



# First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

*An Open and Affirming Congregation*

Date ♦ Day of Church Year (Optional)



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

*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](mailto:office@uccanoka.org) and ask to be added.*

Prelude

Koki Sato

The Church Bell Rings

\* Opening Hymn

“For the Beauty of the Earth” #28

**For the beauty of the earth, for the splendor of the skies,  
for the love which from our birth over and around us lies,  
God of all, to you we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.**

**For the wonder of each hour of the day and of the night,  
hill and vale, and tree and flower, sun and moon, and stars of light,  
God of all, to you we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.**

**For the joy of human love, brother, sister, parent, child,  
friends on earth, and friends above, for all gentle thoughts and mild,  
God of all, to you we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.**

**For the good that love inspires, for a world where none exclude,  
for a faith that never tires, and for every heart renewed,  
God of all, to you we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.**

\* Call to Worship and Opening Prayer (drawn in part from Isaiah 43)

One: The Holy One says, “Do not fear, O people, for I have called you by name, and you are mine.”

Many: “When you pass through the turbid waters, I will be with you; they shall not overwhelm you.”

One: "For I am the LORD your God, the one who saves. Because you are precious in my sight, I love you."

Many: "Do not fear, for I am with you. I have created everyone for my glory, and you are glorious!"

One: Let us pray.

Many: Never let us forget, O God, that we are blessed! We are more precious than gold! We sparkle with the starlight of your creation, with the glittering substance of the stars. You made us and called us good; it is we who called us sinners in the hands of an angry God. But you are Love! You are Grace! You are wild, unapologetic celebration! Help us to absorb that truth in our innermost being, that our lips might ring forth with the beauty of your affirming song. Hallelujah! 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.*

### 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

### "My Savior"

Price/Besig

*Anoka UCC Chancel Choir; Don Shier, Director*

*As a shepherd tends the sheep in a quiet meadow,  
so my savior watches me and cares for me each day.  
As a captain sails the sea through the storms and shadows,  
so my savior stays with me and keeps me unafraid.*

*When I fall, God takes my hand and helps me to start again.  
When I call, God understands; my Savior is my friend.  
As a parent calms the fear when there's pain and sorrow,  
so my Savior comforts me and helps me to find my way.  
God is my Savior, beautiful Savior, source of all hope and abiding faith.  
Truly I love God, proudly I serve God, redeemed forever by God's grace.  
As a cool and gentle breeze brings a fresh new dawning,  
so my Savior touches me and fills my heart with hope.  
As the sun breaks through the trees on a bright new morning,  
so my Savior shines on me and helps my faith grow!*

*(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 – 1 Timothy 1:12-17

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, <sup>13</sup> even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, <sup>14</sup> and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the foremost. <sup>16</sup> But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. <sup>17</sup> To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

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

**Many: Thanks be to God.**

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

“I Sing the Mighty Power of God” #12

**I sing the mighty power of God that made the mountains rise,  
that spread the flowing seas abroad, and built the lofty skies.  
I sing the wisdom that ordained the sun to rule the day;  
the moon shines full at God's command, and all the stars obey.**

**I sing the goodness of our God that filled the earth with food;  
God formed the creatures with a word and then pronounced them good.**

**Oh, how your wonders are displayed, where'er I turn my eye:  
if I survey the ground I tread or gaze upon the sky!**

**On earth there's not a plant or flower but makes your glory known.  
The clouds arise and spread their showers by order from your throne.  
All life is but a gift from you and ever in your care;  
wherever people gather, you, O God, are present there.**

**We Are Sparkly Unicorns!**

*This simple liturgy is designed to affirm the glorious beauty of all created things, including humans.*

*You will be invited to come forward and receive a visible mark  
that will symbolize that we are all more precious than gold.*

*It is "cosmetic grade glitter" in a gel suspension; the gel should dry in a few minutes.*

*It is easily washable with face wipes, makeup remover, or simply soap and water.*

**One:** The Scriptures say, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." Yet that affirmation comes as part of a curse.

**Many: I am not a curse!**

**One:** The Scriptures also say, "God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good."

**Many: Indeed, I am very good!**

**One:** The Scriptures say that God, who clothes the grass of the field with the richest green and the lilies of the field in the most brilliant white, will clothe us as richly and brilliantly.

**Many: I am more precious to God than the finest gold!**

**One:** I am precious in God's sight.

**Many: I am precious! I am lovable! I am loved!**

**Interlude**

**Koki Sato**

*Please bring your Offering with you as you come forward to receive the glitter of blessing.*

*The plates will be available to you at the end of the service as well.*

**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 9WKLGX8TRZCN.*

“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!**

\* 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.**

Sermon Text

I don't like to preach from the Pastoral Epistles, otherwise known as 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus. Partly that's because they're almost certainly not written by Paul, but since they are attributed to Paul it muddies how "Paul" talks about women. That's because these Epistles are the place where women are told they can't speak in church, they should defer to male authority, and so on. In the seven letters of Paul that are almost certainly written by him, we find Paul writing to women who are leading churches, something that very much coheres with the Gospel testimony that women were bankrolling Jesus and leaders in his movement.

What Paul and fake-Paul both have is this focus on sin that, let's be real, doesn't seem all that helpful in the evangelism department. In fact, I've always been befuddled at how often it shows up in promotional materials for a certain, large, subset of churches. Just this week, I found a promotional postcard in my yard for an area church, and it features a four-point sales pitch. Number one: "Sin separates us from God," noting Paul's teaching "for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Number two: "Christ died to pay for our sins," supported by "Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). Number three, "Salvation is a free gift," which sounds good, but the Romans reference is, "For the wages of sin is death" (6:23). And number four, "We must accept his forgiveness." MUST. Not very invitational, yeah?

I get it. The world's a messy place, and humans make it messier. We do the things we know are wrong, and sometimes we can't even stop ourselves. War. Murder. Hate. That Islamophobic slaying of Wade Al Fayoume, a six-year-old Palestinian-American boy. Hostages in Gaza. Dysfunctional government. Homophobia. Children being used as pawns in electoral politics. It's all terrible. Do we really need to make it worse with theologies that only enflame this habit of self-flagellation? That insist upon the doctrinal correctness of Original Sin?

That's a choice, you know. Original Sin. It's rooted in the older creation story with Eve and Adam and their consumption of the forbidden fruit. It's frustrating, because we could so easily understand the story as a mythological exploration of the questions, "Why is childbirth so painful" and "Why is farming so back-breaking?" But instead, much of the church looks at it as a theological claim that humans are so lost and broken that only God can make it right. It only makes it worse that a contributing factor to the development of this doctrine was Augustine's confusion about his own sexual urges and why he couldn't seem to control them. (True story!)

As I said, it's a choice, one made too often. For instance, the annual Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols of King's College, Cambridge, in England is grounded in Original Sin. The whole sequence begins with this header: "God tells sinful Adam that he has lost the life of Paradise and that his seed will bruise the serpent's head." It ends with the tacit affirmation that Jesus came to undo that sin, and while that's happy news in this context, that context is still Original Sin. Other pastoral leaders have acknowledged instead that we can root our celebration in Original Blessing (Genesis 1:31): "God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good."

You'd think Original Blessing would be a better evangelistic approach than Original Sin, yeah? In a world filled with anguish, does it make sense to say, "We're all awful, so you should come to church"? Or might it be better to lead with, "In a world that so often tells us we're not, be assured that to God, you are more precious than gold"?

Because you are. Each of you is more precious than gold. More precious than the finest rubies. In fact, maybe it's like diamonds, which start out as messy, gloppy, eroding carbon-based remains. But when the world subjects them to intense pressure, they just get more and more beautiful, as if it were a reminder that the essence of every created thing is beauty, the beauty that God alone sees so clearly.

God loves you! God gave you free will, and an unlimited love that invites us to use that free will to make choices that will heal the world and make us whole. And God's love isn't conditional. Why must God's forgiveness be conditional? Don't the Scriptures say, "For God so loved the world?" Don't the Scriptures say that the Creation is good? Didn't Jesus go rolling around Palestine telling people who were hated by the world that he loved them, that God loved them, that they were clothed just as beautifully by God as are the lilies of the field?

Real talk, friends. Y'all are already sparkly unicorns even without the Unicorn Snot. You already glittered in your mother's womb. And you all here at this church aren't afraid to let that glitter sparkle under the light of sun and moon. You all know that Jesus calls us to do all the things. Feed the hungry, house the homeless, heal the sick, and so on. That's of critical importance. Equally important is to show forth the love of God to all people, all creation. The talking is as important as the walking (and in fact they totally run together). You do that, too, with your unabashed, brave, intentional efforts to tell those who have been told otherwise that they are, in fact, beautiful in the eyes of God. Some pessimistically dismiss that as "identity politics," but you know better. You know that when someone who is queer is being told they are aberrant in the eyes of God, that it's their core identity that is being attacked. Undermined. Traumatized. You know that it's necessary to speak words of love against such rhetoric, promising people that they are whole, beautiful, beloved, worthy, and a delight to God and to their neighbors at 3<sup>rd</sup> and Main.

Real-er talk. I sometimes tell my friends that I feel spoiled. Lucky. Gobsmacked. Against the tide of congregation-blaming blog posts by former pastors, I constantly want to say, "Not all churches are toxic!" Having served a church that freaked out a little bit when the local newspaper said on the front page that I was ready to perform same-sex marriages, I am grateful to serve a church that is fearless in its outward love to the marginalized. Sure, it comes with pushback. How couldn't it? Even Jesus had pushback because he spoke loving words that contradicted the wisdom of his day. That's not to compare ourselves to Jesus, but it does remind us that spreading Love always carries risk. Maybe that's why the sparkly unicorn is such a good metaphor: we sparkle as we witness to the Good News, but we also recognize that the unicorn is fierce defender of all who are in need, a creature of good who honors the celestial beauty in each of us.

Real-est talk. I have a feeling that my unfiltered storytelling about conversations with my home church and the fact that I've now been here seven years has made some of you anxious. Just this week, someone said to me, "I know that when pastors have been at a church as long as you've been here, they start thinking about leaving."

Well, dismiss that thought RIGHT NOW. You are more precious than gold to me, too, and I'm tied to the saddle on this sparkly unicorn. I am so grateful and humbled that the Spirit led us to each other. That we can boldly speak the Good News in ways so many churches can't or won't. That we can come together in mutual support and care when that road gets rocky. That when my public witness draws scorn, you all will sally forth and form a hedge of protection not just around me, but around those I am trying to support.

Today marks the completion my seventh year with you all and the beginning of the eighth. I am thankful to you for the call that is reaffirmed every week. Thank you for the support for my public ministry, my private life, my health, and my wholeness. Thank you for hanging tough together in the midst of a pandemic! Thank you for your love of grace-talk and your disgruntlement with sin-talk. Thank you for loving the little children and letting them run. Thank you for your love of music and your willingness to put your money where your love is. Thank you for building an embarrassingly large office for your pastor, and thank you for enjoying how I fill that space with toys.

At the end of seven years of ministry with you, I am reminded that seven is a deeply symbolic Biblical number that connotes "completeness." But before you read too much into that, remember this, too: so is 40.

## 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.*