



Pride Sunday

First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Anoka, Minnesota

June 25, 2023 ♦ 9:30am



We are an Open and Affirming Church.
No matter who you are or
where you are in your life's journey,
you are welcome here.



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 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 and ask to be added.

Prelude

Gideon Scheeler

The Church Bell Rings

*** Opening Hymn**

“In the Midst of New Dimensions” #391

Original by Julian Rush; alternate lyrics by Rev. Chris McArdle

We sang this last year, and the final verse applies more than ever so we're singing it again.

**In the midst of new dimensions, in the face of changing ways,
 Who will lead the anxious peoples wandering in their separate ways?**

**[refrain] God of rainbow, fiery pillar, leading where the eagles soar,
 We your people, ours the journey now and ever, now and ever, now and evermore.**

**There were Jonathan and David, one a shepherd, one of kings;
 Each was precious to the other, greater love than anything. [refrain]**

**From the east came Ruth, Naomi, women to each other clung,
 Finding family in each other, pledging love in sacred tongue. [refrain]**

**There was one before all others Jesus loved beyond the rest,
 Jesus, there for one last dinner, John's head held against his chest. [refrain]**

**Should laws passed by fearful people cause us to withdraw in pain,
 May God's blazing, phoenix spirit transform hate to love again. [refrain]**

A Time for Children

The Baptisms of Mara Jade, Aayla, and Steven Allbee

Parents: Nicole and Christopher Allbee

One: In the sacrament of baptism, we are following an ancient custom. Joseph and Mary brought the infant Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem to be blessed and named as God's own. In the early Christian church, entire households, including children were initiated into the faith through baptism. John baptized Jesus. And this is what Jesus came to know in that moment: After he was baptized and while he was praying, he knew God loved him deeply.

Many: **We believe God made human life to be good and that children share in the original blessing of all living things. In this moment of dedication and grace we praise the goodness of God.**

Questions and Promises of the Parents

Pastor: As parents, do you desire to have your children baptized into the faith and family of Jesus Christ?

Parents: We do.

Pastor: Will you raise your children in a home where trust is cultivated, love is your guiding principle, and a spirit of grace prevails?

Parents: We will.

Pastor: Will you participate in communities and provide opportunities for your children to encounter that which is sacred and worthy in life and where your children may learn and appreciate the Christian heritage?

Parents: We will.

Pastor: Will you teach your children to follow in Christ's way, to resist evil, to stand up against injustice, and to serve others?

Parents: We will.

Pastor: Remembering God's great love for us, will you teach your children to love others with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength?

Parents: We will.

Questions and Promises of the Children

Pastor: Mara Jade, both Jesus and The Doctor believed the same thing – that they never met anyone who wasn't important. Do you promise to treat everyone you meet with that same assurance of importance?

Mara Jade: I do.

Pastor: And do you promise to never stop learning, never stop loving, and never stop striving to be the person that Jesus knows you are and can be?

Mara Jade: I do.

Pastor: Aayla, today we're asking you to make a promise to always be kind, to always fight for what's right, and to learn from Jesus and from your loved ones how to always be a good person. Do you promise to do this?

Aayla: I do.

Pastor: And do you promise to never stop learning, never stop loving, and never stop striving to be the person that Jesus knows you are and can be?

Aayla: I do.

Pastor: Mara Jade and Aayla, may the Force be with you.

Mara Jade and Aayla: And also with you.

Congregational Promise

One: Let us, the community of First Congregational Church, pledge our love and support to this family.

Many: **We covenant with you on behalf of your children. We rejoice in the hope and love which they represent. We unite with you to labor and pray for their spiritual growth, that they may know and trust the goodness of God. On behalf of the whole church of Jesus Christ, we welcome them.**

Baptismal Prayer

One: Let us pray. Creator God, faithful parents have come into your presence this morning. Fill them with your wisdom so they may teach their children to know and love God. May they and their children be ever conscious of the beauty of the world and the goodness that surrounds them. May they have the courage to face evil and the faith to transcend it. Grant them strength of body and clarity of spirit, that they may enjoy fullness of years and live to do your will in faithfulness.

As the Baptismal waters are blessed:

Recalling now your endless and boundless love, we ask that you bless this water, that it might be for us both symbol and substance of your love, reminding us to love others as you have loved us. Amen.

Baptism

Pastor: What name have you given this child?

Parents: Steven Wayne Allbee.

Pastor: Steven Wayne Allbee, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all.

Pastor (to Aayla and Parents): And what is your name?

Parents and Aayla: Aayla Michelle Allbee.

Pastor: Aayla Michelle Allbee, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all.

Pastor (to Mara Jade): And what is your name?

Mara Jade: Mara Jade Lynn Allbee.

Pastor: Mara Jade Lynn Allbee, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all.

Congregational Blessing

One: Let us now, as the people of God and the Body of Christ, bless these children together:

Many: May your names be honored and respected for wisdom and good deeds. May God's blessing be upon you, now and always. May you be a joy to your families and may you bring blessing to humanity and glory to the name of God. We welcome you into our midst on behalf of the whole church of Jesus Christ. Amen!

Bestowing of the Congregational Gifts

Special Music

“Rainbow”
Laurie Elvig, Soloist

Kacey Musgraves

*When it rains, it pours / But you didn't even notice it ain't rainin' anymore
It's hard to breathe when all you know is / The struggle of stayin' above the risin' water line
Well, the sky has finally opened / The rain and wind stopped blowin'
But you're stuck out in the same ol' storm again
You hold tight to your umbrella / Well, darlin', I'm just tryin' to tell ya
That there's always been a rainbow hangin' over your head
If you could see what I see, you'd be blinded by the colors
Yellow, red, and orange, and green, and at least a million others
So tie up the bow, take off your coat, and take a look around
Oh, tie up the bow, take off your coat, and take a look around
Everything is alright now / 'Cause the sky has finally opened
The rain and wind stopped blowin'
But you're stuck out in the same ol' storm again
Let go of your umbrella / 'Cause, darlin', I'm just trying to tell ya
That there's always been a rainbow hangin' over your head / it'll be alright.*

*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 15:21-28

Lector, **Congregation**

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "**Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.**" ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

"Jesus, You Have Truly Called Us"

BEACH SPRING

*Daniel Charles Damon sets powerful lyrics to a beloved and well-known tune,
calling for us all to courageously rise to the challenge of this hour.
The tune is the same as "As We Gather at Your Table" #332*

**Jesus, you have truly called us, still today we hear your voice.
Lead us onward, lead us upward, till all people can rejoice.**

**[refrain] Meet us in our time of trial, fill us with your Spirit's power,
As we stand before oppression, give us courage for this hour.**

**Jesus, save us from poor choices. Hatred, running like a thread
through the fabric of our hist'ry, mars our faith and leaves us dead. [refrain]**

**Jesus, save us from our weakness, from deceit and from despair.
Move us on to new creation in a world that's free and fair. [refrain]**

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

Gideon Scheeler

* 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!

* 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

Gideon Scheeler

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

God loves you in the fullness of your vibrant humanity.

You are lovingly made in the Image of God.

There is nothing on heaven or earth that can separate us from God's love.

There; I've reestablished those bedrock truths of our faith. They always need to be said, particularly because there are so many in the Church who say the opposite. For years, that's why we've had churches involved in Pride. It's all about countering the destructive theologies that marginalize and endanger LGBTQ+ folks. It's about celebrating our queer neighbors in all their beauty. And for sure, we do that all the time.

But this year it's different. Discrimination, hate, and legislation targeting the LGBTQ+ community are on the rise in ways we haven't seen for a while. As an Open and Affirming church that celebrates Pride, we can't just say, "God loves you!" We have to ALSO address these other dynamics, particularly in a way that seeks to build bridges across which we can meet our fearful neighbors and show them what love looks like when it isn't contributing to suicidal ideations among our LGBTQ+ youth and adults. We need to speak a fierce word about efforts to "reclaim the rainbow."

Did you know that's a thing? Just in the last week or so, a Christian rapper released a song about it. I've seen bumper stickers that contain the phrase. There are countless t-shirts and other purchaseables online that insist, either explicitly or more subtly, that the LGBTQ+ community co-opted the rainbow from the Church, from Christianity, from the Bible, from God.

The gist of this campaign is the Biblically-literalist conviction that God created the rainbow for one purpose: to remind us all that God would not again seek to destroy the earth with the waters of a flood. These proponents insist that any other messaging about the rainbow violates and disrespects this story.

And yet.

While Genesis says that the rainbow is the sign of a covenant between God and all living creatures, the whole point is so that GOD can remember that covenant. The rainbow is there so that GOD will remember God's promise to not wipe out air-breathing life again. And what is that promise if not a promise to not resort to violence? To not hit the cosmic reset button? To not drag the folder of humanity into the trash bin? To remember God's great love for everything and everyone God created and NOT treat it like something that can be easily discarded?

Please. Tell me that's not the whole point of Pride. Whether it was adopted by queer organizers for religious reasons or not, in the Church we affirm our perspective that the Pride rainbow is a reminder to us of how much God loves *all living creatures* and promised to not harm them.

Which is, of course, exactly what's happening. Legislatures across this country are passing laws that are ostensibly about protecting children, but in effect they are *harming* LGBTQ+ children. Proponents of these laws build from the utterly false premise that children are undergoing irreversible surgical and medicinal procedures. Were that true, I could understand—but it's not. Almost no children are having their sexual organs and other body parts removed or altered. Puberty blockers only delay some of the physical developments of puberty, and the only potential negative side effect I've unearthed is an addressable potential for bone density loss and a possible delay in growth plate closure (who doesn't want to be taller?) (I confirmed this through St. Louis Children's Hospital, by the way.) No reputable doctor or hospital will do any of these things without parental consent and without the active participation of mental health professionals, and all of these things are considered standards of care for LGBTQ+ youth by major medical associations.

What lies underneath these pushbacks is something that I see happening in the Scripture lesson I took today from the lectionary. It's actually Matthew's version of the Syrophenician woman story from Mark, but with a key added component. Jesus is trucking around in Tyre and Sidon—Gentile lands—and a local woman approaches him, shouting her need for Jesus to come heal her daughter. She recognizes his authority and appeals to his power. Jesus plays it cool, but the disciples have a little freak-out. They shout, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us!" Then we get that same moment from Mark where Jesus doesn't yet realize he was sent to help EVERYONE, and he momentarily denies the woman's request until she persuades him he's way off-base.

It's what the disciples say that's new to the story. "Send her away, for she keeps shouting at us!" Take note, friends. By that claim, they're showing us that their beef with her isn't that she's a Gentile. It isn't that she's a woman. It's that she's *bothering* them. *Inconveniencing* them. She's forcing them to think about things they haven't had to think about—in this case, the wellbeing of their Gentile neighbors, folks they've never had to worry about because their home culture has been built all around their Jewish identity and relationships.

There's not a lot of daylight between, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting at us!" and, "I don't have a problem with LGBTQ+ people; they just don't need to rub my face in it!"

That's the biggest pushback of all to Pride, yes? Straight and cisgender folks haven't had to deal with the existence of queer folks in their midst because our society has been set up to keep them marginalized and silenced. It's only when they get loud that the inevitable pushback turns extra nasty, as we see today. Bud Light did a social media sponsorship of a trans activist, and homophobic folks cancelled them. Target—which has been selling Pride merch for years—suddenly gets noticed for selling swimsuits that make it easier for trans women to tuck their genitalia, and it's now a gigantic problem. Churches start putting up rainbows, and Christians who haven't really ever thought about it before suddenly have a problem.

Two Thursdays ago, Jennifer got a call from someone whose great-aunt used to go to church here. If you want to know who she was, ask me later! The caller asked for me to call him back, and when I saw the note the next day, I did. He started out by reaffirming his connection to the church through his great-aunt, and he said he wanted to talk about our Pride flags. I was cautiously hopeful that Great-Aunt would have loved them.

Before he returned to that topic, he told me more about his aunt—her name, when she died, where she worked in Anoka, his belief that she had left the church money in her will.

And then he asked me to take the flags down. It's a plot by Satan, you see. By the Devil to indoctrinate our children. Did you know that the prominent LGBTQ+ advocacy group GLSEN has stickers available for students in the Mounds View school system? Great-Aunt would be so ashamed. His parents would be so ashamed. Please, would you take them down? All of this Pride stuff is about luring children into the gay lifestyle. *Et cetera, ad nauseum.*

I will gladly say this much: the man was kind. He didn't shout at me. He spoke politely and from his heart, and as I reflected on that heart later, I observed: his heart was in the right place. It was just pointed in the wrong direction. He genuinely wants children to be safe; he's just operating from a pretty wide set of false and misleading premises about what keeps children safe.

These laws aren't keeping children safe.

Loving children in all their vibrant humanity keeps children safe.

Gender-affirming healthcare keeps children safe.

Queer kids seeing a church flying the rainbow keeps children safe.

Teaching kids in school about gender and sexuality keeps children safe.

Making sure queer kids know you've got their back keeps children safe.

Perhaps if had been in a more confrontational mood I might have argued with him, but thankfully, this happened over the phone and not on social media where such interactions grow heated more easily. Plus, as I said, he was genuinely nice. I did tell him, "Sir, I'm sure you know that because we fly those flags I'm not going to actually take them down; we believe very differently about this." That was the extent of my rebuttal, and then I thanked him for his politeness. I assured him that the calls and letters that sometimes come are never as nice as he was, and I appreciated him for that. I told him if he were to ever want to sit down for a cup of coffee and learn about why we fly those flags I'd be happy to do so.

What I really wanted to say was, "Oh, sweet man. If you could see what I see, you'd be blinded by the colors." For of course that's where we come back to: each of us is so beautifully made in the Image of God, for only in the fullness of life can we see that image reflected in this world—and there is no one on this earth who doesn't reflect that Image in some way, shape, or form. Our role as lovers of Jesus and walkers of his Way is to be like the Caananite woman who shouted her truth, that all who are treated like dogs might ultimately be recognized as beloved neighbors who deserve us to all recognize that they are already whole. Unbroken. NOT sinners. NOT abominations. NOT condemned.

There's a rainbow hanging over all of our heads, and it's always meant that God loves us. Let us keep shouting THAT from the hilltops and in the streets until the day we reach the Beloved Community.

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.