



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation
March 17, 2024 ♦ 5th 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 “Come, Let Us Join with Faithful Souls” #383

**Come, let us join with faithful souls our song of faith to raise;
one family in heart are we, and one the God we praise.**

**Faithful are all who love the truth and perfect truth proclaim,
who steadfast stand at God’s right hand and glorify God’s name.**

**And faithful are the gentle hearts to whom the power is given
of every hearth to make a home, of every home a heaven.**

**O God of hosts, our faith renew, and grant us, in your grace,
to join the songs sung by the saints in every time and place.**

* Opening Psalm and Affirmation (adapted in part from Psalm 133)

One: How very good and pleasant it is when neighbors live together in community!

Many: It is like an anointing of precious oil upon the head, running down over the collar.

One: It is like the dew of Mount Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.

Many: For there the LORD ordained her blessing – life forevermore.

One: As we embrace the promise of life forevermore, we affirm the purposes of this church: to embody the uniqueness of every kind of individual person with diverse, compatible, and conflicting characteristics; to work at accepting and

fully encountering the nature of our individual humanness; to provide an experience of a community always struggling to become more caring, open, inclusive, and accepting;

Many: and to expose and examine our individuality and community in the light of the truth of Jesus and the Christian approach of redemptive love. 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

“Be Still My Soul”

arr. Purifoy

Linda Theisen, Soloist

*Be still my soul, the Lord is on your side. Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to your God to order and provide, in every change God faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul, your best, your heavenly Friend through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

*Be still, my soul, your God will undertake to guide the future, as in ages past.
Your hope, your confidence let nothing shake, all now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul, the waves and winds still know his voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.
Be still, my soul, the hour is hastening on when we shall be forever with the Lord,
when disappointment, grief and fear are gone, sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul, when change and tears are past, all safe and blessed we shall meet at last.*

Scripture Reading – Genesis 2:18-22 (alt.)

Lector, Congregation

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the earth-creature should be alone; I will make them a helper as their full and equal partner." ¹⁹ So out of the ground the

LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the earth-creature to see what they would call them; and whatever the earth-creature called every living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ The earth-creature gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the earth-creature there was not found a helper as a full and equal partner. ²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the earth-creature, and they slept; then God took one of the earth-creature's ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the LORD God took the rib, formed it into a woman, and brought her to the man.

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

“Blessed Be the Tie That Binds” #393 (v. 4 by PC)

**Blessed be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love;
the sharing of a common life is like to that above.**

**Before our God we come and pour our ardent prayers;
our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, our comforts and our cares.**

**We share each other's woes, each other's burdens bear,
and often for each other flows a sympathizing tear.**

**Where two or three ga-ther near, Christ, wi-th us yo-u are found,
our hea-rts commu-ne in po-tent gra-ce, your pre-sence felt all around.**

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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*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

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

The word “redeem” has a troubling history in the church. Theologically, the word has traditionally meant “to pay a cost,” with that cost being the profound sin of humanity for which only Jesus could atone. It really does have an economic, transactional element to it: that humanity owed God a debt that they couldn’t possibly repay, so Jesus did it. You will recall how often I have pressed against that theology, for perhaps no greater Scriptural reason than Jesus himself said, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice,” only to have the Church turn him into the sacrificial Lamb.

Nonetheless, there’s something to that economic understanding of “redeem,” because another definition of the word is “to discharge or fulfill,” as in fulfilling a promise. Or a covenant. Like God does. There’s also this: “to obtain the release or restoration of, as from captivity, by paying a ransom.” Now, I recognize this sounds a lot like the first thing: ransoming us from our captivity to sin and the powers of death. But what if Jesus was redeeming us—saving us—from something else?

This is the last Sunday of working through our church’s mission statement, and it brings us to the fourth and final line: “to expose and examine our individuality and community in the light of the truth of Jesus and the Christian approach of redemptive love.” I’ve said a lot this season about the individuality bit, especially as it pertains to honoring each and every person, their context, their uniqueness, and so on. I’ve talked about how we as a community are always struggling to be more open, caring, inclusive, and accepting. What more is there to say? Well, it all has to do with *redemptive love* and how it exists in the tension between individuality and community.

There is perhaps no better illustration of that tension than the oft-named dynamic where people say, “I’m spiritual, but not religious.” The crux of that claim often has to do with an individual’s discomfort with the sins of the Church—and here I really do want to use that word, because no other word better captures the destructive history of a Church that married the Empire and became, in so many ways, the opposite of what Jesus and Paul taught. Not allowing women into leadership. Clergy sexual abuse scandals, particularly pedophile church leaders and the children they abuse and traumatize. The golden calf of, well, *gold*, representing the Church’s complicated relationship with money and property. Prosperity Gospel. White supremacist, Christian nationalism. Abiding discrimination against LGBTQ+ folks. Is it any wonder that so many people have just walked away from the so-called “religious” elements of the Church and given up trying to find those parts of the Church that repent of such sins?

Despite all of those entirely sensible reasons to walk away from the organized church, I say with deep love and grace that there’s a problem with the whole “spiritual but not religious” thing, and I say this from a place of personal experience, because I’ve been there too.

I’m not a convert to Christianity. I was born into it. I was baptized into the faith and family of Jesus at the First Congregational Church of Crete, Nebraska, long before I was old enough to remember it. I was an active participant in the life of that church all throughout my childhood and through my freshman year at college (same town). I went to Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. On Wednesdays after school, I’d walk to the church for choir practice for Cherub Choir (grades 1-3), Children’s Choir (grades 4-6), and later on I was able to join the adult choir. I participated in Youth Group. I was a member of our OCWM committee. I played in our youth bell choir. To be fair, at least part of the reason I did all these things was because it was expected of me by my parents.

By the time my sophomore year rolled around in college, I stopped going to church. It wasn’t initially anything profound; I had joined a fraternity and inherited this whole new group of really close friends. Even though I really wasn’t a partier, I did end up staying up later on Saturday nights than before,

such that it became super easy to just sleep in on Sundays. I didn't have any beef with Church, at least not until my pastor saw me at the movie theatre one day and greeted me with mock surprise that I still lived, a perhaps-unintended message of dis-welcome.

Long before ministry was on my radar, I was taking a bunch of religious studies courses in college. Mostly that was because my teacher was a member of my church—so I already knew him—and I thought he was far and away the best teacher on campus. He made the Bible come alive, so I just kept taking his classes and eventually majored at his request. In the midst of that, I took a class where he taught us about both Judaism and Islam, the other Abrahamic religions that are prevalent in modern-day Israel. That's when things started getting hinky. Despite how the media likes to talk about Islam, in that class I encountered a religious tradition where women were often strongly affirmed. I appreciated the five pillars, particularly the one that obligates all practicing Muslims to give to the poor. I also thought it so gracious that while the pilgrimage to Mecca is required, it's only required for those who have the means and ability—much as how fasting during Ramadan isn't required if it would compromise the practitioner's health.

All those learnings shook me, because some of them seemed to stand in stark contrast to the sins of the institutional Church. I began to have something of a crisis of faith, and it contributed to my growing lack of church involvement. Finally, one day, I took my troubled soul and went to talk to my teacher, Gordon. I told him about my doubts and misgivings, and part of the conversation went something like this:

“Do you still identify as a Christian?”

“I do.”

“Then you need to hear this. It's fine if you want to explore your faith and your questions as an individual, but in the end, if you're going to say you're a Christian, you need to gather with others. Jesus said, ‘Where two or three are gathered,’ and that ultimately precludes a solo-Christianity.”

That might be a hard lesson to absorb. It might even trigger a feeling of shame, inasmuch as it skates awfully close to, “Why aren't you in church???” But Gordon offered me that advice with deep love. God can absolutely be encountered in solitude. Elijah went to the desert and experienced God in a sound of sheer silence. Moses experienced God all by himself when he saw a burning bush. God called to Samuel in the night. But if one is going to lay claim to the mantle of Christian, none of us can truly go it alone.

Perhaps it's a particularly American theology that says you can. We live, after all, in a country that celebrates individuality. “I'll just do it myself!” is something that's probably passed most of our lips, and not just when we're children and it's developmentally expected. It certainly doesn't help that we habitually misread all those letters from Paul where he says “you” when the translation should more clearly say “you all.”

We are a congregation—a word that literally means people gathering together. We recognize in our mission that we will expose and examine our individuality and community in the light of the truth of Jesus and the Christian approach of redemptive love. Therefore, as a church, our mission is to come as individuals and experience the transformation and love of God *in community*. That's why we're here. It's why we have a building. An annual budget. A pledge campaign. These are all things that enable us to live together in intentional community. In the end, maybe that ultimately helps us understand the redemption that occurs when we gather together in the presence of the Spirit and the love of Jesus: we are redeemed from the anti-Gospel of self-sufficiency.

Try as we might, no one can truly go it alone, at least not forever. We're just not wired that way. Even the most introverted among us needs some human interaction! Among many other reasons, we

belong to a church because our souls crave community. I think the gathered community might just be the only truly reliable way for us to experience the presence of God in our midst. Where two or three are gathered? That's where we experience the Risen Christ.

In the beginning, when God had breathed her holy breath into the creature of earth and given it life, she realized that it wasn't good that the earth-creature should be alone. She sought to make them a helper to be their full and equal partner. One of the oldest stories in our Bible reflects the reality that we need others. For help. For co-creation. For commiseration. For mutual love and care. For the building up of our spirits and our communities. In the end, the purposes of our church all lead to this. We embody the uniqueness of every kind of individual person, accepting each person's blessed humanity, providing an experience of a community always struggling to be more caring, open, inclusive, and accepting, so that we might expose and examine that individuality **in the midst of a community that liberates us from going it alone.**

Blessed be the ties that bind us together in Christian love. The sharing of a common life is like to that above.

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.