



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

September 24, 2023 ♦ 17th 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

“Great Is Your Faithfulness” #423

**Great is your faithfulness, O God, Creator,
with you no shadow of turning we see.
You do not change, your compassions they fail not;
all of your goodness forever will be. [refrain]**

**[refrain] Great is your faithfulness! Great is your faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
all I have needed your hand has provided,
great is your faithfulness, God, unto me!**

**Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
sun, moon, and stars in their courses above,
join with all nature in manifold witness
to your great faithfulness, mercy, and love. [refrain]**

**Pardon for sin and a peace so enduring,
your own dear presence to cheer and to guide.
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
blessings all mine with ten thousand beside. [refrain]**

* Call to Worship and Opening Prayer

The Call is Matthew's Beatitudes, as rendered by Dr. Wil Gafney.

One: Blessed are the poor in spirit,

Many: For theirs is the majesty of the heavens.

One: Blessed are those who mourn,

Many: for they will be comforted.

One: Blessed are the meek,

Many: for they will inherit the earth.

One: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,

Many: for they will be filled.

One: Blessed are the merciful,

Many: for they will receive mercy.

One: Blessed are the pure in heart,

Many: for they will see God.

One: Blessed are the peacemakers,

Many: for they will be called children of God.

One: Let us pray.

Many: Holy One, give us the courage to envision a world—and an afterworld—where love is not built on a system of merits and demerits, but one where your eternally steadfast love overwhelms all of our mortal thoughts and demands about heaven. Show us the grace that can come when we subtract rewards from the afterlife, and instead see it as a place of ultimate reconciliation and transformation, especially for those whose deaths we celebrate instead of mourn. In the name of Jesus we pray; 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 sacred waters of my birth
to the sacred waters of this hour,
I have leaned upon you who knit me in my mother's womb.
O pour out your Spirit now.**

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

“Praise the Lord” from *Judas Maccabeus*
Anoka UCC Chancel Choir; Don Shier, Director

G.F. Handel

Praise the Lord. Let songs of joy break forth. Sing alleluia. Praise God's name forevermore. Shout, sing and dance, come dance and celebrate. Rejoice; let all within us praise God's name.

Shout, sing, let songs of joy break forth. Praise the Lord, O praise God.

Sing alleluia. Praise God's name forevermore. Sing for joy. Rejoice. O praise God's name forevermore.

*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 – 2 Samuel 1:17-27

David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan. ¹⁸ (He ordered that The Song of the Bow be taught to the people of Judah; it is written in the Book of Jashar.) He said: ¹⁹ Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen! ²⁰ Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon; or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice, the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult. ²¹ You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields! For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more. ²² From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan did not turn back, nor the sword of Saul return empty. ²³ Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. ²⁴ O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you with crimson, in luxury, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel. ²⁵ How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan

lies slain upon your high places. ²⁶ I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. ²⁷ How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

“Immortal Love, Forever Full” #166 (vv. 1-4)

**Immortal Love, forever full, forever flowing free,
forever shared, forever whole, a never-ebbing sea!**

**Our outward lips confess the Name all others names above;
Love only knows from where it came and comprehends God’s love.**

**We may not climb the heavenly steps to bring the sovereign down;
in vain we search the lowest deeps for One no depths can drown.**

**But warm, sweet, tender, even yet this One our help will be;
for faith has still its Olivet, and love its Galilee.**

Acts of Prayer

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 gWKLGX8TRZCN.

Interlude

Koki Sato

Prayers of the People

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

COFFEE HOUR IS SERVED BETWEEN SERVICES.

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

Perhaps you don’t know this, but I’m personally disinclined to dust off old sermons and preach them again. Each one is the product of a unique moment in time, an intersection between me, current events, the congregation I served at the time, and the Holy Spirit. I consider each preaching moment to be an opportunity to discern anew what the Spirit is speaking to me, that I might preach the Good News the best I can in that moment. That being said, I do want to dust off a passage from a sermon I gave on May 15, 2011.

... when I heard that Osama Bin Laden had been killed, my dominant emotion was not joy or jubilation. It wasn’t the sense of revenge achieved. It wasn’t even relief—well maybe a little of that, in that I’m relieved that we can stop hunting him. What I felt was regret. I felt regret that we, as a nation, saw fit to respond to Bin Laden’s violence with violence of our own. I feel regret that I have even had to use the word “hunt”, with Bin Laden as our prey and us holding the guns. I feel compassion for the families who lost loved ones on 9/11, and I pray that this might bring them some sense of closure, but I regret that it had to come to this. More than anything else, though, I regret that so many of our sisters and brothers—perhaps even some of us here—chose to respond to Bin Laden’s death with cries of victory. I discovered a list on TIME magazine’s web site that named some of the best headlines to

come out the next day. Some were fairly straightforward, but three in particular left me feeling ill. One shouted, “Rot in Hell!” Another simply posted the word “DEAD” in all capital letters. A third published, “Got Him! Vengeance at last! US nails the bastard!”

Immediately prior to preaching that paragraph, I said, “I’ve been feeling tugged at by the Spirit to speak out in a way that could cause me to suffer some scorn,” and sure enough, two people got up and walked out of that sermon because they thought I was being unpatriotic. But see, the Church isn’t the right locale for overt patriotism; it’s a place to encounter the Gospel, one that Jesus was adamant had to do with the Kingdom of God and no earthly kingdom.

In Jesus’s time, that was a hard pill to swallow, and it still is today. We can see that in the public response to Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s sermon right after September 11, 2001, when he said, “America’s chickens have come home to roost.” He wasn’t being unpatriotic; in fact, I’d argue he was doing quite the opposite. Out of his love of country, he was proclaiming that American foreign policy contributed to the circumstances of that horrible day. It’s just that not everyone was inclined to hear that powerful word.

Would Jesus be lampooned in the press today if he appeared again, exhorting us to love our enemies? “Love” in that sense certainly doesn’t mean “be on their side” or “give aid to the enemy,” but it surely means that we do what must be done without dancing upon the graves of the enemy. David gives us a telling example of what this looks like when done right—or *almost* right.

In 1 Samuel 18, right after David slays Goliath, we find out that Saul has immediately turned against David, whom he perceives as a threat to his rule. Just one chapter later, David learns from Saul’s children Jonathan and Michal that Saul has it in for him. In fact, we read, “... as Saul sat in his house with his spear in his hand, while David was playing music... Saul sought to pin David to the wall with the spear; but he eluded Saul, so that he struck the spear into the wall. David fled and escaped that night.” It wouldn’t be the first assassination attempt.

Flash forward to 2 Samuel 1, and we learn that Saul and Jonathan have died in battle. Immediately upon hearing this tragic news, David offers lamentation. Now, surely we could forgive him if he only mourned Jonathan, who was David’s best friend in the entire world, and possibly, depending on how you interpret the story, David’s boyfriend. But no—David also intones his lament for Saul, the man who tried to kill him on several occasions. The man who offered up his daughters to David in marriage and then gave them to other men. The man whose enmity forced David to flee to Philistia and work as a mercenary for a foreign king.

To be fair, David mourns Saul because just like David, Saul was God’s anointed ruler. That the relationship went south matters less than that. Nonetheless, Saul was still David’s sworn enemy, and David laments his death. He mourns for the enemy.

Isn’t this, too, what Jesus means when he says we should love our enemies? That despite whatever evils they committed that God still loved them, too? It’s an article of our faith, after all, that God loves each of us. “For God so loved the world,” right (John 3:16)? Not, “For God loved only the people in the world whose names are written in the book of life, and everyone else will be thrown into the lake of fire.” Oh wait—that IS in Revelation.

But that just means we have a choice, as we always do.

Do we find authority in the passages of true love and grace, or the ones of either-or, “the only good enemy is a dead enemy”?

Perhaps we might remember that Jesus forgave Judas.

Perhaps we might remember that, on the cross, dying, Jesus said (Luke 23:24), “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

Perhaps we might realize that at the very center of the Easter story is God, NOT responding to the death of Jesus with violence against the Romans, but instead just bringing Jesus back to life.

It’s one of the hardest things, yeah? The wisdom of the world is so often rooted in a retributory model of justice that sees righteousness in delivering upon an evildoer the evil they perpetrated against another. We imprison and imprison and imprison some more. We kill the killers. We leave off the names of mass murderers who don’t survive their onslaughts, because we don’t think they deserve love anymore. We cry out, “We got the bastard!” when the most hated are defeated.

Shouldn’t we be weeping, or at least feeling a twinge of remorse? Isn’t the death of every single one of us a wound in the heart of God? That’s where David didn’t go far enough. He might have mourned Saul, but he celebrated the deaths of the Philistines whenever and wherever he could. It’s part of the reason the Psalms are such a depressing read; many of them are celebrations of the death of enemies, or petitions to God to slaughter the Psalmist’s enemies. Fun stuff, I tell ya.

I think that at the foundation of a lot of this, at least from the Christian perspective, lie all of our assumptions about heaven. It’s for the good folks, right? The righteous? The ones who truly loved their enemies? Who fed the hungry, housed the homeless, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, and visited the prisoners? Surely that doesn’t mean Stalin, right? Yevgeny Prigozhin? Jeffrey Epstein? *Hitler*?

I was recently chatting with a friend who holds a postmillennial worldview—think the rapture, saving the righteous, and all that stuff. They asked me what I thought about heaven and hell, and I honestly said that I thought everyone went to heaven, whatever that looks like. With some shock on her face, they said, “Even Hitler?”

“Yep,” I said. And then, “Especially if we think of heaven not as a reward for good behavior but as an eternal resting in the love of God.”

We can mourn the death of the enemy without condoning their behavior on earth. And if we mourn them, if we truly mourn them and love them as Jesus bids us, then how can we not hope that they will know the grace in death that they offered so few in life? How can we ask God to forgive us OUR sins, but not also the sins of those who sin against us? Why would we not want whatever comes next to be a place where God’s holy realm is fully manifest and we *all* learn what love really looks like? For that is why we sing these words:

Immortal Love, forever full, forever flowing free.

Forever shared, forever whole, a never-ebbing sea.

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.