



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

January 21, 2024 ♦ 3rd Sunday after Epiphany



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

* Opening Hymn

“Hope of the World” (#46) (vv. 1-2)

“Spirit of Love” #58 (vv. 1, 3)

We will sing all verses to PERFECT LOVE, which is #58

**Hope of the world, O Christ of great compassion,
speak to our fearful hearts by conflict torn.
Save us your people from consuming passion,
from false pursuits through which our lives are worn.**

**Hope of the world, God’s gift of our redemption,
bringing to hungry souls the bread of life,
still let your Spirit unto us be given
to heal earth’s wounds and end its bitter strife.**

**Spirit of love, you move within creation,
drawing the threads to color and design;
life into life, you knit our true salvation,
come, work with us, and weave us into one.**

**Great loom of God, where history is woven,
you are the frame that holds us to the truth,
Christ is the theme, the pattern you have given,
come, work with us, and weave us into one.**

* Psalm 103 (portions)

One: Bless the Fount of Wisdom, O my soul,

Many: and all that is within me, bless her holy Name.

One: Bless the Source of All, O my soul,

Many: and forget not all her benefits.

One: She forgives you all your sins;

Many: she redeems your life from the grave.

One: She crowns you with mercy and lovingkindness;

Many: she satisfies you with good things.

One: The Fire of Sinai executes righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed;

Many: she makes her ways known to prophets, to Miriam and Moses alike.

One: Wisdom's womb is full of love and faithfulness,

Many: She is slow to anger and overflowing with faithful love.

One: For as the heavens are high above the earth,

Many: so powerful is her faithful love.

One: The faithful love of She Who Is Wisdom endures forever;

Many: and her righteousness upon children's children.

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

“Sing a New Song”

Praetorius; arr. Schweitzer

Anoka UCC Chancel Choir; Don Shier, Director

*Sing a new song, sing to God with a voice of triumph,
God's praises known to all nations; sing the honor of God's name.*

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ² They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." ⁴ Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. ⁵ He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. ⁷ Jesus departed with his disciples to the sea, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him; ⁸ hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon. ⁹ He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him; ¹⁰ for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. ¹¹ Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, "**You are the Son of God!**" ¹² But he sternly ordered them not to make him known.

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

“Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior” #551

**Pass me not, O gentle Savior, hear my humble cry;
while on others you are calling, do not pass me by.
(refrain) Savior, Savior, hear my humble cry;
while on others you are calling, do not pass me by.**

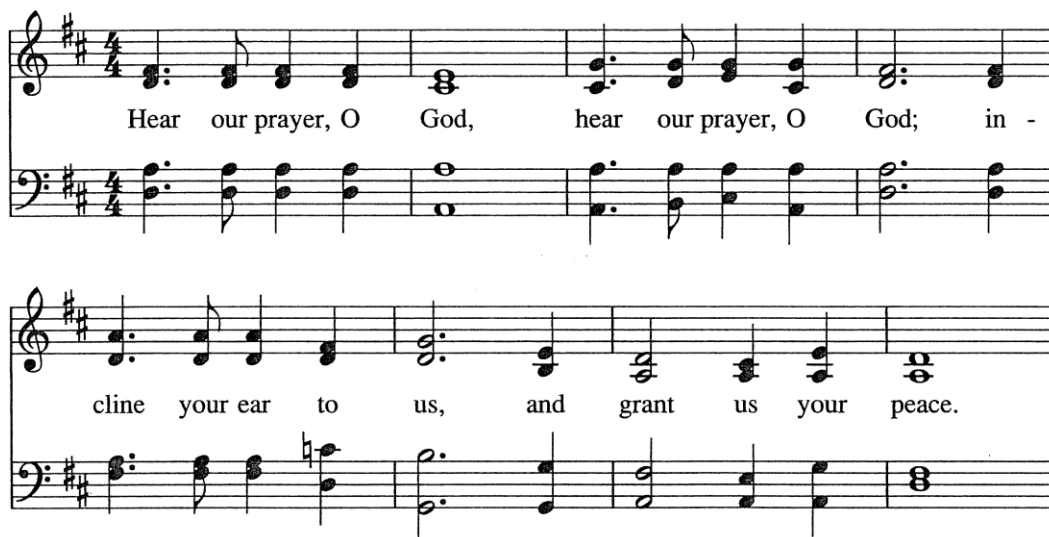
**Let me at your throne of mercy find a sweet relief;
kneeling there in deep contrition, help my unbelief. (refrain)**

**Trusting only in your merit, would I seek your face;
heal my wounded, broken spirit, save me by your grace. (refrain)**

**Be the Spring of all my comfort, more than life to me;
not just here on earth beside me, but eternally. (refrain)**

Prayers of the People

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

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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!**

* 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

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

I feel like today’s Scripture reading gets told in reverse, as if the bit with the demons at the end needed to be the first thing. That’s because the Jesus of the Gospel of Mark is, pretty much before anything else, an exorcist. He drives out the spirits that come from beyond the veil to inhabit and control vulnerable humans. And yet, the Markan Jesus is also super-secretive about this whole thing. He doesn’t want anyone to know who he is. He doesn’t want them to know the nature and source of his power. He’s often able to maintain that enigmatic aura, but the demons always see through it. They perceive that he is sent from God, that he is the Son of God. And they call it out! Jesus is always telling them to shut up.

It’s not clear to me why the Markan Jesus does this, but that’s no surprise because the Gospel of Mark is *weird*. Some of the oldest versions of that Gospel that exist end with Jesus telling Mary and the other women to go spread the good news, but they’re so terrified they run off without telling anyone anything! Then there’s this bit when he’s arrested and we get these two mysterious verses right at the end of the scene: “A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.” That’s it. No clarity as to just who this “certain young man” is. It’s bonkers, and I’m here for it.

All of this secrecy surrounding Jesus has an odd interplay with the rest of today’s reading, which details a healing miracle that doesn’t involve exorcism. To that end, let’s unpack the story.

As the story unfolds, we recognize that Jesus is probably in Capernaum, a tiny little hamlet on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. That’s basically home base for Jesus as he rolls around the Galilee, and it seems to be the place where he calls the first disciples. There’s a synagogue in Capernaum to this day that you can go see, known as the “White Synagogue,” but the stones underneath the white ones are more likely the foundation of the synagogue from Jesus’s time. Anyway, Jesus goes to the synagogue, and there he finds a man whose hand is “withered.” He also finds folks who don’t like him for whatever reason, and in typical Gospel fashion, we’re told they’re Pharisees, that group of learned Jewish men who knew the rules and evidently didn’t like how Jesus was breaking them. We’re told, “they watched him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath.”

Now, don’t read TOO much into the Pharisees and their motivations here; each of the Gospels benefits from giving Jesus a foil in order to ratchet up the drama, and these Jewish men are the foil most of the time. Too many folks in the last 2000 years have used the Pharisee conflicts as an excuse to

condemn all Jews, and obviously that's been a tragic crime. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this story, they're characterized as folks who are ultra-focused on the letter of the law, in this case the part about doing no work on the Sabbath. They're already expecting Jesus to break that rule, and they're lying in wait to pounce.

I'm guessing the man must have asked for healing, or at least I like to think that he did. Otherwise, it might just mean that Jesus was looking for a fight—and this I doubt, inasmuch as the Markan Jesus is such a secret-keeper. So we get this guy whose hand is ruined. We can safely guess that this is both a physical and a social disability, so when he sees Jesus show up at synagogue, he grasps at the chance for healing. But again, the Pharisees are there, and for a moment, Jesus treats this as an opportunity to hoist them on their own petards. “Is it lawful to do good or do harm on the Sabbath?”

At this moment, we should remember that in the immediately preceding scene, Jesus has just had another argument with the Pharisees who have openly questioned whether it's proper for Jesus's followers to pluck grain from the fields and eat it, something that also amounts to work on the Sabbath. He quotes some scripture at them and then says, no doubt dramatically, “The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” Again, that's a little odd given how he doesn't want the demons to proclaim his lineage, but either way, he's just declared that he has authority to break the Sabbath rule. Thus the Pharisees are waiting to see if he'll do it again—and he does.

How can't he? The man with the withered hand is suffering, and we already know Jesus's heart. Can he really keep quiet when someone is in pain? If someone is being bullied or otherwise marginalized when Jesus has the power to stop it? Indeed, “he was grieved at their hardness of heart.” It's that same grief that so many people feel today when we understand that there are ample resources in America to provide housing and food to everyone who needs it, but this doesn't happen because of a collective hardness of heart among those who actually have the power to make it so. So Jesus does as Jesus does, and the withered hand is made whole. The *man* is made whole. In response, the Pharisees have more evidence now for claims against Jesus, and they go out to talk to the folks who *actually* have power to make Jesus's life miserable: the Herodians, the folks who have been granted power by Rome to run the show in Israel.

Scholars such as John Dominic Crossan have suggested that the Gospels that tell the story of Jesus are best read not as history, but as parable: moderately confusing tales designed to get us thinking hard about the Kingdom of God. And here, in this scene in Mark, we've been given enough pieces to put that parabolic tale in its typical form. From everything we've seen, from the demons to the Pharisees to the man with the withered hand, that parable would go something like this:

“The Kingdom of God is like a healer, a prophet imbued with power, who knows that using his power publicly will mean his end. But when he encounters someone in pain, he heals them anyway.”

Isn't that the story of Jesus? If not, it's at least one way to interpret it. Jesus is a Messianic figure who knows full well that if he leans into that particular notoriety that Rome will eventually notice and act to extinguish him. They had done it before. They had always acted to preserve their power but keeping the powerless chained so that the powerful might hold the locks and the keys. That's what the powerful do. Forgive me if I sound a little populist here, but we've all seen it. The rich and powerful have enough wealth to heal the world, but they convince those who don't have power that there's not enough to go around. They convince the “little people” that there are *other* people who *don't* deserve to have power, and it's up to the rest of us to make sure that pecking order is maintained for the good of all.

Turn on the news and you'll see that dynamic. The demonization of “wokeness,” of brown-skinned and Muslim immigrants, of transgender folks; all of this is designed to enshrine power in the hands of those who already have it. It's the same dynamic as in the time of Rome, and just as he did literally in the Temple courtyard, Jesus was of a mind to flip those tables and make some good trouble. Even when he wanted to maintain a lower profile, he couldn't, because his heart bled for those in need. He couldn't help but do what was in his power, even if it meant that it put him squarely on the path to confrontation with Pontius Pilate.

“The Kingdom of God is like a healer, a prophet imbued with power, who knows that the world order is inherently unjust, but who knows that if he exposes that injustice, the powerful will seek his death. So the prophet does it anyway.”

The analogue to this parable is that sometimes people come into power, people whose hearts bleed for the ones who hurt the most. But rather than use their power to enact sweeping change on behalf of the masses, they engage in what a friend of mine has called “tippy-toe politics.” They follow the unjust illogic of the world that says power is something to be *preserved*, not *used*. They convince themselves that enacting great change will inevitably bring pushback—and they're not wrong. But in the face of that presumed backlash, they do little or nothing. And then they lose their power because they did nothing with it when it was entrusted to them.

I think, in the end, that this points us toward what is so essential about the heart of Jesus. He had power to make his neighbors' lives better. He knew if he used it, there would be a negative response from some. He knew that if he *didn't* use it, he'd face an equally negative response from others. And so, in the end, he made the most loving choice: he used his power to heal and liberate, because no matter what happened to him, in that moment he made withered people whole.

Let us do likewise. Amen.

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