



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

March 12, 2023 ♦ Third 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>

Prelude

Koki Sato

Congregational Introit

“My Life Flows on in Endless Song” #476 (v. 1)

**My life flows on in endless song; above earth’s lamentation,
I hear the sweet, though far-off hymn, that hails a new creation.
Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing;
it finds an echo in my soul—how can I keep from singing?**

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.

Scripture Reading – Luke 8:1-3

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, ² as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³ and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

* Opening Hymn

“Draw Us in the Spirit’s Tether” #337

**Draw us in the Spirit’s tether, for when humbly in your name,
two or three are met together, you are in the midst of them.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Touch we now your garment’s hem.**

**As disciples used to gather in the name of Christ to sup,
then with thanks to God the Giver, break the bread and bless the cup.
Alleluia! Alleluia! So now bind our friendship up.**

**All our meals and all our living make as sacraments of you,
that by caring, helping, giving, we may be disciples true.
Alleluia! Alleluia! We may serve with faith anew.**

Sharing at Christ's Table

Invitation

On the night when Jesus was betrayed, he shared a meal with his closest friends. Was this the most important meal? Surely not! For just as he dined with friends on that last night, he had already eaten at countless tables, roadsides, lakeshores, and rivershores. He ate not just with the twelve remembered in Scripture, but with all manner of friends and even enemies. He means for the Table at which we eat—indeed, with all our tables—to be a place of similar hospitality in love, a place where those things that divide us fade into the background in the grace and love of a shared meal. Let us embrace that steadfast love now in our own remembrance of him.

Prayer

One: God be with you;

Many: and also with you.

One: Lift up your hearts;

Many: we lift them up to God.

One: Lift up your voices!

Many: Let us make a joyful noise!

One: We thank you, Holy One, for the gift of Jesus, for the gift of the Table, for the gift of a sacrament in Christ's name where there is neither east nor west, south nor north. We thank you for the Holy Spirit that blesses this Table and the meal upon it, the same Spirit that ignites within us such a fire of joy that we cannot help but sing! Let that same Spirit infuse our bodies, hearts, and minds as we commune together, that this meal may fill us with a song of peace, love, and neighborly affection that not only feeds the world, but heals it. Now, as he taught others, so we too 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. [*Peel the top off your Communion elements and eat the wafer.*]

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. [*Peel the second layer of your Communion elements and drink the juice.*]

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)

ADVISORY: The livestream of the service continues during the Children's Time; if your child sits facing the Pastor their face shouldn't appear on camera.

“Scripture”

“I Don't Know How to Love Him”
from Jesus Christ Superstar; SSA Ensemble

Webber/Rice

*I don't know how to love him; What to do, how to move him.
I've been changed, yes really changed. In these past few days,
When I've seen myself, I seem like someone else.
I don't know how to take this; I don't see why he moves me.
He's a man, he's just a man; And I've [known] so many men before,
In very many ways. He's just one more
Should I bring him down? Should I scream and shout?
Should I speak of love? Let my feelings out?
I never thought I'd come to this; What's it all about?*

Don't you think it's rather funny? I should be in this position
I'm the one who's always been so calm, so cool, No lover's fool,
Running every show. He scares me so
I never thought I'd come to this; What's it all about?
Yet, if he said he loved me, I'd be lost, I'd be frightened,
I couldn't cope, just couldn't cope, I'd turn my head, I'd back away
I wouldn't want to know. He scares me so.
I want him so. I love him so.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

“Mary Magdalene Was Suffering”

We will sing this to NETTLETON, known best as “Come, O Fount of Every Blessing” (#459)

**Mary Magdalene was suffering in her body, mind and soul —
until Jesus met her, offering love that made the wounded whole.
God, may we like Mary meet you and accept your healing grace.
May we be — like Mary — grateful as we serve you in this place.**

**“Tower of Strength,” the people called her — Christ’s disciple, come what may.
She with other women traveled, funding Christ’s work on the Way.
We are also on a journey sharing in Christ’s ministry.
Make us strong in Christ to serve you with great generosity.**

**Mary was a weeping witness as she stood there at the cross.
At the tomb, she grieved for Jesus; love had paid a heavy cost.
Three days on, the risen Savior gave her good news to proclaim.
She was first to preach the gospel. May we share it, just the same!**

**Mary’s one that we’ve lost sight of in our church’s history.
She’s been labeled and made light of; she’s been called a mystery.
May we see her loving witness in these stories we’ve been told;
And may her example help us To be faithful, strong and bold.**

Offering

Text-to-Give: [844-334-1477](tel: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.*

* Doxology

“My Life Flows on in Endless Song” #476 (v. 4)

**I lift my eyes, the cloud grows thin; I see the blue above it;
and day by day this pathway smooths, since first I learned to love it.
The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing;
all things are mine since I am Christ’s—how can I keep from singing?**

Closing Scripture – Luke 8:1-3

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵ The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶ Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." ⁸ Then they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.

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.*

Acknowledgements

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<https://sojo.net/articles/hymn-mary-magdalene-and-other-misunderstood-disciples>

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Sermon Text

Before I dig into the substance of today's anthem, I have to get something off my chest. I don't love *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Maybe that's because I didn't grow up listening to it. It certainly has something to do with how shouty the singing from certain characters gets. It definitely has something to do with my discomfort at how the Jewish religious leaders are depicted, especially in how they sing in these gravelly, demonic voices that feel more than a little bit anti-Semitic to me. But the big reason? It's because of Mary.

How hard would it have been for Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice to do a little homework in 1970 and realize that Mary Magdalene wasn't a sex worker? She's not, you know. That's a mistake, or perhaps even an intentional character assassination perpetrated 1500 years ago by Pope Gregory the First, who seems to have conflated the woman who bathes Jesus's feet with Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus's primary angel investors and from whom he exorcised seven demons. It wouldn't have been hard for him to understand this and not perpetuate on the stages of the West End and Broadway this notion that Mary was a prostitute. (No shade to sex workers.)

That's what she's singing, you know, even if I changed the lyrics a little bit to make it less obvious. "He's just a man, and I've *had* so many men before, in very many ways." Whether she has or hasn't is immaterial, because it's poor scholarship to write that lyric, and it continues to advance a harmful myth about a woman who the Church finally decided was Apostle to the Apostles. I sometimes wonder: if the early Jesus movement had benefitted equally from the ministries of Peter, Paul, *and* Mary, where would we be? Might we understand the love of Jesus as more of a "hold me like you'll never let me go" thing?

But now that I've gotten that off my chest, there's another lyric that warrants a closer embrace. ***I don't know how to love him; what to do, how to move him.***"

Maybe what Mary really means here is, "I don't know how to move him off of his path." But I'd like to think it's more of, "I don't know how he could possibly be moved by me." If later Church tradition is any indicator, there was something about Jesus that made some people feel small and insignificant. Perhaps it was an awareness of his power. Maybe he really did do those miracles, and it left his followers so awestruck that they started to get all Psalmic, thinking, "Who the heck are we that you would lower yourself to hang out with us?" Certainly John's version of Maundy Thursday leans that way, what with Peter freaking out when Jesus bends down to wash his feet. In the face of such a robust personality, power, or whatever else it was, I wonder. Did people feel small around Jesus? Did Mary?

Or maybe it's that he made people feel so seen that they almost started to feel exposed. All their masks and walls were just windows to Jesus. He saw the person behind the curtain, the one that so many of us think is the fraud, the imposter, the unlovable one, the shameful one, the one about whom we think, "If this person really, truly knew me, they wouldn't be so kind." And make no mistake—that voice was there. It was drilled into people by a world that saw the poor as nothing more than conduits for taxation. Empire always teaches such folks the same mantra: "You're not enough. You're not enough. You're not enough." As I suggested last week, the Imperial Church just continued sending that message by pushing the immediacy and inevitability of sin. The untruths about Mary only reinforce that, especially for women. Especially where anything sex-related is concerned. Oh, it's probably the case that there was *something* about Mary at some point that registered as impure; if nothing else, having seven demons inhabit your body would do that. Maybe Mary wondered if Jesus still looked at her as unclean even after the demons were gone.

She wonders how to move him, even as she doesn't realize that she already has!

That's the Good News. That Jesus was so moved by Mary and all the rest that he put himself in the path of profound danger just so he could spread love as deeply and widely as he could. He spent a lot of time *telling* people about that love. He told them about that hated Samaritan whose love was so

profound. He told them about the prodigal son's father who, upon seeing his son coming home, ran to him and wept and offered him calf, robe, and ring because the son he had thought was dead was alive. He told them that God would drop everything to find the one lost person even if ninety-nine others were milling about just as safe as could be. And then, at some point, his life became a parable. *The Kingdom of God is like a man sent from Heaven who so loved the world that he gave up his life trying to save it.*

I get it. I get that she was scared. I think I would be too. It would be frightening to meet someone who, no matter what you've done, no matter what you've said, no matter who you've hurt, will still wrap his arms around you and hold you and whisper in your ear, "I still love you. You are mine." Because that news, however Good it truly is, is still countercultural. If I could sum up in one sentence what might be the central focus of my ministry, it would be blowing up the needless stigmas of this life. Don't get me wrong; it takes practice to do that, and even more to apply such grace to myself. But it's something I work on every day.

To the person who apologizes for expressing a perspective, I say, "You don't have to apologize for having a brain and using it."

To the person who cries in public, I say, "How else are those emotions going to get out?"

To the person who falls asleep in church and apologizes to me for it, I say, "I'm glad you felt safe enough here to doze off."

To the person who beats themselves up for not having a rosy relationship with their family of origin, I say, "Family's hard."

To the person who self-berates for not doing enough to redress all the woes that befall us, I say, "You aren't called to fight every battle."

To the person who struggles to forgive themselves for past misdeeds, I say, "Your past doesn't define you."

There are countless others that I don't even remember right now because they're so common. They're the very air we breathe. But God's holy breath blows that air away and replaces it with the breezy aromas of kindness and gentleness. Jesus went all over the place sharing that Spirit with anyone who would listen. He loved people in spite of their messiness, and probably because of it. He let people know that they didn't have to abase themselves to be put right with God. God already loved them. God just wanted them—and us—to be so moved by that love that we offer it to others, too.

When I read the Bible, I get the sense that Mary knew that all along. I think that's why she followed him, and along with her girlfriends, made sure that Jesus always had someplace to sleep and always had enough to eat. I think that's why she was there when he was arrested (for surely she was), and why she was there when he was executed. It's why she was there on the third day to wash and anoint his body: because he had moved her. He had changed her. Because he loved her so.

Just like he loves you.

In the end, Mary appeared at that tomb and beheld the risen Christ. Perhaps it was only in that moment that she finally saw him as clearly as he saw her. She realized that despite all of her skepticism and hurting, he wanted *her* to carry the Good News into a skeptical and hurting world. To move others as he had moved her. As she had moved him. So that others might be changed as she had.

On Easter, she finally understood how to love him. May we all do the same.

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.