



# First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

*An Open and Affirming Congregation*  
February 18, 2024 ♦ First Sunday in Lent



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

Centering Music

Koki Sato

The Church Bell Rings

\* Hymn

“O for a World” #575

**O for a world where everyone respects each other’s ways,  
where love is lived and all is done with justice and with praise.**

**O for a world where goods are shared and misery relieved,  
where truth is spoken, children spared, equality achieved.**

**We welcome one world family and struggle with each choice,  
that opens us to unity and gives our vision voice.**

**The poor are rich, the weak are strong, the foolish ones are wise.  
Tell all who mourn *outcasts belong*, who perishes will rise.**

**O for a world preparing for God’s glorious reign of peace,  
where time and tears will be no more, and all but love will cease.**

\* Opening Psalm and Affirmation

*The opening Psalm, Psalm 2, is as arranged by Christine Robinson.*

One: Why are the nations in an uproar?

**Many: Why do the peoples mutter and threaten?**

One: Why do the rich plot with the powerful?

**Many: Why, O God, why?**

One: They are rebelling against the demands of love and justice. God laughs, cries,  
and says with anger,

**Many:** “I have set my Love in your hearts and my Justice in your minds. You are my children, and I have given you the universe, your lives, and the tasks of your days. Be wise. Be warned. Stick to the paths of Love and Justice. Your restless hearts will find me there.”

**One:** As we travel the paths of Love and Justice, we affirm the purposes of this church:

**Many:** to embody the uniqueness of every kind of individual person with diverse, compatible, and conflicting characteristics;

**One:** to work at accepting and fully encountering the nature of our individual humanness;

**One:** to provide an experience of a community always struggling to become more caring, open, inclusive, and accepting; and

**One:** to expose and examine our individuality and community in the light of the truth of Jesus and the Christian approach of redemptive love.

**Many: 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

“My Song Is Love Unknown”

arr. Schweizer

Anoka UCC Chancel Choir; Don Shier, Director

*My song is love unknown, my Savior's love to me;  
love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be.*

*O who am I, that for my sake my Lord should take frail flesh and die?  
Christ came from heaven's throne salvation to bestow;  
but people scorned, and none the longed for Christ would known:  
but O! my Friend, my Friend, Friend indeed,  
who at my need his life did spend.  
Here might I stay and sing, no story so divine;  
never was love, dear King! Never was grief like thine.  
This is my Friend, in whose sweet praise I all my days could gladly spend.  
My song is love unknown, my song is love unknown, is love.*

Scripture Reading - Acts 15:36-41

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." <sup>37</sup> Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. <sup>38</sup> But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. <sup>39</sup> The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. <sup>40</sup> But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord. <sup>41</sup> He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

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

**Many: Thanks be to God.**

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

“Help Us Accept Each Other” #388

**Help us accept each other as Christ accepted us;  
teach us as sister, brother, each person to embrace.  
Be present, God, among us, and bring us to believe  
we are ourselves accepted and meant to love and live.**

**Teach us, O God, your lessons, as in our daily life  
we struggle to be human and search for hope and faith.  
Teach us to care for people, for all, not just for some,  
to love them as we find them, or as they may become.**

**Let your acceptance change us, so that we may be moved  
in living situations to do the truth in love;  
to practice your acceptance, until we know by heart  
the table of forgiveness and laughter's healing art.**

**God, for today's encounters with all who are in need,  
who hunger for acceptance, for righteousness and bread,  
bring us new eyes for seeing, new hands for holding on;  
renew us with your Spirit; God! Free us, make us one!**

### Prayers of the People

*If you wish to share a prayer with the congregation (joy, concern, hope, worry, or anything at all), raise your hand and a Deacon will bring you a microphone. Offer your prayer and finish by saying, "God in your love" to which we will all respond, "Hear our prayer."*

### 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

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.*

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

*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.**

***Has your personal information changed? Keep us informed!  
There are information update forms on the bulletin table. Thank you.***

Acknowledgements

Reprinted music is covered under OneLicense.net #A-715296.

The Scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright ©1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Sermon Text

It’s only the first Sunday of our Lenten worship series, based on our church’s articulated mission, and already we’ve come to what might be the most challenging aspiration in the whole thing. You’ve already spoken the words together: “the purpose of this church is to embody the uniqueness of every kind of individual person with diverse, compatible, and conflicting characteristics.”

*Conflicting characteristics.*

That's the hard part, yeah? It's not all that difficult to embrace and affirm that we are a diverse bunch, in our own way. Most communities have diversity, even if it's not obvious to the eye. And certainly, any community will find it relatively simple to embody the uniqueness of every kind of person with compatible characteristics; that might even be easy! It's somewhat ruefully reflected in demographic trends in churches over the last seven years, as data shows progressive churches skewing more so and conservative churches doing the same. People want to gather together in peace, not friction. But the friction is there, and our mission statement acknowledges it: "every kind of individual person with *conflicting characteristics*."

I think this is the hardest part for every church. What do you do in a totally volunteer community, a place where people come of their own free will and choose every week to either stay or go, when conflict arises? What does a church do when it becomes clear that members will remain in unresolvable conflict? I suppose many folks try to just agree to disagree, but that doesn't always work.

Today's story from the book of Acts illustrates just such a situation, a moment when Paul and Barnabas go their separate ways. To the person who has been reading through Acts up to this point, it might come as a surprise, though conflict can arise like that. Sometimes we don't know it's festering until some external event awakens us to the tension! Perhaps that's what happened with Paul and Barnabas. As the two friends were preparing to leave on a tour of the churches they had already planted, Barnabas made it clear he wanted to bring John-Mark along, and Paul was not having it. *The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company.*

The author doesn't go into the details, but there is one prior clue. On an earlier evangelistic tour of the wider region described in Acts 13, we read this: "Then Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. John, however, left them and returned to Jerusalem."

The text is silent about why John-Mark left. All we can conclude is that Paul was unhappy about it. Maybe John-Mark left because he was less than fully committed to the mission? It would make sense that Paul thought so. He was a convert to the Way of Christ, after all, and converts are often super zealous in how they live out their new faith, and we knew even before the Damascus Road that Paul did everything with zeal. But there could certainly be other things happening here. John-Mark's mom might have been ill. He could have been ill himself. Maybe he needed a mental health break. Maybe he had a family and they were hard up for cash, so he needed to go home and get a paying job. Maybe Paul was super-hard to be around. The possibilities are endless, though that doesn't really factor into the story. We simply know that Paul was pee-ohed.

I think it's natural to read of Barnabas and Paul's separation with a sense of grief. Maybe it's even triggering for any among us who have had to break off a relationship. Because really, these two had to have been tight. The best of friends. For when Saul became Paul, the Jesus Movement leaders in Jerusalem were rightly worried. They doubted the sincerity of Paul's conversion, what with that whole "killing lots of Christians" thing at which Saul had excelled. It turns out it was Barnabas who stepped up to vouch for Paul, securing the at least tenuous trust of the Church's first leaders. Barnabas could do this, moreover, because he had proven his own Christian fidelity; in an earlier scene, we learn that he was once named Joseph, and after selling a field and giving the proceeds to the church, they named him Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement." They liked the guy, and I think it's safe to assume Paul did, too. So how much more sad was it when the two of them reached a point in their relationship that they had to part company?

I think this is a critical message, and one we all struggle with. I don't think many people find it easy to break relationships, even when it's totally necessary. And make no mistake! Sometimes it IS totally necessary. God does not want us to suffer, and so I don't think God wants us to stay in a relationship that has grown toxic and/or abusive.

Perhaps in some corners of the Church this is an arresting notion, especially if we use marriage as our easy example. Marriage is supposed to be for all time, right? *In plenty and in want, as long as we both shall live.* It's well known that in some parts of the Church, divorce is considered a sin. And yet, if we're being honest and vulnerable about such conversations, we must be able to admit that not all marriages work. Sometimes a release is necessary. You probably didn't even know that in the United Church of Christ, we even have a liturgy in our Book of Worship for the *releasing* of marital vows. I can't say I've ever had anyone come to me asking for that liturgy to be used, but it's there.

It's not just marriage, though. The cultural imperative to sustain blood-family ties are so powerful that countless people persist in toxic family environments because they deem separation to be a nonstarter. I'd guess that most churches usually avoid casting out members who have been consistently toxic in the congregation because the ideal we've been taught is that we're supposed to stick together through thick and thin. Don't get me wrong; I do know of churches where the leadership asked someone to leave; I just don't think it happens very often.

For reasons I have shared with some of you before, I've had to learn the hard way that sometimes the only life-giving response to "conflicting characteristics" is, like Paul and Barnabas, to separate. It hasn't been easy; in fact, in some contexts, it's taken a great deal of therapy to be able to do that, and then even more to cope with the loss that inevitably follows. But in all of my experiences and studies on this subject, there's one piece of advice, one piece of earth-shattering wisdom that stays with me. It comes to us from James Baldwin, an American, black, gay writer and activist of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. He famously said, "We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist."

*Unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression.* Or, as I think it appropriate to add, the oppression of my neighbor.

This is the hardest of hard things, friends, but I think Baldwin is speaking the truth to power. Speaking from a vulnerable place, he reminds us that relationships are already hard, but there's a line across which it's no longer a relationship. Richard Curtis reflected on the same in his script for *Love Actually*, when the Prime Minister of Great Britain says at a press conference, "I love that word, 'relationship.' I fear that this has become a bad relationship... a friend who bullies us is no longer a friend."

So what does the church do when a relationship sours? I'm not saying any of this to encourage a particular outcome so much as I am offering grace to anyone who, in their private or corporate lives finds themselves in such a situation. These are real things. Heavy things. And it is incumbent upon we who are called to love our neighbor to recognize that sometimes, in order to preserve that love, we need to live it out from a distance. I like to think that's what Paul and Barnabas did. I like to think that the Jerusalem church did the same in what I think is a key moment in the story: "the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord." I like to think they did that for not just Paul and Silas, but Barnabas and John-Mark, too. They offered their prayerful blessing to the separation, trusting that God would still hold Barnabas and Paul in love even if they couldn't do that for each other.

Though it's not today's focus, the last bit of our church's mission statement speaks to this dynamic. When those conflicting characteristics lead us to a time of separation, we strive ever more to do so in the

light of the truth of Jesus and the Christian approach of redemptive love. We strive to separate in love. And to that end, I find the words of that aforementioned end-of-marriage liturgy to be of great value. At one point, the congregation prays together:

“O God, make us aware of your presence. You have blessed us in all our moments: of joining, of relating, of intending, and of beginning. Be with us in our times of separating and of ending, releasing us from those vows we can no longer keep; we ask in Christ’s name.”

We naturally hope that it doesn’t come to that, but we recognize that sometimes the path of love reaches a fork in the road. When that happens, may we always lovingly commend each other to the grace of our God.

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](mailto: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.*