



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

October 15, 2023 ♦ 20th Sunday after Pentecost



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

Prelude

Koki Sato

The Church Bell Rings

* Opening Hymn

“Rejoice, You Pure in Heart” #55

**Rejoice, you pure in heart; lift praises to the sky;
your festal banner wave with joy, the cross of Christ raise high!
Rejoice (*rejoice*), rejoice (*rejoice*), rejoice, give thanks and sing.**

**Bright youth and seasoned age, strong souls and spirits meek,
raise high your free, exulting song, God’s wondrous praises speak.
Rejoice (*rejoice*), rejoice (*rejoice*), rejoice, give thanks and sing.**

**With voice as full and strong as ocean’s surging praise,
send forth the hymns the saints have loved, the psalms of ancient days.
Rejoice (*rejoice*), rejoice (*rejoice*), rejoice, give thanks and sing.**

**Yes, on through life’s long path, still chanting as you go,
from youth to age, by night and day, in gladness and in woe;
Rejoice (*rejoice*), rejoice (*rejoice*), rejoice, give thanks and sing.**

**Praise God who rules all worlds, the risen Christ adore,
praise God the Spirit, Holy Fire, one God forevermore!
Rejoice (*rejoice*), rejoice (*rejoice*), rejoice, give thanks and sing.**

* Call to Worship and Opening Prayer

One: Does not Wisdom call, and Understanding put forth her voice?

Many: On the highest heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand.

One: Beside the gates at the entry of the town, at the opening of the entryway she sings out:

Many: “To you, humans, I call, and my cry is to all earth’s children.”

One: “Take my instruction and not silver, and knowledge but not gold.”

Many: “For Wisdom is better than jewels; no delight can compare with her.”

One: Let us pray.

Many: Holy Wisdom, grant us your gifts, that we may hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church and to us each and every day. Help us to discern between wisdom and foolishness. Steer us away from articles of faith that diminish the majesty of heaven and harm the Creation. Remind us always that you long to be in relationship with us, working through that mutual love to continue the ongoing work of creating and loving a new world into being. 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.

Choir Anthem

“Let the Whole Creation Cry”

Robert Leaf

Anoka UCC Chancel Choir; Don Shier, Director

*Let the whole creation cry: ‘Glory to the Lord on high!’
Heaven and earth awake and sing, God is good and therefore King!*

*Praise God, all ye hosts above, ever bright and fair in love;
sun and moon uplift your voice, night and stars, in God rejoice!
All God's children, young and old, raise the anthem manifold,
and let children's happy hearts in this worship bear their parts.*

Scripture Reading - Matthew 13:54-58

He came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? ⁵⁵ Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? ⁵⁶ And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?" ⁵⁷ And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house." ⁵⁸ And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

"For the Healing of the Nations" #576

**For the healing of the nations, God, we pray with one accord;
for a just and equal sharing of the things that earth affords;
to a life of love in action help us rise and pledge our word.**

**Lead us forward into freedom; from despair your world release,
that, redeemed from war and hatred, all may come and go in peace.
Show us how through care and goodness fear will die and hope increase.**

**All that kills abundant living, let it from the earth be banned;
pride of status, race, or schooling, dogmas that obscure your plan.
In our common quest for justice may we hallow life's brief span.
You, Creator God, have written your great name on humankind;
for our growing in your likeness bring the life of Christ to mind,
that by our response and service earth its destiny may find.**

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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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

Sermon Text

Thankfully, it seems that the tide has shifted, and a lot of folks have come to understand that climate change is, in fact, a human-exacerbated reality, in no small part due to our failure to wean ourselves from fossil fuels. But do you remember that time, not all that long ago, when climate change deniers would loudly and publicly proclaim that God was in control and that God would fix climate change—IF climate change were a real thing? Perhaps it hasn’t shifted as much as I’d hope, given that the governor of West Virginia said last year that God will “give us time” to fix it—again, IF it’s actually a problem.

It does bring to mind that old aphorism about the man who prays to be saved from a flood, a story that probably every pastor gets around to repeating from the pulpit. You know how it goes. A devout Christian is sitting atop their roof while the floodwaters rage. They pray for deliverance. So, here comes a boat, offering to take the man away. “No, God’s got me.” Then a helicopter comes. “No, God’s got me.” Finally, the man drowns, and in Heaven he asks, “Where were you, God?” and God replies with an epic eyeroll, “In the boat and in the helicopter, beloved.”

Now that I’ve used the story, I confess I don’t much like it. It makes a caricature of folks who believe in the power of God to perform miracles, and while I have my own beliefs about that kind of thing, belittling those who do certainly isn’t going to help build up the Body of Christ. Nonetheless, it’s worth unpacking the implicit claim made in the story—that God has the power to simply make something happen. To make it all better. To magically, miraculously, transform the world from something worse into something better. But is that Biblical?

I’m endlessly fascinated by the tiny story told in today’s Scripture lesson. Jesus makes a stop in Nazareth, his hometown, and he provides pulpit supply at the synagogue. Context implies that he also performed a few miracles. The locals are astounded. They knew him when he was just a child, running through the streets. He probably gave his mom lip. Maybe he taunted the Roman soldiers, much to his parents’ fear and consternation. So all these folks hear him preaching, and more to the point doing deeds of power, and they can hardly believe it. How could *Jesus* be a holy man? How could he have such divine insight and power? He was just that kid who left skid marks in the neighbors’ driveway with his bike! Don’t you remember that time he teepeed the synagogue right before the mayor of Tiberias came to visit?

The author says, “And they took offense at him.” I get that. On some level, those Nazarenes sensed the authority with which Jesus spoke. Or at least, they couldn’t find anything wrong with his arguments and exhortations, and it struck a discordant note in them. How dare little Jesus come and make them feel guilty! He didn’t know his place, that boy. He wasn’t showing respect to his elders. He had risen too far above his station. Indeed, the prophet knew no honor in his hometown.

There’s more going on here, because to me, that last verse sticks out like a sore thumb. “And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.” But this is Jesus, right? How could there be limits upon his power? That’s what it sounds like. It sounds like he *couldn’t* do many deeds of

power there, because of their unbelief. *Because*. The unbelief of the Nazarenes in some way impeded his abilities. It gummed up the works. It clogged the line. It plugged the holy conduit to heaven through which Jesus channeled power. Maybe that sounds heretical, yeah? That mere humans could do such a thing? That they could put boundaries on what Jesus and God were able to do?

Only if you haven't read the rest of the Bible!

When Jesus meets the Syrophenician woman, it is only after she demonstrates her faith that he heals her child. Is it possible that he couldn't before that?

This one is clearer. Remember the woman who couldn't stop bleeding, who expended her life savings on doctors who were unable to cure her? She pushed through the crowd, thinking to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." It works, but then Jesus explains: "Take heart, daughter; your *faith* has made you well" (emphasis mine).

When Jesus approaches the disciples out on the Sea of Galilee, Peter says, "Hey—command me to walk out to you on the water." I don't think he'd ask that if he didn't have faith it could be so! But when he's partway there, the wind rises up and he grows afraid. Until then the miracle is happening, but then Peter lets fear and doubt encroach. The artery bringing him power constricts, and he starts to sink. To drive the point home, Jesus says, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

The Gospels suggest quite convincingly that there are limits to what Jesus—and God—can do with an unwilling people. More to the point, they suggest that the power of Jesus to heal what is broken *requires a conduit*. It requires our active participation. That means that the loving, mighty power of God is ultimately *relational*. It requires relationship if it is to flow powerfully and properly.

There's a school of theological thought called "process theology" that I particularly like. One of its tenets is that we are "co-creators" with God. Another is that God doesn't really work by dictating how things are going to be, but by persuading the creation to go along with God's plans. I love that. I love the idea of a God who *isn't* Omnipotent, and not just because that means you have to twist yourself into a pretzel to explain the existence of evil. I love it because a God whose influence manifests most powerfully through the relationship created by faith is a God who comes to meet us where we are. Who is deeply invested in knowing us fully. Who cares about what we want, about our choices, about our agency. A God like that is no autocrat. No authoritarian. No dictator.

Honestly, I'd love to ask any Christian who believes otherwise how they understand that evening when Jesus washed the feet of his friends. It's not really a miracle so much as a humble act of service. But even that requires the consent of the served. Even that can't happen unless the disciples understand that they're part of the equation. That's part of the lesson.

That's what I think the Nazareth story is really pressing us to consider. The folks who knew Jesus all along couldn't suspend their disbelief about him. They couldn't let go of their learned attitudes and embrace what was happening. And because Jesus's power here is relational, and because he lacked the peoples' consent, he could do no significant acts of power there.

I know that a lot of folks really want to believe that everything happens for a reason. They want to feel like God's got this; that the bad things happening to them will be fixed by God, or otherwise that God has some mysterious plan that they can trust in. And that's fine; I know all kinds of wonderful people with faith like that. My faith is bolstered by my conviction that God is constantly inviting us to be partners in the ongoing work of grace. My faith is undergirded by the belief that the Holy Spirit activates within each of us gifts that make us better co-creators. My heart is warmed at the notion that the power to heal the world is already there, just beyond our fingertips, and that it will flow like living water from the rock if we have the faith to unlock it.

So many of us are praying for peace in Gaza and Israel right now, and rightly so. But are we praying for God to come riding in and make an end of violence? To free the captives and let the prisoners go home? How many social-media affirmations of "Praying for Israel" hope for such an outcome? Jesus is

always reminding us that we're part of the solution. We must have faith to let the power flow. And what would faith look like in this instance? Perhaps it would be faith that the Palestinians and Israelis aren't locked into an unchangeable dynamic. Perhaps it is faith to know that if the checkpoints were withdrawn, if food were shared, if hospitals were built and rebuilt, then that little sliver of land would truly be a land of Promise. If we applied that all over the world? It would be Paradise. Regained.

May it be so. Amen.

Acknowledgements

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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.