



# First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

*An Open and Affirming Congregation*

January 29, 2023 ♦ 4<sup>th</sup> 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>

***At the request of a group of church members,  
today's service is a modification of the Northwest Metro Grief Support Coalition  
service of worship and healing from November 22, 2022 that was cancelled due  
to inclement weather.***

## Welcome & Announcements

*If you are a guest with us today, welcome! If you are comfortable sharing your information with us, there are cards in the pew holders that you can use for that purpose (place them in the offering plate).*

*If you would like to join our mailing list, email [office@uccanoka.org](mailto:office@uccanoka.org) and ask to be added.*

Prelude

Koki Sato

The Church Bell Rings

\* Opening Hymn

“Blessed Be the Tie that Binds” #393

**Blessed be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love;  
the sharing of a common life is like to that above.**

**Before our God we come and pour our ardent prayers;  
our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, our comforts and our cares.**

**We share each other's woes, each other's burdens bear,  
and often for each other flows a sympathizing tear.**

**When we are called to part it gives us inward pain,  
but we shall still be joined in heart, and hope to meet again.**

\* Call to Worship and Opening Prayer

One: The Psalmist says\*, “Cast your burden on the Holy One, who will sustain you.”

**Many: The Gracious One will bear us up as on eagle’s wings.**

One: The Apostle Paul says\*\*, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

**Many: We share each other’s woes, and bear each other’s burdens.**

One: Jesus says\*\*\*, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

**Many: Let us lay before God the weights of our lives, that she may help us carry them.**

One: Let us pray.

**Many: Mother of All, you hold us closely like a hen who broods over her offspring. The warmth of your love chases away the chills of fear, anxiety, and loneliness. You offer us comfort in the midst of our grief by promising us that we are not alone in our sadness, and that somehow, somewhere, life continues beyond the boundaries of earthly death. Sing songs of healing and care to us once again, Sovereign. Fill us with the peace that passes all understanding in all those moments when our sorrow sneaks up and lays us low. We ask it in the name of Jesus, whose ministry of compassion sustains us even today. Amen.**

\* Psalm 55:22a    \*\* Galatians 6:2    \*\*\* Matthew 11:28

Special Music

“In the Bleak Midwinter”

arr. Harold Darke

Rev. Chris McArdle, Solo

*In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan. Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone.*

*Snow had fallen snow on snow, snow on snow, in the bleak midwinter long ago.*

*Our God, Heav’n cannot hold him, nor earth sustain, Heav’n and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign.*

*In the bleak midwinter, a stable place sufficed the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.*

*Enough for him, whom cherubim worship night and day, a breast full of milk and a manger full of hay.*

*Enough for him, whom angels fall down before, the ox and ass and camel, which adore.*

*What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.*

*If I were a wise one, I would do my part. Yet what I can I give him, give my heart.*

A Time for Children (10:30)

ADVISORY: The livestream of the service continues during the Children’s Time;  
if your child sits facing the Pastor their face shouldn’t appear on camera.

Send out your light, Lord, send your truth to be my guide.

Then let them lead me to the place where you reside.

(10:30) *There is no Sunday School today,*

*but an activity sheet has been specially developed for use by children today and is available in the back.*

*Activity bags are available in the back of the sanctuary for those who might enjoy them.*

### Scripture Reading – 2 Corinthians 1:1-7

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia: <sup>2</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, <sup>4</sup> who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. <sup>5</sup> For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. <sup>6</sup> If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. <sup>7</sup> Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.

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

**Many: Thanks be to God.**

Hymn

“We Yearn, O Christ, for Wholeness” #179

**We yearn, O Christ, for wholeness and for your healing touch;  
too long have we felt helpless; our burdens seemed too much.  
Forgetting all pretenses we make our pleadings heard,  
in hope and expectation await your gracious Word.**

**We long to have companions who travel by our side,  
strong friends to call and answer with whom we are allied;  
as we lift up each other when struggles lay us low,  
community develops; our faith and caring grow.**

**We need your living presence, O Christ of Galilee,  
a presence that revives us and sets our spirits free.  
No longer are we fearful, your love pervades each place.  
Em-pow--er us with courage to claim your healing grace.**

Prayers of the People

*In recognition of today’s worship theme, we invite you to request the microphone so that you may speak aloud and share with the community a grief that you are carrying. In so doing, we will bear each other’s burdens more lightly.*

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](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](http://uccanoka.org/donate)).*

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.*

Acknowledgements

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## Sermon Text

November 22 was the one-year anniversary of my father's death. About eight months before his death, he went to the doctor to see if there was a reason for some unusual forgetfulness, and the reason was made plain on a CT scan: a stage four glioblastoma behind his right eye, the same illness that afflicted John McCain and Beau Biden. While doctors were able to remove most of the tumor in fairly short order, I had no illusions about his prognosis, even when the doctors were exceedingly reluctant to say what I had already learned: the survival rate for this particular kind of cancer is very low, and at my dad's age it was even lower. I had lost a church member once to this malady, and she only lived about four months after diagnosis.

Knowing things like that did make it easier for me to cope with my father's suffering and eventual death, but it wasn't ever easy. For a while after he died, I had those moments when grief sneaks up on you in the middle of doing something else seemingly unrelated. In the midst of driving down Interstate 75 in Georgia a month after his death, I was listening to Handel's *Messiah*. Everything was fine until the recording reached the "Hallelujah Chorus," because when those triumphant opening words pealed through my minivan, the image of my father standing in the church choir on Christmas and Easter, singing that refrain for years on end, came flooding into and out of my eyes while the van was speeding along at 75 miles per hour.

A day or two later, I was walking with my family through Legoland, and we came upon a gas station-themed display. There in front of it was a life-sized, blue, 1964 Mustang built entirely out of LEGO. I immediately recalled how my dad had always loved Mustangs, in no small part because his old Mustang once saved his life in a head-on collision with a drunk driver. I was on the cusp of asking my son to go stand by the car so I could take a picture for Papa when I remembered, and there I was, weeping in the middle of a theme park.

Most recently, a few days before what would have been my dad's 77<sup>th</sup> birthday, I was laid low once again when I came to realize that some abiding depression was actually grief connected to not having my dad around for Christmas. I was working at my desk here at church when it happened, and when I realized what lay under my melancholy, I was abruptly thrown into a full-on ugly cry, one that resulted in me leaning over in my chair because I didn't want passersby to see me through my office window.

In the first two cases, I had my wife right there, my person on whom I lean when my ability to cope with stress and sorrow is overtaxed by reality. In the latter one, I was talking online with two dear friends who helped me get through the moment because I was ill-equipped to cope with it in solitude. Because make no mistake—the world tells us we should all be Kryptonian, walking around with a big S on our chests, because we're built that way, right? Or maybe it's that we're supposed to take consolation in the fact that everything happens for a reason? That it's all part of God's plan? That God won't let us be tested beyond our strength?

Well folks, let's be real here for a moment. That's nonsense, because every single one of us has faced things beyond our strength. But that hasn't stopped well-meaning Christians from pulling certain Biblical passages out of context, or for that matter, recognizing that the Apostle Paul had some pretty supernatural views on what God did and didn't do in the everyday lives of the people he served. Just look at the Scripture passage I read for this evening. It actually starts so well: "blessed be God and Jesus who consoles us in our affliction, so that we may console others." That's good stuff, right there, and I'm gonna come back to that. But then Paul does go off the rails a little bit: "If we are afflicted, it is for our consolation and salvation." Say what, Paul? Are you telling us there's some divine reason we're suffering? Hogwash.

We suffer because bad stuff happens, and bad stuff happens **because bad stuff happens**. Until my dad, my family had almost zero history of any form of cancer. My dad's particular health circumstances

could well have led to other kinds of cancer, but not a glioblastoma. And if anyone were to tell me that God stuck that monster in my dad's head for some cosmic reason I might have done something that would get me in trouble with the church's Personnel Committee.

And yet, the so-called wisdom persists, and again, we look to Paul, who wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No testing has overtaken you that isn't common to everyone. God is faithful, and **will not let you be tested beyond your strength**, but with the testing God will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

The variation of this that I've always remembered—in an Irish accent, no less, spoken by Carrol O'Connor in the movie *Return to Me*, is "It's the strongest of us that God gives the heaviest burdens."

Again, hogwash.

But the problem in this instance is only partly Paul, inasmuch as it's still Paul suggesting that God hands out suffering for a reason. The rest of the problem lies with us, because in the Church we've forgotten that *Paul wasn't writing to individuals*. This isn't a singular-you, but a plural one! Paul was writing to an entire church! So let's revisit the verse again with that in mind: **God is faithful, and will not let you ALL be tested beyond your [collective] strength, but with the testing God will also provide the way out so that you ALL may be able to endure it."**

As a community.

Even Paul doesn't suggest that we're supposed to be super-powered when it comes to grief, loss, suffering, and pain. Paul's whole point is that we *MIGHT* be strong enough—in community. He even says in Galatians 6:2, "Help carry each other's burdens. In this way you will follow Christ's teachings." That's what the North Metro Grief Support Coalition is all about. That's one of many reasons we all come to church. We come to be here *together*, to pool our strength, our endurance, our caring, our capacity to carry each other's burdens.

**We share each other's woes, each other's burdens bear,  
And often for each other flows a sympathizing tear.**

On that Interstate and by that Mustang, I reached out and took my wife's hand and squeezed my sorrow into her caring grasp. She helped me carry it, reminding me that I wasn't alone. She missed him too, of course. She missed the man who accepted her without a second glance the first time I brought her home. She missed the man who had become her only father, because she had lost her own over forty years earlier. And though her grief didn't manifest in the same way mine did, in that moment when she supported me in my grief, I was surely doing the same for her. We were stronger than the sum of our parts together, because that's how love and mutual care work.

I hope and pray that this has been your experience too, whether in a grief support group or here at church—that you have come to this place and found yourself supported, carried, strengthened, and loved in a community that is so much stronger than the sum of its parts. I pray that you carry this experience with you always, so that it fortifies you in those inevitable moments arise when the grief comes knocking again. I hope that you will remember that you are not alone, and that makes all the difference.

May it be so.

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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.*