



# First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

*An Open and Affirming Congregation*

January 28, 2024 ♦ 4<sup>th</sup> 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

Centering Music

Koki Sato

The Church Bell Rings

\* Opening Psalm (portions of Ps. 34)

One: I will bless the LORD at all times;

**Many: praise shall ever be upon my lips.**

One: Magnify our God with me;

**Many: Let us exalt God's name forever!**

One: I sought the Holy One, and they answered me, delivering me from all my fears.

**Many: Let us look to the Holy One and be radiant, our faces never ashamed.**

One: This poor soul cried, was heard by the Almighty, and was saved from all trouble.

**Many: The angel of God encamps around us, delivering us.**

One: O taste and see that the LORD is good;

**Many: Happy are those who take refuge in our God!**

One: God is near to the brokenhearted;

**Many: God saves the crushed in spirit.**

One: The Lord redeems the lives of their beloved;

**Many: None who take refuge in God will be condemned.**

\* Opening Hymn

“Taste and See”

James E. Moore

*Cantor; congregation on refrain as below. Music at end of bulletin.*

**Taste and see, taste and see the goodness of the Lord.**

**O taste and see, taste and see the goodness of the Lord, of the Lord.**

A Time for Children (10:30)

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.

*Linda Theisen, Soloist*

*(10:30) Children ages 3 and up may depart at this time for faith formation activities.  
 Activity bags are available in the back of the sanctuary for those who might enjoy them.*

### Scripture Reading - Jeremiah 9:17-22

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider, and call for the mourning women to come; send for the skilled women to come; <sup>18</sup> let them quickly raise a dirge over us, so that our eyes may run down with tears, and our eyelids flow with water. <sup>19</sup> For a sound of wailing is heard from Zion: "How we are ruined! We are utterly shamed, because we have left the land, because they have cast down our dwellings." <sup>20</sup> Hear, O women, the word of the LORD, and let your ears receive the word of his mouth; teach to your daughters a dirge, and each to her neighbor a lament. <sup>21</sup> "Death has come up into our windows, it has entered our palaces, to cut off the children from the streets and the young men from the squares." <sup>22</sup> Speak! Thus says the LORD: "Human corpses shall fall like dung upon the open field, like sheaves behind the reaper, and no one shall gather them."

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

**Many:** Thanks be to God.

Hymn

“As Pants the Hart for Cooling Streams” (#481)

We will sing this to AMAZING GRACE #547.

**As pants the hart for cooling streams when heated in the chase,  
so longs my soul, O God, for you, and your refreshing grace.**

**Why restless, why cast down, my soul? Trust God, who will employ  
all grace for you, and change your sighs to thankful hymns of joy.**

**God of my strength, how long shall I, like one forgotten, mourn,  
forlorn, forsaken, and exposed to may oppressor’s scorn?**

**Why restless, why cast down, my soul? Hope still, and you shall sing  
the praise of One who is your God, your health’s eternal spring.**

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](http://uccanoka.org/donate)).*

*You can support the church further through the RaiseRight program: [www.raiseright.com](http://www.raiseright.com). Our unique church ID is gWKLGX8TRZCN.*

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.**

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

I have a beef with the musical *Les Miserables*: it fails the Bechdel Test, the invention of American cartoonist Alison Bechdel, a queer creator whose work also happens to be the subject of the wonderful musical *Fun Home*. The Bechdel Test is a way to assess the role of women in a film. In a comic from 1985, Bechdel drew a character who said she would only go to a movie if it satisfied the following requirements. First, the movie has to have at least two women in it. Second, those women have to actually talk to each other. Finally, those women have to talk about something other than a man.

*Les Mis* doesn't pass.

Don't get me wrong; I really do love the show. The music is moving, and I love singing along with Javert because his songs sit comfortably in my voice. But as for the women, you have four: Cosette, who is first saved by a man as a child, and then when she's grown up, she's there to provide a love interest for Marius. Eponine, who is also super hung up on Marius. Fantine's entire arc is predicated upon her husband leaving her and her having to resort to increasingly desperate measures to be able to pay for her child's care, culminating in sex work that leaves her dying of syphilis. And finally, Madame Thenardier, whose name is her husband's.

None of these characters satisfy the Bechdel Test.

Nonetheless, in *Les Mis* there is one scene that comes close: when the women mourn their dead. The scene is perhaps the preeminent moment in the entire musical for women. It comes after the young rebels all get killed after the French troops storm the barricades, and we find the women cleaning up the mess while they sing,

***Did you see them, going off to fight,  
children of the barricade who didn't last the night?  
Did you see them lying where they died?  
Someone used to cradle them  
and kiss them when they cried.  
Did you see them lying by side?***

That's what the women are doing in today's Scripture lesson. The prophet Jeremiah calls upon them, bidding the people summon the "mourning women," because that was the role women played in those times. Then, as now, that fell to women because then, as now, it wasn't considered manly to cry. It's still too often considered weakness to openly grieve.

In Jeremiah, there is much to grieve.

The prophet's time coincides with the final fall of Judah, after Babylon has come a-conquering. Imperial forces have deported Judah's king and placed a puppet on the throne. They're taking away the skilled workers and upper classes off to captivity in Babylon. Jeremiah seems to spend his time speaking to those who are left, those who have beheld the devastation. Those who saw Jerusalem fall. Those who saw the troops lay waste to the city and burn the Temple to the ground. Though Jeremiah speaks of hope for a future, a Godly plan to restore a remnant of the people to their homeland, all is otherwise grief and sorrow, so Jeremiah calls upon the professional mourners, women whose job it was to wail and grieve and lament.

In the ancient context, mourning was a role of honor for women as well as an economic opportunity. It was something they could do that the men would not, giving them financial security, and it persists in a few places in the world today, even though in many places (not enough) women have far greater opportunity for social and financial success than in the time of Jeremiah.

Nonetheless, it seems that more often than we perhaps admit, it still falls to women to be the mourners, even if doing so carries a terrible double-standard. Because we live in a world where if women are to aspire to power, they must emulate the ways of men, up to and including forcing down the tears when they rise up, and that's not good for anyone. (Watch the *Barbie* movie!)

It's only been a few days since I did a funeral, and in so many of them, I observe the same dynamic—and to be clear, it's one that's common to everyone, regardless of gender. This dynamic rears up in the same spot: when the relative of the deceased rises to eulogize their loved one. So often, the speakers start out with a preemptive intention, something along the lines of, "I'm going to try to get through this without crying." "Bear with me." Or my favorite, "I'm going to try and hold it together."

When did weeping become synonymous with "falling apart?"

When did expressing sadness become a sign of weakness? (Watch *Inside Out*!)

Why did we ever need professional mourners?

It's almost trite to point out at this juncture that "Jesus wept," but he did. He openly mourned the death of his friend Lazarus. Did those witnessing that event find it unseemly? Did they think he should have gotten a professional mourner to play the drum, toll the bell, and shed the tears so that the Son of God didn't have to?

I grieve how the world, dominated as it has been by those who find tears to be shameful, has taught so many of us that we have to apologize for crying. That's a thing, and we all know it. It shows up in the funeral, when the eulogizer's breath catches, when their voice frogs out in their throat, when the eyeballs begin to glisten and they say, "I'm sorry."

There is nothing for which anyone should apologize in such a moment. Grief, in the words of a certain Marvel super hero, is just love persisting. It's love finding expression in the only way it can in that moment. Those tears are no badge of shame; they're living water. They're holy water. They're blessing. An *anointing*. I firmly believe they consecrate that moment.

Don't take that to mean that NOT crying isn't a blessing; we all grieve differently and on different timetables. When I preached at my dad's funeral, I didn't cry. My grief process had run in a way that on that day, April 23, 2022, I needed to laugh more than I needed to cry. But it's worth noting that I felt like the target of some subtle messaging later in the service when someone who was openly crying suggested that a lack of tears somehow meant there was less love.

So, crying bad, but also crying good. We live in a weird world.

There's an element of Jeremiah's spiritual leadership that might also come off a little weird: as he speaks to a conquered people, he doesn't advocate for them to resist. He promises that at some point in the future, God's going to remember the plight of Rachel's people and act to free them from their captivity. In the meantime, they're not supposed to rebel; they're supposed to *repent*. They should fix their relationship with God, one that they had sorely abused for generations. Would that we followed that lesson! If only we would give ourselves permission to grieve right away.

I remember exactly where I was when the towers fell. I was at my job at the Lincoln School of Commerce, watching on the television as the towers came tumbling down. I was grieving already, both at the loss of life and the horror of it all, but mostly because my brother lived in Manhattan and I couldn't get through to him on the phone to find out if he was alive. My grief magnified many times over in the days to come as I watched our nation respond to that trauma. Maybe I'm misremembering our history, but I'm not sure we ever really took the time to grieve. To truly lament. To let those ragged emotions wring us out and run their course *before* we took our next steps. It sure feels like we jumped to war awfully fast, and that war took up all the air in the room. It left us no room for tears.

That's the same thing I see happening in Israel and Gaza. What Hamas did was brutal. Evil. It remains so as they continue to hold over one hundred Israelis captive, and those kidnappings made everything that followed so much more complex. Nonetheless, would things be different today if the Netanyahu administration had paused to grieve before they sent in the tanks? Would thousands of Palestinian children who had nothing to do with Hamas be alive yet today? Would millions of people NOT be starving in a living nightmare?

*Let them quickly raise a dirge over us, so that our eyes may run down with tears.*

Maybe we still need professional mourners, because Jeremiah suggests that they can help us dismantle that nonsensical conviction that our tears are a sign of weakness. To that end, perhaps we can even repurpose another prophet's powerful words: "Let our tears roll down like waters, and grief like an ever-flowing stream."

It's a shame. It turns out that those women who sing "Turning" in *Les Miserables* are still singing a song that wasn't written by women, much less professional mourners. Otherwise they wouldn't sing,

**Same old story; what's the use of tears?**

**What's the use of praying if there's nobody who hears?**

Because someone DOES hear, and that Someone weeps with us, every time, hallowing our tears and making a sacrament of our grief.

When the tears come, take the time to let them flow.

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.*

# Taste and See

86

♩=84

F C/F Bb/F F F/A Bbadd9 F/A Gm11 C7

Taste and see, taste and see the good - ness of the Lord. O

F C/F Bb/F F F/A Bbadd9 F/A Gm7 C7 C6 C7

taste and see, taste and see the good - ness of the Lord, of the

F Bb/F F Gm7/C C7 F Fadd9

To verses Last time

Lord.

Lord.

1. I will bless the
2. Glo - ri - fy the
3. Wor - ship the

Am7 Bbmaj7 F/A Gm11

Lord at all times. Praise shall  
 Lord with me. To - geth - er let us  
 Lord, all you peo - ple. You'll want for

F/A Gm7/C C7 F A7 A7/C#

al - ways be on my lips; my soul shall glo - ry in the  
 all praise God's name. I called the Lord who an - swered  
 noth - ing if you ask. Taste and see that the Lord is

Dmadd9 Dm/C Bbadd9 F/A Gm7 C7 D.C.

Lord for God has been so good to me.  
 me; from all my trou - bles I was set free.  
 good; in God we need put all our trust.