



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

August 6, 2023 ♦ 10th Sunday after Pentecost



This bulletin is designed to assist you as you watch our livestreamed worship service, whether you follow along live or view it at a later time. The stream can be found on our YouTube channel at this location:

<https://www.youtube.com/@AnokaUCC>

Welcome & Announcements

If you would like to join our mailing list, email office@uccanoka.org and ask to be added.

Prelude

Don Shier

The Church Bell Rings

* Opening Hymn

“Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ” #347

**Let us talents and tongues employ, reaching out with a shout of joy:
bread is broken, the wine is poured, Christ is spoken and seen and heard.**

**(refrain, twice) Jesus lives again, earth can breathe again,
pass the Word around: loaves abound!**

**Christ is able to make us one, at his table he set the tone,
teaching people to live to bless, love in word and in deed express. (refrain x2)**

**Jesus calls us in, sends us out bearing fruit in a world of doubt,
gives us love to tell, bread to share: God (Immanuel) everywhere! (refrain x2)**

Sharing at Christ's Table

Invitation

One: When Jesus invited those to dine with him for whom the world had so little love or regard, their hearts burst with joy to learn that God's care was so much bigger than they had been told. At this table, we live into that call by spreading the invitation as widely as we humanly can; for no matter who you are or where you are on your life's journey, you are welcome here at this Table that belongs to our Christ. For the love of God knows no limits, and is not in any

way diminished by age, race, gender, orientation, ideology, or anything else on this earth.

Many, singing:

“Joyful, Joyful” #4 (v. 1)

**Joyful, joyful, we adore you, God of glory, God of love;
hearts unfold like flowers before you, opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness, drive the storms of doubt away;
giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day!**

Thanksgiving Prayer

One: God be with you:

Many: and also with you.

One: Lift up your hearts:

Many: we lift them up joyfully!

One: Let us thank God:

Many: it is good to thank God.

One: We thank you, God, for giving yourself to your Creation in compassionate love. There is nowhere we can go where you are not there: if we go to the heights of the mountains, or if we make the grave our bed, you are with us. If we go to the depths of the sea, your right hand holds us fast. We thank you for Jesus, your Word, who lived among us, helping us to discern you in new ways. We thank you for his life, lessons, and examples of steadfast love and unlimited care. We ask now that you bless us as we share this bread and cup, that your unimaginable love might nourish us and encourage us to be your servants in this world. Now, as Jesus taught us, we joyfully pray:

Prayer of Our Savior (unison)

The Prayer has many versions; pray whichever you desire (debts, sins, trespasses, etc.).

We affirm that God has many names, so use one of the suggested or another of your choosing.

Our Father/Mother/Creator, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Many, singing:

“Joyful, Joyful” #4 (v. 2)

All your works with joy surround you, earth and heaven reflect your rays,

stars and angels sing around you, center of unbroken praise.
Field and forest, vale and mountain, flowery meadow, flashing sea,
chanting bird and flowing fountain, teach us what our praise should be.

Communion

One: As this grain once was scattered in the field and has come together in one bread, so we, in our joy and in our sorrows, come together as one, for we share one bread. Take. The Bread of Life.

The cup which we share is the cup of the New Covenant written in our hearts and witnessed by Jesus. Take. Drink. The Cup of the New Covenant. God is with you.

You may hold the bread until all have been served. As the ushers distribute, we sing:

Many, singing: “Joyful, Joyful” #4 (v. 3)
**You are giving and forgiving, ever blessing, ever blessed,
wellspring of the joy of living, ocean depth of happy rest!
Loving Spirit, Father, Mother, all who love belong to you;
teach us how to love each other, by that love our joy renew.**

When all have received bread:

One: This is the bread of life for the Body of Christ. Let all the people say:

Many: Amen! [Eat.]

You may hold the cup until all have been served. As the ushers distribute, we sing:

Many, singing: “Joyful, Joyful” #4 (v. 4)
**Mortals, join the mighty chorus which the morning stars began,
boundless love is reigning o’er us, reconciling race and clan.
Ever singing, move we forward, faithful in the midst of strife.
Joyful music leads us onward to the triumph song of life.**

When all have received the cup:

One: This is the cup of blessing for the people of God. Let all the people say:

Many: Amen! [Drink.]

Prayer of Thanksgiving

One: Let us pray in gratitude.

**Many: Thank you God, for renewing us at your table by the presence of Christ.
Thank you for your eternal love, the Bread of Life, that sustains all creation.
May you continue to love us in our faithful acts and by that love discourage us
from our unfaithful acts, that we might rejoice as your servants to the world.
Amen.**

A Time for Children

Special Music

“Room at the Table”

Carrie Newcomer

Mike Benz, Kari Johnson, Alice & Randy Getchell

*Let our hearts not be hardened to those living on the margins / There is room at the table for everyone
This is where it all begins, this is how we gather in / There is room at the table for everyone*

*Too long we have wandered burdened and undone / But there is room at the table for everyone
Let us sing the new world in, this is how it all begins / There is room at the table for everyone*

*There is room for us all / And no gift is too small
There is room at the table for everyone / There's enough if we share
Come on pull up a chair / There is room at the table for everyone*

*No matter who you are, no matter where you're from / There is room at the table for everyone
Here and now we can be the beloved community / There is room at the table for everyone*

Scripture Reading – Romans 2:1-11 (*adapted*)

Lector, **Congregation**

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. ² You say, "**We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.**" ³ Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? ⁴ Or do you despise the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? ⁵ But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. ⁶ For God will repay according to each one's deeds: ⁷ those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality will receive eternal life; ⁸ while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹ There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the

Jew first and also the Greek,¹⁰ but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹ For God shows no partiality.

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

“I’ve Got Peace Like a River” #478

I’ve got peace like a river (x3) ... in my soul. *(all of that twice)*

I’ve got joy like a fountain (x3) ... in my soul. *(all of that twice)*

I’ve got love like an ocean (x3) ... in my soul. *(all of that twice)*

I’ve got faith like an anchor (x3) ... in my soul. *(all of that twice)*

Offering

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www.raiseright.com. Our unique church ID is gWKLGX8TRZCN.

Offertory

Don Shier

* Doxology

“Joyful, Joyful” #4 (v. 1)

Joyful, joyful, we adore you, God of glory, God of love;

hearts unfold like flowers before you, opening to the sun above.

Melt the clouds of sin and sadness, drive the storms of doubt away;

giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day!

* Benediction

* Congregational Blessing

“God Be With You” (#809)

Dorsey/Hutchins

God be with you. God be with you. God be with you ‘til we meet again.

O God be with you. God be with you. God be with you ‘til we meet again.

Postlude

Don Shier

You may be seated as you listen to the Postlude. If you choose to depart at this time, please speak gently as you exit out of respect for those who choose to listen.

COFFEE HOUR IS SERVED AFTER WORSHIP!

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

I heard a powerful thing this week. I was talking with a member of this church who related a conversation they had had with a friend. That friend is someone who goes to church (not here), but doesn't hold an ethic of financial giving to their own congregation. They were surprised to learn that our church member has always given generously and consistently, and they wanted to know why. Our member's answer?

"Because it brings me joy."

"It," in this case, isn't so much the act of giving—though I suppose I could lean into that overly-cited bit from Paul in 2 Corinthians 9 about God loving a cheerful giver. It's really more about simply being part of the church. *This church.* This community of neighbors, friends, loved ones, and chosen family that gathers together regularly to mutually support each other, pray for each other, eat together, weep together, sing and dance together, and be joyful together.

Diverse folks regard the Church in diverse ways. Some heavily stress that the church is a place where you're supposed to be servants to your immediate neighborhood. Some consider it an obligation to attend and participate if you want to have your place in eternity guaranteed. For some, it's a place to avoid because there's too much guilting and shaming going on, a place where sin is so spotlighted that the mere act of attending can induce anxiety. In some contexts, church is not a whole lot more than a country club, a place that's heavy on hanging out and light on justice.

This week, after that church member spoke to me, I couldn't help but dwell upon that bit about joy. Shouldn't our relationship with God fundamentally and primarily be rooted in joy? Maybe this whole endeavor is supposed to produce in us such exuberance and delight that it spurs us to go out into the world and share that joy with everyone we find—not for the purposes of growing the church or saving souls or anything else so practical or spiritual, respectively, but to simply cultivate love and goodness by spreading joy.

I've found myself conversing often lately with folks about the nature of progressive, Christian theology. Sometimes it's been with folks who hold a more traditional theology that leans strongly into the judgment of God after we die. Sometimes it's been with non-Christians who look in from the outside and experience dismay; as one person I spoke to this week said, "I'm not religious, but I love Jesus." I love Jesus, too, even as I acknowledge that our religion is more deeply rooted in Paul than Jesus. That's why I chose today's reading from the Women's Lectionary—precisely because in a service filled with joy, there's a lot of stress coming from this letter to the Romans.

It's uncomfortable, yeah? *God's judgment. Do you imagine... you will escape the judgment of God? You are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.*

God will repay according to each one's deeds. It's not hard to understand how some people run away from church when some pastors and congregations and denominations lean into theologies that are so deeply invested in making people fearful about what God might do to them after they die.

But as I look at these words of Paul, I'm reminded of one of my core beliefs about religious people in general and Christians more specifically: when it comes to our founding Scriptures, NO ONE actually assigns authority to every word they read. No one. We all make choices about what counts and what doesn't. What's loving and what's not. What's authoritative and what's intolerably harmful. As I've said many times, "All Christians cherry-pick the Scriptures; it's just that the progressive ones tend to admit it."

That sounds a bit snarky, but I mean it. I think it's a hallmark of progressive Christian theology. We tend to recognize that the Bible and the Church are wildly diverse things that give rise to all manner of contradictory beliefs and practices. Some are life-giving. Some are death-dealing. And here in this snippet from Paul's letter to the Romans, we get both. Here's the life-giving one:

For God shows no partiality.

I think it's funny to see that line there, because Paul has just spent considerable time showing us exactly how God shows partiality: by condemning those who are wicked and rewarding those who are good. Regardless of what you think about the righteousness of that dynamic, it is partiality. And when it comes to progressive theology, my read is that this is one of those things that progressive Christians tend to qualify or reject outright. Speaking only for myself now, I am convinced that a God who is love, a God whose steadfast love defies all our expectations, a God who would give us Jesus and then give us Jesus again after Rome killed him, cannot possibly be into punishment. I believe in a God who gives us infinite chances to repent, one who doesn't say, "You can only repent in life." If eternal life is a thing, then why wouldn't we have a chance to repent then, too? Why couldn't we make amends even after we die? I believe in a God who offers everyone unqualified love—but I also believe in a God who shows partiality.

That's also a hallmark of progressive Christian theology, drawn from Latin American theologians of the 20th century: that God does in fact demonstrate "a preferential option for the poor." God loves everyone equally, full stop. But God also deeply desires all to live joyfully in wholeness and neighbor-love, and that can't happen when we force our neighbors to the margins. God wants to erase the margins, to bring everyone together in a mutually-upbuilding state of grace that we variously call the Kingdom, the Kindom, or the Beloved Community. And that, dear friends, is as much a cause for joy as anything in our faith.

An unfortunate dimension of our messy humanity is that we lean too heavily into scarcity, competition, segregation, discrimination. We're so motivated by fear that it's often the easiest way to move people to purchase, vote, relocate, welcome, scorn, and more. But it's not the best way. The best way is JOY. To support each other and build a world that so fills us with joy that we cannot help but let that joy shine for all the world to see, to invite others into that joy, to let that joy infect our love, our care, our adoration, our neighborliness. That's how joy works! Joy thrives in abundance and creates feelings of abundance. Joy is the plant that can't help but grow, putting down roots in the hardest of spirits to break up our hearts of stone. Joy dissolves apathy and hate and gives birth to loving community. Paul says that faith, hope, and love abide, and the greatest of these is love, but I think it is joy that truly gives the growth.

Here's a joy. Last Sunday, I appealed to you all to stick around after coffee hour and help dismantle the rummage sale. There was some skepticism floating about that this wouldn't work, but when it came time, twenty or more people flew into action and made light work of an important task. I was truly overjoyed; thank you!

And this: a couple of weeks ago, I addressed the Osseo Area School Board as the pastor of children who are enrolled in that district. I preached in support of that district's LGBTQ+ inclusion policy that has come under attack. Some days later, I received an email from a teacher in the district; here's an excerpt of their communication:

I wanted to sincerely thank you for attending and speaking at the District 279 school board meeting on July 25th. I was not able to attend the meeting but caught the recording later. It was very disheartening to listen to so many speak on the LGBTQ resolution, mostly out of uninformed fear. Your words were incredibly encouraging and healing for me as a teacher and parent. God bless the work you are doing and thank you for speaking the truth in love!

It brings me immeasurable joy to be able to be an advocate, ally, and celebrant of my LGBTQ+ neighbors, and I have that ability because I pastor a church filled with people who recognize that God's love shows no partiality. We share a core belief that each of us is lovingly made in the image of God in all essential aspects of our being, including gender and sexuality. To be able to spread that joy and bring joy to others is one of my greatest joys in ministry.

What brings you joy as part of this church? Reflect on that. Lock onto it. Let it remind you, motivate you, inspire you, encourage you. Let it be your north star, the gravity that draws you ever back toward the light and love we share here. Let it energize your giving of time, treasure, and talent. Let it so fill you that you become a fountain of joy, flowing so freely that it quenches all that would delay the arrival of God's holy realm.

Amen.

◆ **First Congregational Church UCC, Anoka, MN** ◆

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First Congregational Church, UCC of Anoka is an Open and Affirming Christian Community for all. We affirm that the image of God is most fully reflected in diversity. We invite all people to share their energy and talents in full participation with our community. We welcome all individuals and families of any sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, gender expression, relationship status, race, national origin, socioeconomic status, age, mental and physical health or ability, or belief. Together, we celebrate these and all other facets of one's essential being.