



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

February 11, 2024 ♦ Transfiguration Sunday



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

Centering Music

Koki Sato

The Church Bell Rings

* Opening Hymn

“Isaiah the Prophet Has Written of Old” #108

Use the hymnal if you're comfortable doing so!

**Isaiah the prophet has written of old how God's new creation shall come.
Instead of the thorn tree, the fir tree shall grow;
the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, the lamb,
the wolf shall lie down with the lamb.**

**The mountains and hills shall break forth into song, the peoples be led forth in peace;
the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God
as the waters cover the sea, the sea,
as the waters cover the sea.**

**Yet nations still prey on the meek of the world, and conflict turns parent from child.
Your people despoil all the sweetness of earth;
the brier and the thorn tree grow wild, grow wild,
the brier and the thorn tree grow wild.**

**God, bring to fruition your will for the earth, that no one shall hurt or destroy,
that wisdom and justice shall reign in the land
and your people shall go forth in joy, in joy,
your people shall go forth in joy.**

* Opening Psalm (adapted from portions of 107)

One: Give thanks to God, for she is good;

Many: her faithfulness endures forever.

One: Let the redeemed of the Holy One proclaim that she has transformed them;

Many: she has changed our state from captivity to freedom.

One: The Creator send forth her word and healed the people;

Many: Let us give thanks to the Womb of Life for her faithful love!

One: Let us make offerings of thanksgiving and tell of God's acts with shouts of joy;

Many: Hallelujah! Great and holy is our God!

One: Let us pray.

Many: Loving God, on this Transfiguration Sunday, we remember your steadfast, faithful, and enduring love. We also remember that yours is the power to transform! You take what the world calls unclean and declare it clean. You take small things and make enormity of them. You embrace us in our messiness and send us into the world to be your agents and co-creators of goodness and lovingkindness. Transform us anew, Holy One! Transfigure us this day, that we may be salt and light and leaven to the world, helping bring about your Beloved Community on earth. Amen!

A Time for Children (10:30)

Prayer of Preparation

“Pour Out Your Spirit”

C. Grundy

From the sac - red_ wa - ters_ of_ my_ birth
to the sac - red_ wa - ters_ of_ this_ hour,
I have leaned up-on_ You_ who knit me_ in_ my_
moth-er's womb. O pour out Your Spir - it now.

Special Music

“One Voice”

The Wailin’ Jennys

Alice and Randy Getchell

*This is the sound of one voice / One spirit, one voice
The sound of one who makes a choice/ this is the sound of one voice..
This is the sound of voices two / The sound of me singing with you
Helping each other to make it through / this is the sound of voices two.
This is the sound of voices three / Singing together in harmony
Surrendering to the mystery / this is the sound of voices three.
This is the sound of all of us / Singing with love and the will to trust
Leave the rest behind, it will turn to dust. This is the sound of all of us.
This is the sound of one voice / One people, one voice
A song for every one of us / This is the sound of one voice.*

Scripture Reading - Mark 4:30-34

[Jesus] also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." ³³ With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴ he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

"In the Bulb There Is a Flower" #433

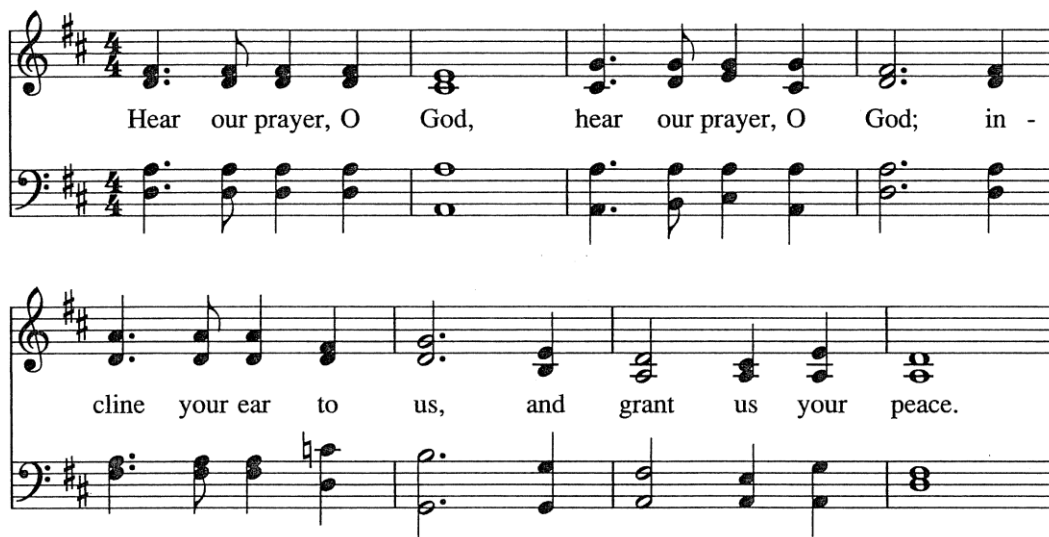
**In the bulb there is a flower, in the seed, an apple tree;
in cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.**

**There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;
there's a dawn for every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will come the future; what it holds, a mystery,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.**

**In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;
in our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.**

Prayers of the People

Sung Prayer



Hear our prayer, O God, hear our prayer, O God; in -
cline your ear to us, and grant us your peace.

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.

Offering

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www.raiseright.com. Our unique church ID is 9WKLGX8TRZCN.*

Offertory

Koki Sato

* Doxology

NUN DANKET

“Now Thank We All Our God” #419 v. 3

**All praise and thanks to God our Maker now be given,
to Christ, and Spirit, too, our help in highest heaven.
The one, eternal God, whom earth and heaven adore,
for thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore!**

* 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

Koki Sato

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

Repeat after me:

Turnip. **Turnip.**

Kohlrabi. **Kohlrabi.**

Cabbage. **Cabbage.**

Collard Greens. **Collard Greens.**

Kale. **Kale.**

Cauliflower. **Cauliflower.**

Broccoli. **Broccoli.**

Brussels Sprouts. **Brussels Sprouts.**

Remember that. There will be a quiz.

“With what can we compare the Empire of God? it is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest off all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs.”

You might have noticed that I changed a word in there, though in this case, I changed it *back*. The phrase in Greek that we traditionally render “Kingdom of God,” *basilea tou theou*, is more accurately translated “Empire of God.” The implications of that usage are consequential, inasmuch as they speak to how Jesus was trolling the Imperial powers of his day even as they give us added context as to why Rome was inclined to kill him. *Basilea tou theou*. **Empire** of God. *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Empire of God*. Not the rich. Not the Emperor’s. The Empire belongs to the oppressed.

But see, this parable comes early in Mark, so it’s one of the most confusing ones. Jesus still had stuff to do, so he couldn’t afford to tick off Rome. Yet. He had sermons to preach, people to heal, demons to exorcise, crowds to feed. So he told these confusing little stories that left the powerful scratching their heads and thinking, “What’s he on about this time? Mustard seeds? Why is he talking about weeds?”

That also gets lost in translation: the whole “making something big out of something small” is only the first-level interpretation of this parable, because mustard was considered a weed. An unwanted plant, mostly because it spread extremely rapidly, taking over gardens. Why on earth would you sow it

deliberately? To those familiar with first-century horticulture, Jesus was talking nonsense! But to those who had ears to hear, the meaning came eventually. *The Empire of God is for those the world says are worthless, like a mustard weed.*

Many of the people to whom Jesus ministered would have understood that message in their bones. It was a populist message, much like we hear today, rhetoric that speaks critically of those with power and deliberately takes the side of those who don't. Such language goads the haves, and Jesus frames it in a way that the have-nots will know what he's talking about.

We know what he's talking about, because we still live in an age of Empire. Perhaps the identity of the Imperial elite vary depending on your perspective; for some, it's the American Empire. For others, it's the One Percenters. Regardless, even we who are pretty comfortable in our lives have a sense that the world is out of balance because so much of the planet's wealth is concentrated in the hands of so few people they'd barely fill this room. The 20 richest people, so few they'd fit in our four front pews, are worth about \$2 trillion alone, nearly 10% of America's gross domestic product. These are the very folks to whom Jesus offered his critique when he told parables and beatitudes. These are the folks who would have heard Jesus talking about weeds and maybe even thought to themselves, "That's fine, so long as he remains hanging out with the weeds."

I bet you know exactly what makes something a weed. All it takes is for the plant to be unwanted in whatever spot it's growing. So it is in the world Jesus walked, as he journeyed from community to community, speaking to people who were unwanted—except, perhaps, for the taxes they could supply to Rome. They had no value beyond that. They were mustard. Certainly Pharaoh thought of the Hebrews that way; it only became a problem when those weeds spread so much that Egypt feared they'd add their strength to that of a foreign invader. Pharaoh ordering the death of the firstborn in Egypt was a *weeding*. Those who followed Jesus around knew that. They knew that story. They knew the mighty considered them weeds.

And here's Jesus, telling them that the Empire of God is like weeds who grow majestic and tall and provide shelter for the birds.

Though it can certainly be interpreted as being about size, I don't read the mustard seed parable that way. It's about value, not size. Worthiness. It's about how God sees the little people in contrast to how the world sees them. And what Jesus is telling them is so subversive. Revolutionary, even!

"With what can we compare the Empire of God, or what parable will we use for it? It's like the tiny seed of unwanted mustard, which, when the farmer sows it into their field, grows up into huge plants that take everything over, such that even eagles nest in its shade."

The Empire of God is where the worthless find their worth.

The Empire of God is where the worthless find out they were ALWAYS worthy.

Do you, perhaps, hear Jesus talking to you in the midst of this parable? Do you hear him telling you that you are, in fact, of infinite value? That those around us who the world says have no value are similarly worthy?

I was so grateful to be able to host, on your behalf, a listening session at the church on Tuesday night. Representative Zack Stephenson, Anoka City Council member Erik Skogquist, and Senator Jim Abeler convened a meeting of local residents so that they might hear from those residents their thoughts, feelings, and concerns about the possibility of rebuilding our local jail into a MUCH larger facility. In the midst of all of that talk, more than a few people reflected upon how a culture of incarceration has been evolving in recent years. Senator Abeler, seconded by the other two public servants, noted that jail time is

no longer seen as the solution for every legal situation. Rep. Stephenson noted that by some counts, the number of people in jail who are experiencing addiction struggles or mental health challenges may be as many as 90% of the whole. He went on to note that windowless cells will do nothing but exacerbate mental illness. In the audience, one man's comments struck me deeply, as he referred to the incarcerated quite intentionally as "citizens." Not "criminals."

(You shall love your neighbor as yourself.)

Those confined behind bars aren't weeds. They deserve cultivation, too. They deserve to be fed and watered and encouraged to flourish and grow until birds rest in the shelter of their branches.

You know, what's funny about weeds is that it's all really just about location. It's not about the essence of the plant, for the essence is critical—they supply oxygen! The Spirit breathes into us through the filter of weeds! And the Spirit also gives us gifts of ingenuity, imagination, and inventiveness, such that we can take a weed like mustard and transform it into other plants, other ones NOT typically considered weedy, plants that provide health and life and nutrients to the world. The Spirit helps us to see the weed as a *gift*.

To that end: I name for you *brassica oleracea*, a weedy variety of wild mustard that has been selectively bred and grown until it fills the shelves of the produce section at Cub. Someone selected for increased root growth and came up with turnip. One who selected for stems gave us kohlrabi. Creatives who selected for leaves brought us cabbage, collard greens, and kale. By selecting for flowers, some developed cauliflower and broccoli. By selecting for buds, others gave us brussels sprouts. Now, to be fair, not everyone likes every one of those foods; for some, broccoli may as well be a weed. And yet, its essential goodness and value cannot be overstated, just as your essential goodness and value cannot be overstated.

Perhaps we can say it like a parable: "The Empire of God is a vast garden where every plant has its place. There shall be no need need for weed killer or dandelion forks, for every plant is wanted. Every plant is care-fully tended. Every plant is watered and fed with love and grace until they grow thirty, sixty, and even a hundred-fold, until even the angels of God come to take refuge in their shade."

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. (**Thanks be to God.**)

Amen.

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

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