



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation
July 23, 2023 ♦ 8th Sunday after Pentecost



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

If you would like to join our mailing list, email office@uccanoka.org and ask to be added.

Prelude

Don Shier

The Church Bell Rings

* Opening Hymn

“Guide Me, O My Great Redeemer” #18

**Guide me, O my great Redeemer, pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but you are mighty; hold me with your powerful hand.
Bread of heaven (x2), feed me till I want no more (x2).**

**Open now the crystal fountain, where the healing waters flow.
Let the fire and cloudy pillar lead me all my journey through.
Strong deliverer (x2), ever be my strength and shield (x2).**

**When I reach the River Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside.
Death of death, and hell’s destruction, land me safe on heaven’s side.
Songs of praises (x2), I will ever sing to you (x2).**

* Call to Worship (adapted from Psalm 99)

One: The Holy One is Sovereign; let the peoples tremble!

Many: God sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!

One: Mighty One, Lover of Justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in the land.

Many: Extol the LORD our God; let us worship at God’s feet!

One: When we cry out to you, God, speak to us as you did in the days of old.

Many: Appear to us as in a pillar of cloud or a column of fire; answer us in the holiness of your love!

One: Let us pray.

Many: God, you have indeed established that your holy realm will come only when we live on earth as you will it in heaven. The Beloved Community will only be made manifest when we live and love with equity. Help us, Holy One, when Jesus’s teachings about those things seem terribly unfair. Sing to us a song more alluring than the strains of the world, that we might trade selfishness for selflessness, greed for grace, and judgment for justice. Join us in a mighty chorus that can make it so! 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.

Special Music

Cole Marshall

*Children ages 3 and up may depart at this time for faith formation activities.
Activity bags are available in the back of the sanctuary for those who might enjoy them.*

Scripture Reading – Matthew 20:1-16

Lector, **Congregation**

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴ and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. ⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶ And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you

standing here idle all day?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' ⁸ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' ⁹ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² saying, **'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'** ¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

"There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" #23

**There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in God's justice, which is more than liberty.
There's no place where earthly sorrows are more felt than in God's heaven;
there's no place where earthly failings have such kindly judgment given.**

**For the love of God is broader than the measures of our minds;
and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful, we would gladly trust God's word;
and our lives would show thanksgiving for the goodness of our God.**

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).

You can support the church further through the RaiseRight program: www.raiseright.com. Our unique church ID is gWKLGX8TRZCN.

Offertory

Don Shier

*** Doxology**

LASST UNS ERFREUEN (#17)

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow.
Praise God, all creatures here below. Alleluia! Alleluia!
Praise God for all that love has done; Creator, Christ, and Spirit, One.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!**

*** 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

Don Shier

*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 AFTER WORSHIP!

***Those who would like to talk about membership are invited to join Pastor Chris
during Coffee Hour today for a time of conversation and story-sharing.***

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

During my exile to corporate America, I learned one of its biggest rules: don't talk about your salary with other workers! That silence conceals all manner of salary inequities, foremost among them that white guys get paid far more for the exact same work than their counterparts who are women or people of color. That silence enables inequity. Or iniquity. Take your pick!

This happens in the church, too, especially when donations are kept strictly secret. I'm not saying *confidential*, because there's a difference; confidentiality is about sharing information with those who need to know, while secrecy reinforces shame and guilt. In the Church, money-secrecy is rooted in the fear that pastors—and by extension God—will treat people differently based on how much money they give.

Jesus was no stranger to people's anxiety where money was concerned, and in his parable of the landowner's payday he goes right to the heart of it in one of his most important lessons, one that I think is far more powerful than the Good Samaritan and says more important things about the kingdom of heaven. But, as it touches on stuff about which we get so bent out of shape, we don't talk about it nearly as much!

The story is simple enough. A landowner heads out to the 7-11 or the Home Depot or wherever, looking for day laborers. These are, of course, folks who don't have a steady job, subsisting on whatever jobs they can cobble together. They go to places where they know employers will come by, and they hope to be hired. I think we mostly associate this with construction workers and farm workers, and Jesus is sitting firmly with the latter. We should also note that in our contemporary context, day workers in the USA are predominantly immigrants and Latinx, which brings in a whole extra level of social stigmatization. Moreover, the story hits us right in a tender spot in the English rendering, “he saw others standing idle in

the marketplace.” While that should only mean “waiting,” the word “idle” triggers our inherited prejudices about people who are lazy and looking for handouts, a terribly unloving way to think about our unemployed neighbors.

Anyway, the landowner hires some workers and agrees to give them each a *denarius*, a Roman silver coin that is the industry standard for a day’s pay. Later, when the landowner realizes that he needs more workers, he goes back for more several times throughout the day. Thus far, Jesus’s audience is with him, because this is all familiar territory. Then Jesus turns the corner and ticks everyone off.

At the end of the day, the landowner calls in the day-workers so that he can give them their pay. The ones who have been there all day get handed their *denarii* and walk off to the side, satisfied. But to their incredible dismay, the next workers who come up, the ones who worked a couple fewer hours, get the same pay! And then the same thing happens with the next group and the group after that! Those who worked twelve hours? One denarius. Those who worked two? *One denarius*. Cue the grumbling:

It’s unfair!

It’s unjust!

Report this guy to the Better Business Bureau!

Someone call the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission!

Who knows a lawyer who works in employment law??

Neither the grumbling nor our silence are a surprise. If you work twelve hours, you get twelve hours of pay. If you work two, you get two hours of pay. That’s how it works. That’s fair. That’s equal. That’s *equitable*, yeah?

Maybe not.

“Equity” is this political season’s byword. It seems like there’s one word or acronym every cycle that is designed to transform grumbling into votes. During our local school board races four years ago, it was “CSE” for “Comprehensive Sex Education.” Two years ago it was “CRT”—“Critical Race Theory,” a law-school analytical lens by which America’s policies and laws are examined in light of our national history of race inequality. This year, the acronym is “DEI,” which stands for “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” efforts that are designed to meet students where they are and provide to them what they need to succeed.

Let me put it another way.

When I was in elementary school, I was tapped to participate in what we called “Enrichment” with Mrs. Kuzma. It was an equity program, a “Talented and Gifted” class for the kids who succeeded academically enough that we had time and ability to learn more stuff. It enabled classroom teachers to focus more on the rest of the class, while Mrs. Kuzma gave the Enrichment kids special attention and lessons about acting, writing, Greek Myths, how to make pressed paper using old paper and a blender, and so on. That was equity at work—allocating resources in a way that enabled every student to succeed.

In the parable, we’re not talking about academic achievement; we’re talking about hunger. Remember the denarius? It’s not just a day’s pay; it’s enough to buy food for a family for one day. How can a day worker who is only paid for two hours because he was unlucky enough to be picked first afford to feed his family? Won’t they eventually starve? Won’t that reduce the number of available workers and send harmful ripples through the entire economy?

Give us this day our daily bread.

Jesus is telling us that God isn't concerned about how many hours you worked, because you deserve to have your daily bread. You deserve to feed your family. No one goes to bed hungry in the Beloved Community. *Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.*

A couple of months ago, a bunch of you saw the letter to the editor that I got published in the *Star Tribune*. In that letter, I opined that there was no greater test of Christian love than to make sure everyone has enough to eat. Period. No debate, no caveats, no exceptions. Feed the people—or in that case, all public schoolchildren.

Peter, do you love me?

You know I do, Lord.

Feed my sheep.

This lesson is so important to Jesus that he makes it the object of his most impactful deeds. He feeds the multitudes. He dines with those who are deemed untouchable and outcast. He breaks the bread and broils the fish for his friends after he rises from the dead because THAT'S the way they recognize him—he's the guy who feeds people! And of course, he's only following the footsteps of the prophets and leaders who came before him.

Despite this, the multitudes are hungry. Why, in a country where so many people insist we're a Christian nation, are people still hungry?

Simple. We have not yet co-created the Beloved Community. We have not yet taken to heart the implicit demand of this challenging parable and ensured that everyone has enough to eat. We have not yet divested ourselves of the cruel conceit that no one deserves one whit more than what they themselves work to earn, that welfare programs are undeserved handouts, that those who can't or won't work for whatever reasons don't deserve to flourish like those who do.

We pray, "*Give us this day our daily bread*" whenever we gather and then we don't take that to heart. We struggle to take seriously the lesson that in God's realm, Love doesn't keep accounts on who worked the hardest. Love isn't a scarce commodity. Love is freely given to everyone, because everyone deserves love—and a full belly at the end of the day. We shouldn't be envious because God chooses to be generous.

When I wrote that letter to the editor, I had a few emails back from folks who really struggled with the whole "feed all the kids" notion. Some objected because they thought I was claiming that the government should feed everyone (I wasn't, but that's not a bad idea). Some objected because they had reversed the math, insisting that kids in the Wayzata didn't need a handout, as if every kid there comes from a rich family. I got a little taste of the grumbling that Jesus endured, that any of us will inevitably endure when we preach a truly loving Gospel that proclaims God's love for all people with no exceptions. But at the end of the day, when the workers come in for their pay, we have to remember that so long as there are empty bellies, Love will challenge all of our notions about deserving and fairness. Jesus is clear about what is righteous:

Feed them all.

Love them all.

Go and do likewise.

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.