



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

February 4, 2024 ♦ 5th Sunday after Epiphany



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 are a guest with us today, welcome! If you are comfortable sharing your information with us, there are cards in the pew holders that you can use for that purpose (place them in the offering plate).

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

Centering Music

Koki Sato

The Church Bell Rings

* Opening Hymn

“Jesus, the Joy of Loving Hearts” #329 (*alt.*)

**Jesus, the joy of loving hearts, fount of our lives, and light of all:
from every bliss that earth imparts we turn, unfilled, to hear your call.**

**Your truth unchanged has ever stood; you plead with all to call on you;
to those still seeking, you are good; to those who find you, life is new.**

**We taste of you, the living bread, and long to feast upon you still;
we drink of you, the fountainhead; our thirsty souls from you we fill.**

**For you our restless spirits yearn, where-e'er our changing lot is cast;
glad, when your smile on us you turn, blessed, when by faith we hold you fast.**

**O Jesus, ever with us stay! Make all our moments calm and bright!
Oh, chase the cloud of gloom away! Shed o'er the world your holy light.**

Sharing at Christ's Table

Invitation

One: When Jesus sat at table and enjoyed communion with tax collectors and sinners he proclaimed that God's care knows no bounds. At this table we live into that call by spreading the invitation as widely as we possibly can; no matter who you are or where you are on your life's journey you are welcome

here. For neither age, nor race, nor gender, nor orientation, nor ideology, nor anything else can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Savior.

Thanksgiving Prayer

One: God be with you:

Many: and also with you.

One: Lift up your hearts:

Many: we lift them up to God.

One: Let us thank God:

Many: it is good to thank God.

One: We thank you, God, that you have provided for all the worlds that ever were or will be by giving yourself to them in love. 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, uncovering your presence. We thank you that you stamped his death with victory and that Life, not Death, was the final word. We ask now that you bless us, as we share this bread and cup, that we might be nourished by that same unbounded love and so be encouraged to be your servants to the world. And now, as your beloved whom you have reconciled to yourself, we 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.

Communion

One: As this grain once was scattered in the field and has come together in one bread, so we, with different needs and hopes, 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:

Musical score for the bread distribution song. It consists of two systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment line. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: "Eat this bread, drink this cup, come to me and nev - er be hun - gry." and "Eat this bread, drink this cup, trust in me and you will not thirst."

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:

Eat this bread; drink this cup; come to me and never be hungry.

Eat this bread; drink this cup; trust in me and you will not thirst.

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 (10:30)

Prayer of Preparation

“Pour Out Your Spirit”

C. Grundy

Musical score for the prayer of preparation. It is a single line of music in 4/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics are: "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.

Choir Anthem

“We the Lord’s People”

Jeffrey Rickard

Anoka UCC Chancel Choir; Don Shier, Director

*We the Lord’s people, heart and voice uniting,
 praise God who called us out of darkness, light and truth revealing.
 Bring we now before God all our gladness and joy.
 O God, Almighty, Son and Holy Spirit,
 Trinity blessed, heavenly light, the source of our salvation.
 Shine forth in our living now and ever, amen.*

Scripture Reading – Mark 4:10-12

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. ¹¹ And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; ¹² in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'"

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

“All My Hope on God Is Founded” #408

**All my hope on God is founded: who else can my hope renew?
 Still through change and chance God guides me, only good and only true.
 God unknown, grace alone, calls my heart to be God’s own.**

**Well does the almighty giver bounteous gifts on us bestow!
 With delight our souls are nourished; pleasure leads us where we go.
 At God’s hand does love stand; joy awaits each new command.**

**In glad hymns to God eternal sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising for the love in Christ made known.
Hear Christ's call, one and all; those who follow shall not fall.**

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:
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

*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.

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

In Bible Study right now, we're reading the Exodus story, and we're working our way through the plagues upon Egypt that God calls down through Moses. In many of those instances, you get some variation of the refrain, "God hardened Pharaoh's heart." I'd love to say it were merely a peculiarity of the text, but it's troubling. The whole notion that God would harden someone's heart suggests a God who controls us like puppets, a God who would—in the case of the Exodus—extend the suffering of an oppressed people just to make a point. (The point being that God is bigger than Ra or Osiris or Isis or any other Egyptian god.) A God who hardens the heart of people is a capricious God.

How much more unsettling is it when Jesus himself says something much the same? That's the dilemma that plagues us as we encounter today's reading. It comes in the middle of the Parable of the Sower, with the parable itself preceding today's passage and an explanation of the parable following. In fact, the whole shebang was the actual lectionary entry today, but I wanted to just focus on the little bit in the middle, where Jesus explains to his friends why he preaches in parables: "In order that they may look but not perceive, and may listen, but not understand, so that they may not turn again and be forgiven."

So that they may not **REPENT** and be forgiven.

Why on earth would God or Jesus NOT want people to repent? It seems like nonsense, yeah? But it's also an opportunity for us to engage in some good, old-fashioned study of the text, consulting people who know more than we do and who come from different social locations, so that we might understand what the story's authors were getting at—because make no mistake: these are still fundamentally stories that people told, stories through which they imagined what God was all about and what they had to do with it. Otherwise, what we're left with is a contention that God is in the business of creating haves and have-nots, insiders and outsiders.

That's the contention of Emerson Powery, a black Biblical scholar who, drawing upon the experience of black folk in America, sees the author of Mark leaning heavily into the insider/outsider dynamic. The implicit claim is that God is providing for those who follow Jesus, while those who don't are left confused.

The narrative approach to understanding this difficult moment involves reading all of Mark, upon which we remember that only four chapters later, Jesus starts ministering to outsiders after the Syrophenician woman reminds him that he must use his power to heal everyone, not just "the children" who are invited to the table.

A third insight comes to us from the influential Jewish scholar, Robert Alter, who published a translation of the entire Hebrew canon. Now, Alter doesn't do much with the New Testament, but in this instance, Jesus is citing Isaiah 6:9, where an angel tells Isaiah, "Go and say this to the people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.'" Verse 10 adds more challenge as the angel says, "Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed."

Alter doesn't lean into the implied theology here, namely, that God hardens hearts so that they may NOT be healed. So that they may continue to suffer. Instead, he remembers that the text was written by people. He suggests, "...if we see all this from Isaiah's point of view, the entire message is colored by his quite realistic fear that his prophetic mission is doomed to failure from the outset, that all his exhortations will not move the people to turn back from its evil ways. God's command, then, to make the heart of the people obtuse is a kind of preemptive justification by the prophet for the anticipated failure of prophecy" (Alter, *Prophets* volume of his *The Hebrew Bible* translation, p. 642).

If that doesn't ring with the music of truth, I don't know what does. That's the conundrum faced by every prophet: what is the point of preaching the truth to power, to advocating for the oppressed, to

calling upon people to turn from their evil ways when they're going to just ignore it? We're dealing with *humans*, after all, that species that is so resistant to change unless experience forces it. That's what Jonah had to have been thinking when he was called to go to Nineveh: "Why would I go all that way just to talk to a bunch of people who aren't going to listen?" Surely Alter is right: this is precisely what Isaiah was thinking as he spoke to those recalcitrant kings.

It's the same dynamic we face every day as we try to create justice in a world whose roots drink deeply of selfishness and greed.

It's the same feelings we feel when we know the world is burning but it seems like profit is a far greater motivator than the warnings of scientists.

It's the same frustration we feel when Dr. King's words get taken out of context in a deplorable effort to maintain an unjust status quo.

The despairing cry of the prophet is ever, "*Oh, what's the point?*"

Friends, let's be real. It's not just about prophets. How often do we all assume we know what the outcome is going to be already, so we don't make any effort to change it? How often do we let pessimism, fatigue, or a fear of conflict or failure persuade us that the effort will bear no fruit? How often do we preface some comment with, "I already know what you're going to say."

Do we really?

Of course we don't, but it's so easy to justify our decisions by assuming an outcome. So, we limit what's possible by declining to challenge the world.

As I was finishing seminary and preparing my first pastoral profile for circulation to open churches, I had to decide where to send it. There were checkboxes for each UCC Conference, but I didn't want to check them all. I limited my options to Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, and I think South Dakota, all due to proximity to friends and family. I did that despite the advice of my Conference Minister, who said to me, "Don't limit the power of the Holy Spirit to surprise you."

That's exactly what we're doing when we pre-judge the outcome and decide to not make the effort. We are limiting the Spirit's ability to persuade the world toward an unexpected outcome. A joyful outcome. An outcome we scarcely allowed ourselves to dream.

To varying degrees, we in the church believe in God (most of us, anyway, and that's okay). That belief carries with it the expectation that we are called to be a people of hope, a people who dare, a people who risk the possibility of disappointment because if we don't, then nothing's ever going to change. If we don't challenge the powers and principalities of this world who bow at the altar of mammon, who dance to the choruses of wealth, how can we expect that widows and orphans will ever know security? If we assume we know how things are going to play out and make no effort to change it, aren't we just complicit in the status quo?

I'm not saying this to shame. Not at all. Sometimes the mess is so profound that we simply can't bring ourselves to jump into the mud with our mops and brooms. Nonetheless, Jesus calls us to do that. To dare to co-create a better world than the one we're in, even if that world's just a skosh better than this one. Because really, if we can imagine something better than the status quo, why wouldn't we try to bring it about? Most of the time, the attempt won't make anything worse if it fails—but if it succeeds, O glorious wonder!

There are so many contexts in which this works, especially in the church. "Would you consider joining the Council?" "Can I count on you to make a soup for our Lenten meals?" "Would you mind reading the Scripture today in worship?" "Can you increase your pledge by 5%?" "Will you come to bell choir rehearsal and see how much fun we have?" (Feel free to add your own!) You never know when someone is going to reply with a yes!

"So that they may not turn again and be forgiven."

Bunk. Our God is not a capricious God, despite the theological ramblings of people who were scared their efforts would not bring about any positive change. Our God is a loving God, a God who hopes eternally that we will join together in the struggle for justice and peace. That's why God keeps calling prophets. They give us all chances to turn and turn again, to repent, to set our faces back toward the Divine and live in partnership with the Holy Spirit.

When the world's getting you down, remember that, and HOPE.

Amen.

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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.