

Ash Wednesday



First Congregational Church of Anoka

United Church of Christ

an Open and Affirming Congregation

February 14, 2024

Livestream is not available for this service; we apologize for any inconvenience!

Welcome & Announcements

Centering Music

Koki Sato

The Church Bell Rings

* Opening Hymn

“We Are Your People” #309

**We are your people: Spirit of grace, you dare to make us
Christ to our neighbors of every culture and place.**

**Joined in community, treasured and fed, may we discover
gifts in each other, willing to lead and be lead.**

**Rich in diversity, help us to live closer than neighbors,
open to strangers, able to clash and forgive.**

**Glad of tradition, help us to see in all life’s changing,
where Christ is leading, where our best efforts should be.**

**Give, as we venture justice and care (peaceful, insisting,
risking, resisting), wisdom to know when and where.**

**Spirit, unite us, make us, by grace, willing and ready,
Christ’s living body, loving the whole human race.**

The Imposition of Ashes

*If you wish to bear an ashen mark but won’t be coming to church to receive ashes,
you can mark yourself with a bit of moistened soil. If you have ashes,
do NOT mix them with water (that makes lye); mix them with olive or canola oil.*

Introduction

One: In the life of the Church, the ashen cross is a sign of penitence—of the bearer’s commitment to repenting of their sin.

Many: May these ashen crosses remind us to reflect upon the ways we have not lived out God’s call to be justice-forgers and peace-makers.

One: To some, these ashen crosses are a claim of identity, a self-naming that one is “Christian.” A follower of Christ.

Many: May these crosses remind us to reflect upon what it means to be a follower of Jesus and to always and ever walk that path with faithfulness and love.

One: Tonight, as ashes touch our skin, let us bear these marks as a sign of our commitment to the mission of this congregation.

Many: Tonight, together, as part of Christ’s Body, with the guidance of the Spirit and the love of our Creator, we recommit ourselves to the purposes of this church in confession and covenant.

Confession

One: The mission of this church is to embody the uniqueness of every kind of individual person with diverse, compatible, and conflicting characteristics.

Many: Forgive us, Holy One, when we have not embodied that uniqueness with our full hearts, spirits, strength, and lives. Forgive us when we have met our conflicting characteristics with separation instead of embrace.

One: The mission of this church is to work at accepting and fully encountering the nature of our individual humanness.

Many: Forgive us, Fire of Sinai, for those times when we have not accepted each person’s blessed individuality in our midst. Forgive us when we have treated each other like outsiders because of our individual differences.

One: The mission of this church is to provide an experience of a community always struggling to become more caring, open, inclusive, and accepting.

Many: Forgive us, Mother of the Universe, for every moment in which that struggle has been too much to undertake. Forgive us for those times when, either by accident or by intent, we have been uncaring, closed, exclusive, and rejecting.

One: The mission of this church is to expose and examine our individuality and community in the light of the truth of Jesus and the Christian approach to redemptive love.

Many: Forgive us, Creator of Love, when we have failed to hold our individuality and community in creative tension with each other. Forgive us when we have shied away from the challenging work of redeeming love.

One: You are part of the Body of Christ;
Many: we are the Body of Christ together!

Receiving the Ashes

One: Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth. May these ashes remind us our mission and of your call to be bearers of grace throughout the world as both individuals and as a shared community of love.

Many: Amen.

You are invited to come forward to receive ashes. Please return to your seat by another path.

Your forehead or hand will be marked with ashes in the shape of a cross; you may also receive the blessing without receiving ashes as the pastor says:

“You are part of the Body of Christ. We are the Body of Christ together.”

While the Imposition of Ashes occurs, the choir will sing.

Choir Anthem

“Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days”

arr. Alonso

Anoka UCC Chancel Choir; Don Shier, Director

*Lord, who throughout these forty days for us did fast and pray,
teach us to overcome our sins, and close by you to stay.
As you with Satan did contend and did the victory win,
O give us strength in you to fight, in you to conquer sin.
As you did hunger and did thirst, so teach us, gracious Lord,
to die to self, and only live by your most holy word.
And through these days of penitence, and through your Passiontide,
for evermore, in life and death, O Lord, with us abide.
Abide with us, that when this life of suffering is past,
an Easter of unending joy we may attain at last!*

Scripture Reading – 1 Corinthians 12:12-16, 21, 26-27

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer

together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

“O God in Whom All Life Begins” (#401)

We will sing this to ELLACOMBE, better known as “Hosanna, Loud Hosanna”#213

**O God in whom all life begins, who births the seed to fruit,
bestow your blessing on our lives; here let your love find root.
Bring forth in us the Spirit’s gifts of patience, joy, and peace;
deliver us from numbing fear, and grant our faith increase.**

**Unite in mutual ministry our minds and hands and hearts
that we may have the grace to seek the power your peace imparts.
So let our varied gifts combine to glorify your Name
that in all things by word and deed we may your love proclaim.**

**Through tears and laughter, grief and joy, enlarge our trust and care;
so bind us in community that we may risk and dare.
Be with us when we gather here to worship, sing, and pray,
then send us forth in power and faith to live the words we say.**

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.*

Offertory

Koki Sato

Recitation and Recommitment to Our Shared Mission

One: Let us covenant with each other and with God to live ever more deeply into our church’s purpose and mission.

Many: Come, Holy Spirit, and hear our pledges of recommitment.

One: The purposes of this church are as follows.

Many: We covenant with To embody the uniqueness of every kind of individual person with diverse, compatible, and conflicting characteristics. We covenant to work at accepting and fully encountering the nature of our individual humanness. We covenant to provide an experience of a community always struggling to become more caring, open, inclusive, and accepting. We covenant to expose and examine our individuality and community in the light of the truth of Jesus and the Christian approach of redemptive love.

One: By these spoken words of shared mission, we have recommitted ourselves to the purposes of this church and to the work of the Spirit who is always present in our midst.

Many: Come, Holy Spirit! Make it so!

One: Now let us pray together in the manner taught to us by the Anointed One, that the words he gave us may seal our commitment to God and to each other.

Please rise if you are comfortably able.

* 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.

* Congregational Refrain

“O God in Whom All Life Begins” #401 (v. 3)

As before, we will sing this to ELLACOMBE, better known as “Hosanna, Loud Hosanna”#213

**Through tears and laughter, grief and joy, enlarge our trust and care;
so bind us in community that we may risk and dare.**

**Be with us when we gather here to worship, sing, and pray,
then send us forth in power and faith to live the words we say.**

* Benediction

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.

Acknowledgements

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Lenten Activity Schedule

The schedule is nothing fancy; just come to the Soup Supper at 5:30 and stay for the All-Church Quilting Project at 6:30! Each member of the church will be shown how to complete a quilt square; those squares will eventually come together into a quilt that represents us both individually and communally.

Sermon Text

I just found out that “crazy quilt” is actually a thing. I’ve used the term before, and though I didn’t think I had made it up, I had no memory of where I had encountered it. In my head and in my usage, it has been a term that captures the idea that a whole bunch of different things can be brought together into one, cohesive whole, much like someone could take a bunch of random fabric scraps and make an abstract quilt from them. Imagine my surprise, then, when I discovered that “crazy quilting” is an actual technique that was really popular in the 1800’s!

What isn’t crazy is the idea for us to make a quilt together during this season of Lent!

We have a history at this church of doing these “Lenten Discussions” on the Wednesday evenings of Lent. They’re quite the tradition, usually involving a lot of educational speakers on some topic or another. In 2017, we had a Lenten series on transgender inclusion that led to us recreating our Open and Affirming covenant. That was Mike Willoughby’s idea. In 2018, we had a series on the #MeToo movement that featured as a highlight a panel discussion with three women who had either run for or won elected office. That series was Alex Busch’s idea. In 2019, we focused on immigration, and we heard from a lot of folks who were themselves immigrants to the United States. That was Terja Larsen’s idea! Our 2020 series on climate justice was unfortunately truncated by the pandemic, but I’m still grateful to Zack Stephenson for working to line up a lot of that series. Last year we brought in a series of Indigenous speakers to raise our awareness of our call to love our Indigenous neighbors. Friend of the church Ellen Hadley helped me with a lot of that programming. And this year? The quilt thing is Krystal Crawford’s idea.

I suppose in some sense the diversity of those Lenten offerings itself represents a kind of crazy quilt, a reality in which we have brought a bunch of diverse, individual elements into a cohesive whole that becomes visible when we zoom out and look at it from a distance. That’s totally not the reason we chose quilting for this year’s Lenten activity, but it totally works at the view from 30,000 feet. For that matter, the quilting idea and my choice to focus on our church’s mission statement were not chosen in concert; those, too, had a crazy-quilt element to them that only made itself clear to me in how I ended up stitching them together.

Our church’s mission statement—officially called “the purposes of the church” in our Bylaws—spends a lot of time quilting us together even if it doesn’t use that terminology. A crazy quilt seeks to

embody the uniqueness of its squares that display diverse characteristics that can be both compatible and conflicting. Looking at a completed crazy quilt enables us to encounter the nature of all those individual squares coming together as one. A crazy quilt, just like our church, struggles to figure out how to fit all of these pieces together as openly and inclusively as possible. And of course, a crazy quilt melds together individual squares into a community, just as we do in our church as we join together in search of a unity that celebrates our diversity.

In a sense, this whole endeavor is just about the most Christian thing we can do, especially if we look at the way that Paul shaped the trajectory of the wider church in general and the Corinthian congregation specifically. For we know from Paul's letters that those Corinthians were a fractious lot, folks who were truly struggling to accept each other. You can easily read between the lines of Paul's writing to them that they were a messy, conflicted, argumentative church that was spending all of their time fighting over whose spiritual gifts were the best. Who was right. Who got to make the rules and enforce them.

To those quarrelsome Corinthians, Paul wrote a moving ode to love, but not so that they'd recite it in their weddings. He wanted to remind them that if they loved each other, they would be patient with each other. Kind. Not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. They wouldn't insist on their own way and grow irritable and resentful, but they would reject wrongdoing and rejoice in telling the truth. He promised that if they did this, they would endure. They would revel in faith, hope, and love.

I bet that if you ask most Christians to comment upon 1 Corinthians, they'd jump right to 1 Corinthians 13. Maybe that's the only thing they could even tell you was there. But Paul would be quick to remind us that his letter isn't just that chapter. That's just one square of a much larger quilt. He'd remind us that you can't have Chapter 13 without Chapter 12, and that Chapter 12 says just as much as 13, and perhaps even more, about what it means to be a church that is always struggling to be more caring, open, inclusive, and accepting. Perhaps for today, he'd preach it like this:

“For just as the quilt is one and has many squares, and all the squares, though many, are one body, so it is with Jesus. For in the Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Lutherans, Catholics, and Congregationalists; black, white, and brown; gay, straight, bi, pan, and ace; and so on. Indeed, the quilt isn't just one square, but many. One square cannot say to the other, “I have no need of you.” Each square is equally important to the quilt. So if one square is torn, all squares are torn with it. Now you are the quilt of Jesus, even as you remain individually members of it.”

In the spring of 1993, I pledged my fraternity, a local one at Doane called “Alpha Pi Epsilon,” but I almost didn't finish the pledging week. Part of it was because some of the traditional methods of training new fraternity members didn't and don't sit well with me, such as the militaristic idea that you have to break individuals down in order to build them back up as a whole. Or, and this was the straw that broke the camel's back, the emotional pressure put upon pledges, particularly fake expressions of disappointment directed at people who are, realistically speaking, still just kids. That last one really did me in on a Tuesday night, and the next morning, I went to talk to one of my favorite members of the fraternity to let him know I was going to quit.

Through the imaginative use of a Star Trek communicator badge, my friend managed to cut to the core of something that was subconsciously bothering me, namely, the idea that by joining the fraternity, I was surrendering my individuality in order to be part of a larger whole. I mean sure, joining the frat meant that I would forevermore be known as an Ape. I'd probably sit with my brothers in the section of the cafeteria where we always sat. I'd wear the same maroon and gold jacket that everyone else did that only differed in the monogramming. But would I still be me?

Hey. I was only 19.

My friend managed to convey to me that even though I would be an Ape, I was still Chris. This was no Borg situation; I was still an individual within the collective. My distinctiveness would remain my own. I

would not be assimilated. He convinced me to stay, and it was good. I was able to be “me” AND “we” at the same time.

Just like at church.

It’s a struggle sometimes, but only inasmuch as the world has this annoying tendency to view the church as a monolith. We know it’s not, naturally. Our church is its own thing, and we’re different in some pretty obvious ways from every single other church in Anoka County. We’ve already shown that we have maintained our church’s individuality among the wider Body of Christ. And though sometimes other parts of the Body have told us they have no need of us, we don’t return the favor. We understand that the Body of Christ on the whole is a crazy quilt, and if you take anyone’s square out of it, the whole thing will be that much closer to falling apart.

I hope that you’ll be back next week to construct your own quilt square. I think this is going to be a really enjoyable time of not just quilt-building, but community-building. I believe it will be a deeply memorable exercise in us putting actual form to the words of our church’s mission, lit brightly in the truth of Jesus and the Christian approach of redemptive love.

Amen.

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

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Director of Health Ministries – Jessie Waks, NP

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Keyboardist – Koki Sato

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.