



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

August 27, 2023 ♦ 13th 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

If you would like to join our mailing list, email office@uccanoka.org and ask to be added.

Prelude

Gideon Scheeler

The Church Bell Rings

* Opening Hymn

“Beautiful Jesus” #44

**Beautiful Jesus, head of all creation,
God and the blessed Mary’s child:
I want to love you, praise and adore you,
joy of my soul, so long desired.**

**Beautiful springtime, lovely, green, and hopeful,
all earth exhales its sweet perfume:
Jesus is sweeter, Jesus is purer,
sad hearts at this, rejoice and bloom.**

**Beautiful sunshine, clear, so lovely, moonlight,
stars shine like angels, ranked through space:
Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines clearer,
in perfect beauty, love, and grace.**

**All earthly beauty, all celestial radiance
fade when compared to Jesus’s face.
Let me not cherish beauties that perish;
let me this lovely good embrace.**

* Call to Worship and Opening Prayer (drawn in part from Psalm 62)

One: For God alone my soul waits in silence;

Many: from God comes my salvation.

One: The Holy One is my rock and my saving fortress;

Many: I shall never be shaken!

One: For the Mother of All my soul waits in silence,

Many: for my hope rests with her.

One: Trust the Fire of Sinai at all times, O people; pour out your heart before her.

Many: God is our refuge and safe harbor!

One: Power belongs to God,

Many: and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.

One: Let us pray.

Many: Holy One, so many say that they alone know your will, that they alone know your intentions. Too often we hear leveled the charge of, "False Prophet!" Remind us always that where there is kindness, justice, and love the words of prophecy come from you. Warn us that where there is cruelty, discrimination, and hate, those words cannot be the Gospel. More than anything, give us a spirit of fierce gentleness, that we may focus not on earthly quarrels, but on your steadfast 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

"My Savior"

Price/Besig

Linda Theisen, Soloist, and **Congregation**

(Please join in for the bold text, using the traditional tune to "Beautiful Jesus")

*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!*

Scripture Reading – Matthew 7:15-19

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

We Welcome New Members

Invitation

One: We invite to come forward those who wish to unite with us in the ongoing worship of our Still Speaking God.

Introductions

Affirmation

One: The church is a community of people with varied gifts, united by Holy Spirit. We gather to celebrate God's presence, to discern God's truths, and to follow the way of Jesus. And so we ask you, those who seek

membership in this congregation: as we covenant with God and each other...

One: will you join with us to affirm the uniqueness of every kind of individual person with diverse, compatible, and conflicting characteristics?

Candidates: We will, with God's help.

One: will you join with us to work at accepting and fully encountering the nature of our individual humanness?

Candidates: We will, with God's help.

One: will you join with us to provide an experience of a community always struggling to become more caring, open, inclusive, affirming, and celebratory?

Candidates: We will, with God's help.

One: will you join with us to expose and examine our individuality and community in the light of the truth of Jesus and the Christian approach of redemptive love?

Candidates: We will, with God's help.

Congregational Promise

One: Beloved, let us pledge to these persons our support and care.

Congregation: As your companions along the Way of Christ, we rejoice in the gifts you bring to us. We pledge to you our love and support. With God's help, we will together live out the mission and ministry of Christ's Church.

Prayer of Our Savior

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.

Welcome and Gift-Giving

One: In the name of Jesus Christ, we welcome you to the privileges and responsibilities of membership in this congregation. We give thanks to God for your witness among us.

The congregation may express welcome through applause while gifts of welcome are presented to the church's newest members.

Hymn

“God, We Join in Celebration”

This hymn, by Rev. Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, was commissioned for the 275th anniversary of the Neshaminy-Warwick Presbyterian Church.

May these words speak to us today as we grow in ministry and love together with new members!

Tune: HYMN TO JOY #4 (“Joyful, Joyful”). Light adaptations by CGM.

**God, we join in celebration of your love and faithfulness:
long ago where rivers meet our church was formed to love and bless.
Long ago, your people worshiped, shared the gospel, served you well,
celebrated grace and friendship, then went out, your love to tell.**

**What a faith-filled, rich tradition we are blest, O Christ, to know.
Guided by your lovingkindness, many helped our church to grow.
Called by you to love their neighbors, thousands served you here with grace.
Thank you for their loving labors that have brought us to this place.**

**Grateful for the past you've given, now we look in hope to you.
Make us salt, and light, and leaven, working for a world that's new.
By your Spirit, lead and guide us as your loving family,
teach us, shape us, walk beside us! Bless our mutual ministry!**

Offering

Text-to-Give: [844-334-1477](tel: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

Gideon Scheeler

* Doxology

LASST UNS ERFREUEN (#17)

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow.
Praise God, all creatures here below. Alleluia! Alleluia!
Praise God for all that love has done; Creator, Christ, and Spirit, One.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!**

* 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

Gideon Scheeler

*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 AFTER WORSHIP!

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

It’s probably not a good idea to go around calling people “false prophets.” Accusing someone of leading others astray, usually based on some code of ethics or theology that the accuser holds dear, isn’t comfortable, it isn’t fun, and it’s definitely messy humanity at its messiest.

This week, a clergy friend shared a post from another pastor. That pastor had posted a graphic that was two images under the heading, “Brainwashing is brainwashing.” The first image is a black-and-white photo of German children, leaning out of a train-car window, waving Nazi flags. The second image is a photo of a group of elementary school-aged children, in their classroom, holding up homemade progress pride flags.

Let’s be clear: the meme is destructive, and rather than false prophecy, it engages in false equivalency. There are no points of contact between children being taught to hate all the things Nazis hate and children being taught to love their LGBTQ+ neighbors. For sure, the original meme-sharer thinks that’s so. He believes, however erroneously, that queer folks are acting against the will of God. He refuses to acknowledge the biological reality of queer folks—that they’re born the way they’re born, and that humanity enjoys diverse genders and sexualities. But there’s so much more to this false equivalence.

Nazis imprisoned and/or killed those who deviated from the so-called Aryan master race of white, straight, Europeans. Jews, queer people, Catholics, Romani, and more were sent to the gas chambers. Our LGBTQ+ neighbors and their allies are actively working to AVOID gas chambers, figurative or not. Queer kids die in greater numbers than their straight neighbors. They’re bullied, abused, and marginalized in workplace, church, and home. Teaching kids to fly the progress pride flag is about teaching children that love knows no limits. It’s *saving* lives, when the original pastor’s meme is endangering them. If I were prone to labeling folks as false prophets, this guy would be an easy target.

Though the truth must be spoken in love, doing so by calling folks false prophets only adds to the suffering in the world. It's certainly not how we love our neighbors, especially the ones we detest. So the question bears asking: how do we love our neighbors who say and do things that bring harm to the already-marginalized? What does love look like in that context?

It may well be that Judas wasn't a bad guy, despite the efforts of the author of John to discredit him. John alleges that Judas didn't care about the poor, but was in fact a thief who kept the common purse and would steal from it (John 12:6). But if there's any historical truth to Judas's story, it may lie in his name "Iscariot," which means "dagger." It might be that Judas was a revolutionary, someone who was committed to the violent ejection of Rome from Palestine. When Jesus comes along, saying these countercultural and shocking things about Rome and Caesar, Judas may well have thought, "This is the guy who's going to lead us to freedom!" Perhaps he was a freedom fighter who believed deeply that Israel was awaiting a Messiah who would lead them in armed rebellion. But when Jesus proved to not be that person, and in fact Jesus's rhetoric seemed to be advocating for NOT kicking the Romans out, Judas took matters into his own hands.

The Gospels suggest that Jesus knew what was in Judas's heart. No doubt if the story went as I have described, he could have seen that Judas was unhappy. Prone to outbursts. Maybe he routinely got into arguments with Jesus and the other disciples about their misplaced priorities and doomed-to-fail strategies. Maybe Jesus didn't know exactly how Judas was going to commit betrayal, but he could sense it coming. The body language had been clear for a while.

So does Jesus cast Judas out? Does he call him out? For whatever reasons, no. He simply tried to maintain a loving relationship toward Judas. Jesus knew it wasn't about Jesus; it was about Judas. So Jesus did nothing to further marginalize his friend. He ate dinner with him. Shared the olive oil into which they dipped their bread. Didn't even resist when Judas arrived with the soldiers, to the point of ordering the rest of his friends to put down their swords. He showed Judas love in every moment along the way.

Hopefully none of us are on the cusp of being betrayed and arrested. I wouldn't want to have to live out love in that way. But we can learn from Jesus's example. We can chart a loving course where it concerns those who hate us or those we love, and it's as simple as a single sentence.

Don't wish harm upon them.

There's more to it than that, but I think that sums it up. Do not wish harm upon an evildoer. The Psalmist says (37), "Don't fret because of the wicked... trust in the LORD and do good... refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret—it leads only to evil." The Psalmist does suggest that God will take care of it and we don't have to, but that last part is key. Don't retaliate. Don't perpetuate the harm. Or, as I've suggested, don't wish harm upon the evildoer. Isn't the harm they cause already going to rebound at some point? This doesn't, of course, mean that we don't protect those who need protection and stand with those who are being targeted. But it does mean that we refrain from responding to aggression with more aggression. For as Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

There's such deep wisdom in that. "Pray for those who persecute you." Or who persecute others. Pray for their healing and their wholeness. Pray that they may know peace and happiness in their lives. Don't wish harm upon them. By all means, pray that the Holy Spirit might show them a path of love that will lead them to repentance from the harms they have caused, but don't pray for harm to befall them. That's the key. The only way to break the cycle of harm is to heal. The only way to break the cycle of hate is to love.

I have to remind myself of this all the time, because it's so easy to slip into reciprocal scorn. Love requires *practice*! Some years ago, when we got our first protester who stood out front with his clapboard sign, wagging his Bible at folks showing up for worship and shouting about the wages of sin, it wasn't my idea to bring him a bottle of water. I was praised for it because I'm the one who did it, but it wasn't my idea. At best, I was only thinking about ignoring him. It was a member of the church—a woman—who wanted to bring him water. I did it instead because I worried that a patriarchal protestor might be less inclined to get confrontational with a man. That's all. I was trying to love my church member—not the guy out front on a hot day. But I heard the lesson, and I've tried to live by it. Sometimes I fail. Sometimes I succeed. Even now, my rhetoric evolves as I think about things I've said in the past.

On both occasions when I testified in support of a ban on conversion therapy, I said, "Christians who support conversion therapy usually do so on a narrow understanding of a handful of brief passages in the Bible that allegedly declare queerness to be a sin." That's basically just saying, "You're reading it wrong! You're wrong about your Bible!" I tried a more loving approach in Osseo a few weeks ago when I said, "We're all here because we want to protect and nurture our children. We love them and want what's best for them. I affirm that those who believe that queer people are living in a manner inconsistent with God's will are trying to love their neighbors." I chose to acknowledge the intention to love, and in so doing hopefully I would honor those who disagreed with me. Then, rather than arguing about their Bible interpretive skills, I pointed to public statistics illustrating how such rhetoric dramatically increases the suicide rate among queer youth.

So what does this all mean when it comes to one who scorns you as a false prophet? How do I love such a one? Again, I think it's easy to acknowledge, if less easy to put into practice. Don't wish him harm. Pray for his wholeness and his happiness. Pray that he will only know in this life the kindness that he denies to others. Then, put up a rigid boundary. For that's the other piece, the one on which we should always end. Loving our neighbors—especially the ones who call us false prophets—doesn't mean that we have to be in relationship. God does not call us to subject ourselves to toxicity in harm in order to live out love. For where is the self-love in that? Refrain from anger. Forsake wrath. Cultivate kindness and care, even for the enemy, for it is on that tree that the sweetest fruit ripens.

Amen.

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

1923 Third Avenue, Anoka, MN 55303 ♦ (763) 421-3375

Pastor – Rev. Chris McArdle

Minister of Visitation – Pastor Kelsey Renk

Director of Health Ministries – Jessie Waks, NP

Director of Music Ministries – Don Shier

Keyboardist – Koki Sato

Moderator – Terja Larsen

Website: <http://www.uccanoka.org> ♦ Email: office@uccanoka.org

Text-to-Give: 844-334-1477



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.