



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

March 3, 2024 ♦ 3rd 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

“The Old Rugged Cross”

arr. Wagner

Anoka UCC Bell Choir; Don Shier, Director

The Church Bell Rings

A Time for Children (10:30)

Choir Anthem

“Wade in the Water”

arr. Emerson

Anoka UCC Chancel Choir; Don Shier, Director

*Wade in the water, wade in the water, children,
wade in the water, God's gonna trouble the water.*

*River Jordan is chilly and cold (God's gonna trouble the water).
Chills the body but not the soul (God's gonna trouble the water).*

*If you get up there before I do (God's gonna trouble the water).
Just tell my friends I'm comin' too (God's gonna trouble the water).*

We Come to the Table

One: When John, Jesus, and their disciples baptized believers into the faith and family of God, they often did so in the Jordan River, a venerated stream that provided life-giving moisture to people from the headwaters in the north, through the Galilee region, and on into the Dead Sea.

Many: Wade in the water, children.

One: In his ministry, Jesus offers us the life-giving water of the Spirit, the living water that feeds our souls even as more earthly water sustains our bodies.

Many: Wade in the water, children.

One: As we come to the Table, we will partake of bread that was formed from plants that were sustained by blessed water. We will partake of the fruit of the vine that produced grapes that were, in turn, filled with transformed water.

Many: Wade in the water, children.

One: When Philip met the Ethiopian Eunuch, the Ethiopian exclaimed, “Here is water; what is to prevent me from being baptized?” The answer was plain: nothing at all.

Many: Wade in the water, children.

One: When we set this table in Christ’s name, we too can exclaim, “Here is the sacramental meal; what is to prevent us from sharing in it?” The answer is the same: nothing at all.

Many: Wade in the water, children.

One: Nonetheless, we know that the Church has not always welcomed strangers or neighbors with such grace and invitation. Because we strive to embody and live out the welcome Jesus offered to all, we reaffirm 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;

Many: to provide an experience of a community always struggling to become more caring, open, inclusive, and accepting;

One: 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: Wade in the water, children!

One: And so, we thank you, God, for giving us Jesus, who in turn gave us this bread, this cup, this Table, this Living Water in which we wade. Bless these elements and bless us as we share them, that they might bring us light, healing, and life to be shared with all who are thirsty. And now, as your children whom you have embraced in love, 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: This bread came from grain that was sustained by the waters of heaven and earth, just as we are. Let us receive that grace again as we share this bread. Eat. The Bread of Life.

The cup which we share offers us water that has been transformed by soil, sun, and nutrients. Jesus offered this as if it were his very lifeblood, sustaining him and all of us in love that flows as strong as the River Jordan. Drink. The Cup of Blessing.

The Deacons will distribute first the bread and second the cups.

Please partake as you are served.

Special Music

“Jesus Walked this Lonesome Valley”

arr. Wagner

Anoka UCC Bell Choir; Don Shier, Director

Prayer of Thanksgiving

One: Let us pray.

Many: We thank you, God, for renewing us at your Table through the gifts of bread, cup, and living water. We thank you for these things that sustain all creation, building us up and transforming us into agents of your Good News. May you continue to feed and water us as we continue in our struggle to be more caring, open, inclusive, and accepting of our neighbors. Amen.

Scripture Reading - Mark 2:1-4

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ² So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. ³ Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴ And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

“We Yearn, O Christ, for Wholeness” #179

**We yearn, O Christ, for wholeness and for your healing touch;
too long have we felt helpless; our burdens seemed too much.
Forgetting all pretenses we make our pleadings heard,
in hope and expectation await your gracious Word.**

**We long to have companions who travel by our side,
strong friends to call and answer with whom we are allied;
as we lift up each other when struggles lay us low,
community develops; our faith and caring grow.**

**We need your living presence, O Christ of Galilee,
a presence that revives us and sets our spirits free.
No longer are we fearful, your love pervades each place.
Em-pow--er us with courage to claim your healing grace.**

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

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

At the end of the fifth season of the modern *Doctor Who* series, the heroes of the show encounter a large, black, stone box called “The Pandorica.” Legend holds that it is a prison for the most fearsome being in the universe, and—spoiler alert—that being is The Doctor himself, who ends up getting imprisoned in the box by his varying Imperial enemies, who are sick and tired of The Doctor constantly disrupting their plans for intergalactic conquest, the destruction of all life, or the forced assimilation of all living beings and the erasure of all uniqueness and diversity in the universe.

It kind of reminds me of Jesus!

It’s easy to guess that Jesus’s “Pandorica” was his tomb. That was, after all, an act of Imperial aggression in which they tried to end Jesus and shut him up in a box forever. Pilate were motivated much as The Doctor’s enemies in that regard, because Jesus was rolling around Palestine doing everything he could to free people from their social enslavement to Rome and a patriarchal world. He touched the socially untouchable; he fed the hungry who couldn’t afford food because of taxation; he flipped the tables of those who made the Temple grounds a place of commerce instead of worship; he told everyone he met that there was a power greater than Caesar who loved them; and, he promised that the poor and marginalized would inherit the earth. Because of all of these events, Rome hung him on a cross and then stuck him in the Pandorica.

The central story of our faith is how that prison got opened and Jesus walked free, risen and restored, though that’s not the Scripture reading I picked for today. Today, we read of a paralyzed man whose friends knew that Jesus was their only hope. But, figuratively speaking, Jesus was in a box—a house so surrounded by people that they couldn’t get their sick friend to the healer. So they go up on top of the house, presumably in the blazing sun, and set to with their pickaxes and shovels, chipping away at the stone beneath them until they created an opening through which they lowered their friend into the arms of love.

People today are still forced to dig their way through the box just to get to Jesus.

I have a dear friend, who, upon learning that I was a pastor, opened up about her personal faith journey, one that was marred by exclusion. Specifically, she mourned how her church wouldn’t allow any alternative form of bread to be served for the Eucharist, which rendered her, a person with celiac disease, unable to partake of the Body of Christ. It was a trauma, an act of separation where she should have known invitation. It was as if her Jesus was enclosed within a stone house, a stone prison, and the only way to get to him was to chip through the roof.

Churches like ours, where the preachers and people spend a lot of time trying to effect social and spiritual transformation by addressing social ills head-on, are often labeled “political.” We know that’s because the powers and principalities of this world have maintained their power by dividing the people, by convincing one group of folks that another group are their enemies, by distracting people through these petty and made-up conflicts so that they won’t look behind the curtain. The powerful say that churches shouldn’t take on social issues. That churches that do so are divisive and partisan. And make no mistake—that’s a message that sells. The megachurches that comprise the 100 largest churches in America don’t spend a lot of airtime on most social issues. The rhetoric in such places tends to focus on a person’s personal relationship with Jesus, and often the preaching tends to sound like a self-help sermon. That’s not to say such content doesn’t have its place! It is to say that doing so ignores just how socially active Jesus was. It sets aside how often Jesus was trying to invite people into “an experience of a community always struggling to become more caring, open, inclusive, and accepting.”

You hear it, right? That’s in our church’s mission statement. *To provide an experience of a community always struggling to become more caring, open, inclusive, and accepting.* For me, that’s the central intention of our mission; it’s the part that resonates the most with me. The folks of this church who crafted this statement understood that Jesus is doing more than just calling us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, heal the sick, welcome the stranger, and visit the prisoner. He calls us to deconstruct the systems of power that create hunger, nakedness, homelessness, illness, migration, and imprisonment. He calls us to rebuild the world into a Beloved Community where everyone’s needs are met, where mourning and crying and pain are no more because all of the “-isms” of this world have passed away.

If anyone ever challenges you about attending a church with Pride flags, a Black Lives Matter sign, a seasonal sign that reads “Blessed Ramadan to our Muslim neighbors,” that’s what you tell them. You tell them that the Kingdom of God cannot manifest so long as racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, and all of the other –isms persist. You tell them that the Church has, for almost all of its existence, actually upheld these things instead of trying to tear them down. You tell them that loving your neighbor is entirely about the struggle to become more caring, open, inclusive, and accepting!

It is a struggle! Despite my narration of our inherent diversity, we are rather homogenous in this church. We’re mostly white, straight, and economically stable. Most of us aren’t disabled. We aren’t first-generation immigrants. Most of us have probably never been incarcerated or homeless. That’s why I love the inclusion of the phrase “always struggling.” It concedes that because of our social location, because of our privilege, we will often not grasp the many ways we can be more caring, open, inclusive, and accepting until it bites us in the butt. Until someone comes along and knocks a hole in the roof so that they can get to Jesus.

But see, this struggling bit isn’t there to discourage us; it’s there to challenge us to always strive for the better way. And we do so! Let me tell you some of the ways we have, starting with my favorite one of all.

When the church added on the “saddlebag addition” to the Sanctuary, it occurred to a member of the church that the pulpit was still facing forward. The preacher would therefore not even remotely be facing the folks on the west side of the room. So, that member suggested altering the pulpit, moving the desk-part one segment to the left so that it aimed toward the middle of the congregation. Now, that might sound like a little thing, but its impact can’t be overstated.

Two summers ago when the lift pooped out on us, only then did we realize that despite our best intentions to be more caring, open, inclusive, and accepting of people with mobility needs, *it wasn't enough*. We learned the hard way that if that lift died, we had no accessibility to the Sanctuary level for folks who struggled with stairs. So, precisely because we are committed to being more inclusive, we dipped into the Vanguard fund for \$30,000 to pay for that beautiful ramp that makes it easier to both enter and exit the building.

When the pandemic reared up, we were forced to recognize that we weren't doing everything we could to bring church to people who couldn't be here in person. The model was "come on Sunday," with not nearly enough attention to the folks who couldn't. So, we finally started a livestreaming ministry, even to the level of modifying our worship space to make that ministry as efficient and effective as possible.

The pandemic also taught us about the ongoing struggles of our immunocompromised neighbors who have long had to struggle in solitude because the rest of us weren't paying attention. We've struggled to learn that lesson, and that's why we maintain a section of our sanctuary for masking and social distancing—and why we put it in a place that (hopefully) doesn't feel like putting the maskers in a corner.

Doctor Who, with that whole "Pandorica" thing, was obviously doing a play on "Pandora's Box," that container of Greek myth that contained all of the ills of the world and was subsequently opened. As a community always struggling to embody the Good News, we recognize that Jesus spent his ministry trying to stuff all of those evils back into the box—only to have the Church put Jesus in the box instead. Today, we reaffirm our church's intention to break through the roof of that box so that all who are marginalized might know the healing love of Jesus. We reaffirm our mission to always struggle to live into the Way of Christ, one that was so dangerous to the powers of the world that they tried to shut it away forever. We reaffirm our conviction that on the third day, God rolled the stone away and let Jesus out of that box so that he could continue his work of transforming the world into a more caring, open, inclusive, and accepting home for all of God's children.

Let it be so! Amen.

◆ **First Congregational Church UCC, Anoka, MN** ◆

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Director of Health Ministries – Jessie Waks, NP

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Moderator – Terja Larsen

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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.