



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

January 14, 2024 ♦ Baptism of Christ (observed)



Regretfully, our livestream will not be available on Sunday, January 14.

We apologize for the inconvenience!

Past services are always available for viewing at <https://www.youtube.com/@AnokaUCC>.

Welcome & Announcements

Centering Music

Koki Sato

The Church Bell Rings

* Psalms 1 and 23 (*selections; alternate renderings*)

One: Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or sit in the seat of scorners.

Many: Their delight is in God's instruction, and on God's teachings they meditate always.

One: They are like trees planted by streams of water, yielding rich fruit and vivid leaves. In all they do, they prosper.

Many: The Holy One is my shepherd, my gardener, my guardian; I shall not want!

One: She brings me to grassy meadows of rest and waters of tranquility.

Many: She restores my life. She leads me in right paths for the sake of her Holy Name.

One: Even when all around me is shadowed and frightening, I fear no evil; for you, Loving God, are with me. You lead me to all comfort.

Many: You prepare bounty for me even in the midst of danger; my cup overflows!

One: Surely your steadfast love and goodness will pursue me all the days of my life,

Many: and I shall dwell in your blessed home my whole life long.

* Opening Hymn

“Wash, O God, Your Sons and Daughters” (*alt.*)

Sung to the familiar tune BEACH SPRING.

Wash, O God, your sons and daughters, newborn creatures of your womb.

Number them among your people, raised like Christ from death and tomb.

Weave them garments bright and sparkling; compass them with love and light.

Fill, anoint them, send your Spirit, holy dove and heart's delight.

Ev'ry day we need your nurture; by your milk may we be fed.
 Let us join your feast, partaking cup of blessing, living bread.
 God, renew us; guide our footsteps; free from scorn and all its snares,
 one with Christ in living, dying, by your Spirit, children, heirs.

O hope deep your holy wisdom! Unimagined, all your ways!
 To your name be glory, honor! With our lives we worship, praise!
 We your people stand before you, water-washed and Spirit-born.
 By your grace, our lives we offer. Recreate us; God, transform!

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

“On the Sea of Life”

Angel & Sloan

Anoka UCC String Band

*We are on the sea of life / sailing to a better home
 where the saved of all the earth shall abide;
 leaving all our trials here / many pleasures wait us there
 when we cross the foam and reach the other side.*

*(refrain) Sailing, sailing on, we are sailing o'er the foam;
 we are talking to the captain as the angry billows roll.
 Soon our ship will reach the harbor and be safely o'er the tide.
 We are going home, to the other side.*

*Many millions now abide / in that home beyond the tide
where the ransomed pilgrims wait free from care.
There is room aboard for all / who will heed the captain's call
and take ship for heaven's country bright and fair. (refrain)*

Scripture Reading – Acts 8:26-39

Lector, **Congregation**

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ He replied, "**How can I, unless someone guides me?**" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." ³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "**About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?**" ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "**Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?**" ³⁷ ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

"In Water We Grow" (back of bulletin)

Receiving the Blessing of Water

During this simple liturgy, you will be invited to come forward as you feel so moved.

The Pastor will anoint your head with baptismal water and offer a blessing:

“By these waters of blessing, be free from all scorn.”

If you have never been baptized but wish to be now, you may say so as you approach the Pastor.

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

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!**

* 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.

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

“What is to prevent me from being baptized?” That’s the question asked by the Ethiopian Eunuch, an otherwise nameless character who even today represents so much of what we in the Church recognize as an internal reluctance to spread the Good News as widely as possible in the world. By that I mean our human struggle to extend hospitality and love to anyone who is considered other, abnormal, and even unclean.

The Ethiopian ticks those boxes ably. To our modern eyes, we can immediately see that he’s likely Black. He’s certainly a slave, if one afforded some power within his master’s household. Also, as someone whose privates have been removed, he’s now an outsider when it comes to binary gender roles. While it’s unclear to me whether he would have been considered unclean in the story’s context for those reasons, the fact that’s he’s a foreigner is an issue. In *today’s* context, we know that he’s someone too often called “abomination.”

“What is to prevent me from being baptized?” The fast answer, therefore, is, “Um, a whole lot of things.” But that’s not what Philip does. He baptizes the person immediately. If he had had any hesitation, he was surely mindful that the Spirit had explicitly sent him to this location. Reason dictates that he was sent to meet this specific person. To be asked that specific question. To reply in the affirmative! The lesson of the story is the answer to the question: there is nothing to prevent the Ethiopian from being baptized.

That’s the way it’s supposed to be. Baptism is a gift freely given without precondition, even if it’s supposed to involve living our lives in a particular way thereafter. You know, with kindness, justice, and love. Truth and righteousness. All those things that are sometimes hard for us! But what exactly baptism *means* has varied in the life of the Church, to the point that it becomes a stumbling block.

To some, baptism is a sign that your sins have been cleansed, though sinning does continue.

To others, baptism is a key that opens the heavenly gates.

To some, baptism is a covenant made by the one being baptized to walk in the way of Jesus.

To others, baptism is a covenant made by parents and guardians, a worshipping congregation, and God to raise a child to know Jesus so that, at some point later on, that child might blossom into a fully formed faith.

For Paul, it’s dying.

In Romans 6:3-6, Paul tells his audience, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ have been baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of [God], so too we might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.”

There’s a lot there to unpack, friends. Don’t panic! There are implications there about that whole “unlocking heaven” piece. There’s the whole bit about becoming part of the Christian community. But

the biggest piece is all of Paul's talk about dying, because he understands baptism as a symbolic drowning and death, only to emerge again from the water reborn and renewed. That's partly why evangelicals talk a lot about being "born again." That's not really our context in mainline Protestantism, but that doesn't mean we can't find meaning in Paul's words in an appropriate and uplifting way.

The song we heard today from the String Band touches upon the theology of baptism where it gets you into heaven. It doesn't say that exactly, but that's the underlying premise: you're a Christian, and you're on this journey through life, as if on a ship, sailing toward Heaven on the "other side." The captain is Jesus, and if you heed his call (presumably by becoming baptized with all that implies), you get to take ship for heaven's country bright and fair.

But I believe, and I've preached this many times, that there has to be something about baptism more than just unlocking heaven, because there has to be more to being a Christian than just getting to heaven. This is especially true when Christians treat baptism like a "get out of jail free card" that absolves them from any future behavior that muddies that blessed water. Baptism has to mean something for us now. It has to demand something about how we live our lives now and not just in the afterlife. And that meaning, that demand can still very much involve something dying.

"What is to prevent me from being baptized?" The Ethiopian Eunuch speaks to us today just as he spoke to Philip, because the arbitrary things that would prevent him from being baptized are those things that need to die. I think it makes far more sense for us to frame it that way. In baptism, it's not so much sin that dies, but our sinful proclivity to judge each other for the most ridiculous of reasons. We have to lay to rest our habit of heaping scorn upon one another, especially when that scorn applies to who we are instead of the things that we do. Paul reminds us again and again that in Christ Jesus there is no more male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free. We can faithfully reframe that to mean that in Jesus, sex and gender are no longer categories of belonging. In Jesus, nationality is no longer a category of privilege. In Jesus, your race or economic status or anything else that might enslave you to your neighbor are no longer categories of greater and lesser blessing.

We know that scornfulness has metastasized in recent years. No one person is ultimately to blame; we see this worldwide as people from the highest office to the meanest social status engage in the same kind of rhetoric. We caricature our enemies. We make up silly and scornful names and then repeat them *ad nauseam* on social media. We tell lies about each other in order to invite others to heap scorn upon those we dislike. So many today sell their wares in the markets of innuendo and implication, often without a shred of proof. And all of this happens in a land where the great majority of the people have historically identified as Christian.

So I say again: baptism has to mean something about how we live our lives now. If it means that we submerge ourselves into a watery death and rise again cleansed, that cleansing must include us committing ourselves to drowning the culture of scorn. We have to be done with "DINO" and "RINO." We have to reject calling each other unclean and impure. We have to cut it out with the charges of "effeminate witch" and "false prophet" and "hick" and "rube" and "idiot." We even need to practice NOT calling each other "sinners." Because this I know is true: every person so labeled is still a neighbor who is loved by God. "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Nothing, if we are doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God and each other.

Here's a fact: the 100 largest churches in the United States of America are all non-inclusive when it comes to sexuality and gender. These churches are typically evangelical megachurches, and while they don't all overtly lead with their "marriage is only between a man and a woman" statements of conviction,

in every one of these churches, a queer person will eventually be told that in order to be right with God they're gonna have to stop their "sinful" ways. I'm not sharing that to scorn; I'm pointing out a nagging reality of our wider Christian context.

I don't know what to do about that, at least in terms of getting those churches to change their tune. But then, that's probably the wrong approach. A church of 10,000 people probably won't pay much attention to a little church of 300 people who are known for our rainbow banners. All we can do is remember that any change we would help create in this world has to start with us. It's about how we treat others not just in private, but in public.

We start that by drowning scorn. We give it up. In our public rhetoric, even though it's hard, we forego the name-calling and the schoolyard bullying that has come to characterize so much of our public debate. We treat with kindness and love those with whom we disagree. We remember that our baptisms are, in addition to whatever else, a call upon each of us to treat others as Jesus treated them: with love, respect, and an awareness that we are all beloved children of God. That doesn't mean we surrender challenge and critique; "going high when they go low" doesn't mean you surrender the struggle for justice and peace. But it does mean that we don't do it in a way that just lights another Molotov cocktail and chucks it into the middle of the public arena.

"What is to prevent me from being baptized?" The Ethiopian may as well have asked, "What is to prevent me from being treated like a whole, beloved, human child of God?" The answer is the same: nothing, so long as we truly embrace the Good News as Jesus shared it with us. May we all be so daring as the one baptized that day on the road to Gaza.

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.

Unison

1. In wa - ter we grow, se - cure in the womb,
 2. In wa - ter we wash: the dirt of each day,
 3. In wa - ter we dive, and can - not draw breath,
 4. In wa - ter we dwell, for by its deep flow

and speech - less - ly know love's safe - ty and room.
 its trou - ble and rush are car - ried a - way.
 then sur - face a - live, re - bound - ing from death.
 through blood - stream and cell, we live, think, and grow.

Bap - tiz - ing and bless - ing, we pub - lish for good
 In Christ re - cre - a - ted by love's cleans - ing art,
 Our old self goes un - der, in Christ dead and drowned.
 Praise God, love out - flow - ing, whose well of new birth

the free - ing, ca - ress - ing safe - keep - ing of God.
 self - will and self - ha - tred dis - solve and de - part.
 We rise, washed in won - der, by love clad and crowned.
 bap - tiz - es our know - ing, and wa - ters the earth.

WORDS: Brian Wren, 1989
 MUSIC: Carl F. Schalk, 1987

STANLEY BEACH
 10.10.11.11