



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation
February 25, 2024 ♦ 2nd Sunday in Lent



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

“Praise to the Living God” #8

**Praise to the living God, the God of love and light,
whose word brought forth the myriad suns and set the worlds in flight;
whose infinite design, which we but dimly see,
pervades all nature, making all a cosmic unity.**

**Praise to the living God, from whom all things derive,
whose Spirit formed upon this sphere the first faint seeds of life;
who caused us to evolve, unwitting, toward God’s goal,
till humankind stood on the earth, as living, thinking souls.**

**Praise to the living God, who knows our joy and pain,
who shares with us our common life, the sacred and profane.
God toils where’er we toil, in home and mart and mill,
and deep within the human heart God leads us forward still.**

**Praise to the living God, around, within, above,
beyond the grasp of human mind, but whom we know as love.
In these tumultuous days, so full of hope and strife,
may we bear witness to the Way, O Source and Goal of life.**

* Opening Psalm and Opening Affirmation

The opening Psalm, Psalm 1, is as interpreted by Christine Robinson.

One: Happy are those who know good and do good.

Many: Their love for the good feeds them continually.

One: They are like trees planted near the river, whose roots go deep and wide.

Many: They thrive, bear fruit in season, and weather drought without wilting.

One: Those who are not so grounded will blow around like dry leaves in the wind.

Many: Root yourself in Good, and live.

One: As we seek to root ourselves in Good, we affirm the purposes of this church: to embody the uniqueness of every kind of individual person with diverse, compatible, and conflicting characteristics;

Many: to work at accepting and fully encountering the nature of our individual humanness;

One: to provide an experience of a community always struggling to become more caring, open, inclusive, and accepting; and to expose and examine our individuality and community in the light of the truth of Jesus and the Christian approach of redemptive love.

Many: 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

“As the Deer”

Nystrom

Kari Johnson & Laurie Elvig, Duet

*As the deer panteth for the water, so my soul longeth after Thee.
You alone are my heart's desire, and I long to worship Thee.*

*You're my friend and you are my brother even though you are a King.
I love you more than any other, so much more than anything.
You alone are my strength, my shield; to you alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire, and I long to worship Thee.*

*I want you more than gold and silver, only you can satisfy.
You alone are the real joy giver, and the apple of my eye.
You alone are my strength, my shield; to you alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire, and I long to worship Thee.
I long to worship Thee.*

Scripture Reading – Mark 11:12-21

Lector, **Congregation**

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. ¹³ Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it. ¹⁵ Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; ¹⁶ and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷ He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." ¹⁸ And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. ¹⁹ And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. ²⁰ In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. ²¹ Then Peter remembered and said to him, "**Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered!**"

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

ymn

"I Come with Joy" #349

**I come with joy, a child of God, forgiven, loved, and free,
the life of Jesus to recall, in love laid down for me, [repeat].**

**I come with Christians far and near to find, as all are fed,
the new community of love in Christ's communion bread, [repeat].**

**As Christ breaks bread, and bids us share, each proud division ends.
The love that made us, makes us one, and strangers now are friends, [repeat].**

**And thus we meet, and better know the Presence, ever near,
and join our hearts and sing with joy that Christ is risen here, [repeat].**

**Together met, together bound, in friendship we will stay,
and go with joy to love the world and live the way we pray, [repeat].**

Acts of Prayer

You may write a prayer on the supplied index card; the Pastor will share the prayers aloud unless you write “silently” by your prayer. The Deacons will take up the cards after the offering.

Offering

Text-to-Give: **844-334-1477**

Thank you for your gifts to our ministries!

If you are watching from home (live or later), please consider adding to the Offering by sending your gifts by mail, text, or online (uccanoka.org/donate).

You can support the church further through the RaiseRight program:

Our unique church ID is 9WKLGX8TRZCN.

Interlude

Koki Sato

Prayers of the People

A Pastor will read aloud the prayers of the congregation, occasionally including the call/response:

*God in your love // **Hear our prayer.** Prayers marked “SILENT” will not be read aloud.*

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.

* 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.

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 BETWEEN SERVICES.

***Has your personal information changed? Keep us informed!
There are information update forms on the bulletin table. Thank you.***

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

That poor fig tree! It wasn't its fault. Jesus was just having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, in large part because he was hangry. His blood sugar was low. He was stressed out! So on this particular day when Jesus was walking toward Jerusalem from Bethany, he was definitely **hangry**.

This happens on the day after Palm Sunday, so Jesus is exhausted. Sunday was filled with crowds, hosannas, maybe an Imperial procession on the other side of town against which he staged his triumphal entry. He went back to Bethany that night to crash on Mary and Lazarus's couch, and he had an even bigger day planned for Monday. He was headed to the Temple grounds, and there he was already planning to flip the tables of the moneychangers. He was in a state, and when you add being hangry to that, it's gonna be bad for the fig tree!

Here's a truism: when you're hangry, it gets really easy to forget that our neighbors always have their own opinions, interpretations, worldviews, and contexts. It gets really easy to stop using our "I-Statements" and instead speak in absolutes that try to shape and define the world according to our prejudices.

A guy I know might have been hangry after the Golden Globe awards. He took to Facebook to offer his hot take on some winners, opining, "And now I learn that *Oppenheimer* won a Golden Globe? And Nolan got best director?! For one of the objectively worst movies ever made?"

On the first day of orientation at Eden Theological Seminary in the fall of 2006, the faculty defined "modernism" for us as the tradition of assuming that there is a universal way to look at the world. They noted that historically, especially in the West, that "universal way" was a colonial, white, European, masculine framing of everything. They went on to note that "postmodernism" is an intellectual movement recognizing that everything has a context. Everything is at least somewhat relative. Or, as I like to say it, everything is *subjective*. How can't it be? We all view the world through our own exceedingly personal lenses that have been cut and polished by the sum of our experiences, knowledge, prejudices, environment, and so on. For that friend of mine, *Oppenheimer* wasn't great. Where he failed was to so

vehemently insist that it was “objectively” bad. He was defining the terms of the debate, claiming that his perspective was normative. Universal. Applicable in every situation.

Well, I watched *Oppenheimer* the other day, and I know one thing for certain. I like it a whole heck of a lot better than the Elijah Wood movie *North*, a film Roger Ebert couldn’t trash enough. Ebert’s review hit on both objective and subjective notes. The objective claim was that *North* was “one of the worst films ever made.” The subjective one was, “I hated this movie. Hated hated hated hated hated this movie. Hated it. Hated every simpering stupid vacant audience-insulting moment of it. Hated the sensibility that thought anyone would like it. Hated the implied insult to the audience by its belief that anyone would be entertained by it.” In that memorable flaying, he at least paid lip service to the fact that this was simply his own opinion, which really, is all a film critic—or any of us—can ever claim. After all, a majority of BAFTA voters in Great Britain obviously disagreed about *Oppenheimer*, giving it the awards for Best Director and Best Picture last week. Oscar voters are almost certain to do the same on March 10.

Today, the focus-line in our church’s mission statement is, “To work at accepting and fully encountering the nature of our individual humanness,” so I’ll put it right out there: doing that is incompatible with any claims of “objectivity.” Our individual humanness is inherently subjective! We all speak from our own contexts, ones that are inevitably informed by our “sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, gender expression, relationship status, race, national origin, socioeconomic status, age, mental and physical health and ability, [and] belief.” It’s not for nothing that we put that litany into our church’s Open and Affirming Covenant back in 2017.

Our ONA Covenant is a powerful statement of our effort to work at accepting and fully encountering the nature of our individual humanness. It expresses our awareness that each of us is our own crazy quilt, unique in its squares and stitching. When we recognize and affirm each other in all of that God-blessed uniqueness, that’s an act of grace. An act of love. An act of neighbor-care that treats the other not as an other, but as an equal. As a beloved child of God.

I’ve always struggled with any religious perspective that privileges Jesus’s divinity over his humanity. That’s why I particularly love the Gospel of Mark, because in it, Jesus is at his most human. It’s the Markan Jesus who, for me, best illustrates the theological tradition that in Jesus, God experienced all of the flaws and foibles of humanity. It’s the Markan Jesus who gets hangry! So, for me, it’s the Markan Jesus who helps me work at accepting and fully encountering the nature of our individual humanness. It’s the Markan Jesus who is mysterious, weird, unexpected, and oh-so-messy.

Isn’t messiness what it boils down to? Life is messy. People are messy. Remembering that and embracing that is the first step toward grace. It’s a necessary part of recognizing that we all move through the world a little bit differently from each other, and that’s okay. It’s part of remembering that some folks will think *Oppenheimer* was a triumph, while others won’t. Some think *Barbie* should win Best Picture, and others don’t. Some think Weird Al Yankovic should have done the Super Bowl Half Time Show and not Usher.

In this local context, this local congregation, we work at accepting and fully encountering the nature of our individual humanness by recognizing that we all do church a little differently. Some come every week; others less so because that’s what works for them. Some folks love the hymns more than anything, and others the prayers. Some folks don’t really love when we send the microphone around the room, while others find it to be a defining aspect of our shared time together. Some come to hear me preach; others come more to sing the songs. Some wear masks; others don’t. Some come hangry—

--and here's the thing about being hangry. It's not just a physical and mental condition. It can be spiritual, too. There are surely some here among us today who are well-acquainted with feeling spiritually hangry. Perhaps you were brought up in a religious tradition that harped on your brokenness and sin. Maybe you were made to feel marginal within your own congregation. Perhaps you've read too many things about the messy marriage of Christianity and Empire in all of its expressions. Maybe you've just felt distant from your God and your neighbor.

That, too, is why we're here, even if it isn't explicitly articulated in our mission. We strive as a church to feed the spirits of all who enter here. To offer them the Good News in a place that celebrates them in all of their individual humanness. Because as I said, people are always coming to the Church hangry. The world has left them malnourished with its conflicting messages of self-sufficiency and widespread scarcity. It makes us all hangry sometimes. It puts us on edge. It conspires to make us competitive and combative instead of cooperative. But this we know is true: bodies and spirits that are nourished aren't prone to getting hangry. The nourished find it much easier to be peacemakers in a world filled with conflict. The nourished find it easier to prepare a table at which enemies might sit together. The nourished find it that much easier to accept and fully encounter each other's blessed subjectivity by sharing perspectives more than we insist upon our convictions.

A final word of grace, though: all of the subjectivity-honoring in the world will sometimes not be enough to alleviate someone's hangriness, which is why I'm so glad our mission statement acknowledges that this is *work*. It won't always be finished at the end of the day. At my last church, a beloved member always sounded hangry about the Muslim world. He was very concerned about persecuted Christians, and he talked about Muslims as if they were objectively bad, as if there was something about Islam that lent itself to the bad stuff we see from groups like ISIS and Hamas. He couldn't acknowledge that he was being subjective. He struggled to accept my gentle rebuttals that ANY person, any group, any people may eventually resort to violence if they've been hangry long enough.

Jesus cursed the fig tree in a moment of pure hangriness. But the next day, as they passed by it again and saw it withered, he was full. He was able to promise his friends, "Have faith in God. Truly I tell you... whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." At Anoka UCC, we can't solve all the problems of the world; we can't make all the prayers come true. But we can provide a place where those who are spiritually malnourished can find sustenance. And that, my friends, is surely a prayer answered for someone.

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.