scary.

It can sound like there is a whole complicated process that somebody else is in charge of.

For a long time, I thought pastors, evangelists, and missionaries were the trained ones responsible for making people into followers of Christ.

Does that sound familiar?

That is why the first turn matters:

Evangelism is not controlled. Evangelism is witness.

What if evangelism is more than a one-time salvation event?

What if it is not a box we check?

Not a spiritual transaction.

Not pressure, fear, shame, or religious salesmanship.

Now I know some of you are thinking:

“Oh no. Pastor Yadi has lost their mind.

They are about to send us out to knock on doors, pass out tracts, and make people say a pledge.”

Rest easy, church.

I am not sending you to the plaza with a stack of tracts and a rehearsed speech.

I am talking about reclaiming the word.

Because good news has to sound like good news.

Can the church say amen?

One definition says evangelism is the church’s intentional, invitational life, sent to repair and relieve brokenness and burdens, even with the risk of rejection.

That is the kind I can believe in.

Not manipulation, but invitation.

Not fear, but compassion.

Not “come be like us,” but “come and see what love can do.”

Evangelism is bearing witness to God’s love.

And once we say that, we have to go back to John 3 and ask how we have been reading this text.

Because the same verse that some of us learned as good news was also used to create fear.

That brings us to the second turn:

John 3 is not a weapon. John 3 is a witness.

John is beautiful.

John is poetic.

John is powerful.

But John can also be difficult when it is taken out of context.

John uses strong contrasts:

Light and darkness.

Life and death.

Belief and unbelief.

Above and below.

And if we are not careful, we can flatten those symbols into a religious sorting system:

These people are in.

Those people are out.

These people are saved.

Those people are lost.

But John 3 is not only giving us a boundary line.

John 3 is giving us a conversation between Jesus and a seeker.

A conversation between certainty and mystery.

A conversation between what can be controlled and what moves like the wind.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.

Nicodemus wants to make that literal.

He asks, “How can anyone be born after having grown old?”

And Jesus starts talking about water and Spirit.

Then Jesus says:
“The wind blows where it chooses.”

In other words, church, the Spirit is not something we manage.

The Spirit is not something we own.

The Spirit is not something we can trap inside our systems, pledges, membership rolls, or religious respectability.

The Spirit moves.

The Spirit surprises.

The Spirit gives birth to new life in ways we do not always understand.

So when we read John 3, we cannot reduce being “born again” or “born from above” to a formula.

New birth is the work of the Spirit.

And the Spirit is not controlled by fear.

The Spirit moves through love.

As a young person, I could no longer buy into an evangelism that turned this text into pressure.

Because what happens when your family rejects you because they think you are no longer “in the light”?

What happens when your spiritual life is messy, and you cannot measure up to the model of a “good Christian”?

What happens when the church says “whosoever,” but means “only if you become respectable first”?

Pues no.

That means the young people I work with that have to do community hours will so NOT fit the bill.

They are rough, mouthy, sometimes rude as hell. They probably don't fit it!

That is not the good news of Jesus.

So we have to read John 3 through love, not fear.

Because the theological center of John 3 is not:
God so threatened the world.

Not God so shamed the world.

Not God so condemned the world.

The text says:
God so loved the world.

And church, John 3:17 matters too.

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

That means the movement of God in Christ begins with love.
Love that heals.
Love that rescues.
Love that brings new life.
Love that reaches toward the world with mercy.

So when John talks about light, we do not need to turn that light into a spotlight of shame.

The light of Christ is not a police interrogation lamp.

The light of Christ is the porch light left on for the one trying to find their way home.

The candle in the window.
The dawn that says, "Night does not get the last word."

And if God so loved the world, then our witness has to sound like love.

Here at First UCC in Second Life, we say you can bring all of you.

Tattoos, glitter, doubts, questions, all kinds of avatar and all.

That is also why our church service on October 25th is a big deal for us.

We get to show those who know about SoulForce.org as an organization what we are about how there is a space here for everyone.

No need to hide, no need to pretend.

We say it is good to be real in SECOND LIFE

Do you remember what it was like to realize that you did not have to hide every part of yourself to be welcomed?

That is good news.

Good news says:

All God's beloveds are loved.
All the avatars.
All the unicorns.
All the furries.
All the gender-fluid people.
All the doubters and seekers.

All the people who have been told they were too much, too strange, too wounded, too queer, too questioning, too different.

Good news says:
You are loved.
You are seen.
You are not outside the reach of God.
You are not a problem to be fixed.
You are a beloved child of the Holy One.

John 3 is not a weapon to decide who is in and who is out.
John 3 is a witness that God's love is wider than our fear,
that the Spirit moves beyond our control,
and that Christ comes not to condemn the world but to bring life.

Now, we also need to read John carefully.
The community behind John was wrestling with identity,
conflict, belonging, and separation.

Because of that, John's Gospel can sound harsh toward Jewish people if we read it carelessly.

So as progressive Christians, we read with humility.

We do not use John to attack our Jewish siblings.

We do not use John to say Christianity replaced Judaism.

We remember that Jesus was Jewish.

Nicodemus was Jewish.

The disciples were Jewish.

This story comes out of a Jewish world.

And still, we can hear the invitation.

Nicodemus comes at night.

He is not ready to stand in the daylight yet.
But Jesus meets him anyway.

Jesus does not say, "Come back when your faith is stronger."
Jesus does not say, "Come back when you can make a public statement."
Jesus does not say, "Come back when you understand everything."
Jesus meets him in the night.

In the questions.
In the secret seeking.
And that, church, is grace.

When I am asked to explain why I serve at First UCC in Second life I say, because here I practice blind grace.

Meaning, it's not about how you look, or any other boxes that church and membership of it you must check out.

It is literally the grace that does not depend on must do, should do or anything like that.

Friends, some of us know what it is to seek God quietly because we are not ready to say it out loud.
Some of us know what it is to believe and doubt at the same time.

Some of us know what it is to whisper prayers in the dark because daylight feels too risky.
And Jesus still meets us there.

That leads us to the third turn:
Evangelism is not recruitment. Evangelism is embodied good news.

If Jesus meets Nicodemus in the night, then we do not have to force people into the light before they are ready.

We become a community where people can encounter Christ even while they are still searching.
Church, I believe we can reclaim evangelism as the embodiment of God's love in the world.

Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber talks about pointing people to Christ rather than reducing Christianity to a "sin management program."

And I believe that.

When we know Jesus, we begin to care about what Jesus cared about.

Jesus went to the margins.
Jesus welcomed the rejected.
Jesus touched the untouchable.
Jesus ate with the wrong people.
Jesus crossed boundaries that polite religious society told him not to cross.

Jesus looked at people who had been shamed, dismissed, and pushed aside, and said:
You are seen.
You are loved.
You are worth healing.
You are worth calling by name.
That is the work, church.

And we already know how to do this.

We know how to love our neighbor.
We know how to do justice.

We know how to create a space where someone can show up as their whole self and not be asked to shrink.

We know how to say God is in the borderlands, in the digital sanctuary, with the rejected, with the queer kid, with the seeker who comes by night.

Maybe I misunderstood evangelism all along.

Maybe it was never supposed to be about winning arguments, managing sin, or scaring people into heaven.

Maybe it is simply this:
Living so deeply in the love of God that our lives begin to point toward Christ.
Not perfectly.
Not loudly all the time.

Not with a tract in one hand and judgment in the other.
But with compassion.

With honesty.
With justice.
With welcome.
With courage.

With a love that says:
Come and see.
Come and rest.

Come and bring your whole self.
Come and know that God's love is real.

We say in Second Life that it feels good to be real.
And church, it does.
It feels good to stop pretending.

It feels good to know that God does not only love the cleaned-up version of us.
God loves the real us.

The questioning us.

The healing us.

The glitter-covered us.

The tired us.

The ones who came to Jesus at night because we were not ready for daylight yet.

And the Holy Spirit meets us there.

The Spirit inspires us.

The Spirit sends us to share our gifts, serve our neighbors, and bear witness to hope.

I am confident that God did not call us to a faith built on hatred, rejection, closed borders, hidden belongings, or fear of people who do not believe like us.

That is not the way of Jesus.

We are called to share a hope that does not exclude, shame, or demand people fit inside a perfectly crafted religious box before they are worthy of love.

We are called to embody the life and ministry of Jesus.

And if that is true, church, then this cannot stay as an idea floating somewhere above our heads.

This has to become a practice.

Because if it is good news, somebody ought to be able to experience it through us.

So the question this week is not:

“Can I explain John 3 perfectly?”

The question is:

“Can somebody experience the love of God through me?”

Can somebody encounter grace because I answered the message?

Can somebody feel less alone because I checked in?

Can somebody see Christ, not because I preached at them, but because I loved them well?

That is where this becomes real.

So, church, here is the call.

Do not let this sermon become one more good idea we heard and forgot by Tuesday.

Take it with you.

Put it in your hands.

Put it in your messages.

Put it in your compassion.

So here are this week's action items, choose one person standing near the edge of the community.

Someone who has gone quiet.

Someone who is new.

Someone who is grieving.

Someone who is questioning.

Someone who may not know if they belong.

Send one message.

Make the call.

Drop the IM.

Send the text.

Do not wait for perfect words.

Just begin with love.

Say something simple like:

"Hey, I was thinking about you today. No pressure to respond, but I just want you to know you matter, and I'm glad you're here."

That is it.

No sermon.

No sales pitch.

No theological debate at the H-E-B checkout line.

Friends, I don't play like that.

Offer one act of care.

Ask:

"Is there anything I can hold in prayer with you this week?"

Or:

"Would you like to sit together sometime?"

Or:

"Do you want to grab coffee, talk, or just be quiet together?"

Then listen.

Do not fix them.

Do not turn them into a project.

Do not make them prove they are ready for daylight.

Meet them with love and trust one Spirit moving.

Because you are not the Savior.

I know, qué sorpresa.

Your call is to bear witness.

To love.

To show up.

The Spirit does the birthing.

The Spirit does the holy work we cannot control.

That is evangelism.

Good news with skin on the game.

¡Si mi gente! (Yes my friends)

Good news with chanclas (sandels or what some know of boots on the ground).

Good news in our homes, in our chats, in our neighborhoods, in our digital spaces,
and in every frontera we cross.

So let the good news live in our mouths and in our hands.

Let it be the way we welcome, serve, love, do justice, and make room.

Let it point people not to fear, not to shame, not to a sin-management program, but
to Christ.

The Christ who meets Nicodemus at night.

The Christ who meets us in our questions.

The Christ who says God so loved the world.

Not just the church.

Not just the respectable.

Not just the certain.

Not just the ones who already know the pledge.

The world.

And if God so loves the world, then our witness must love the world too.

So this week:

One person.

One message.
One act of care.

One Spirit moving.
That is good news.

Can the church say amen?

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.

BEN FULLER - If I Got Jesus: Song Session

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cna2RrsUi0A&list=RDCna2RrsUi0A&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, living God,
Meet us in this moment.

For every person carrying joy, multiply it.

For every person carrying grief, hold them close.

For every person carrying worry, breathe peace into their spirit.

For every person carrying questions, remind them they are not alone.

Come, Holy Spirit. Move with power and tenderness.

Open our hearts to your love, loosen what fear has tightened, and help us hear your good news again.

Make us a people who welcome, listen, serve, and love without shame or pressure.

May your light guide us, your mercy cover us, and your Spirit send us out with courage.

And the church says:
Amen.

Blessing for the Journey

Go now, beloveds.

Go with good news on your lips, love in your hands, courage in your chest, and the Spirit lighting up your steps.

Go be good news with skin on it.

One person.
One message.
One act of care.
One Spirit moving.

And may the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the fire of the Holy Spirit go with you now and always.
Amen

Music for the Journey

Imagine Dragons - Believer (Official Music Video)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wtfhZwyrcc&list=RD7wtfhZwyrcc&start_radio=1