



Ash ~~Wednesday~~ Sunday

First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Anoka, Minnesota

March 5, 2023 ♦ 8:30am & 10:30am



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>

Prelude

Koki Sato

Welcome

* Opening Hymn

“My Life Flows on in Endless Song” #476

**My life flows on in endless song; above earth's lamentation,
I hear the sweet, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.
Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing;
it finds an echo in my soul—how can I keep from singing?**

**What though my joys and comforts die? My Savior still is living.
What though the shadows gather 'round? A new song Christ is giving.
No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that Rock I'm clinging;
since Love commands both heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?**

**When tyrants tremble, sick with fear, and hear their death knells ringing;
when friends rejoice both far and near, how can I keep from singing?
In prison cell and dungeon vile our thoughts to them are winging;
when friends by shame are undefiled, how can I keep from singing?**

**I lift my eyes; the cloud grows thin; I see the blue above it;
and day by day this pathway smooths, since first I learned to love it.
The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing;
all things are mine since I am Christ's—how can I keep from singing?**

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.*

Special Music

"Seasons of Love"

Jonathan Larson

Anoka UCC Chancel Choir; Don Shier, Director

*Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes,
five hundred twenty-five thousand moments so dear.
Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes;
how do you measure, measure a year?
In daylights, in sunsets, in midnights, in cups of coffee;
in inches, in miles, in laughter, in strife?
In five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes;
how do you measure a year in the life?
How about love? Measure in love. Seasons of love.
Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes,
five hundred twenty-five thousand journeys to plan.
Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes;
how do you measure the life of a woman or a man?
In truth that she learned or in times that he cried.
In bridged he burned or the way that she died.
It's time now to sing out though the story never ends.
Let's celebrate, remember a year in the life of friends.
Remember the love. Measure in love. Seasons of love.*

The Imposition of Ashes

Introduction

One: Throughout Scripture, ashes are a sign of confession and repentance. They are worn as an outward sign of an inner contrition. They are a reminder that our mortal lives are but for a moment, while the steadfast love of God is forever. But if our lives are so ephemeral, so brief, how do we measure them? How do we assess their value? Do we measure them in Sundays attended, in prayers prayed, in Baptisms remembered? Do we measure them in bank accounts, in stock portfolios, in championship rings?

Many: **How do we measure a year in the life?**

Confession

One: As disciples of Jesus the Christ, we are called to walk his Way of steadfast neighbor-love and ministry to the world. The Church has often done this through fasting, repentance, prayer, study, and works of love. These and other things we do help us reestablish the Word as our center, our north star, our measuring stick. Let us confess those things that distract us and lure us off the path toward the Beloved Community.

A time of silence is observed for personal confession.

One: Let us pray.

Many: Most holy and merciful God, we confess to you and to one another, and to the whole communion of saints in heaven and on earth, that the messiness of our lives has led us away from you and from Love. Help us to remember the Love, Holy One.

One: We have not loved you with all our heart, mind, strength, and life. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven.

Many: Help us remember the Love, O God.

One: We have not listened to your call to serve as Christ served us. We have not been true to the mind of Christ. We have grieved your Holy Spirit.

Many: Help us remember the Love, O God.

One: We confess to you, O God, all our past unfaithfulness: the pride, hypocrisy, and impatience in our lives,

Many: Help us remember the Love, O God.

One: Our self-indulgent appetites and ways and our exploitation of the earth as we dominate it for our own selfish ends,

Many: Help us remember the Love, O God.

One: Our anger at our own frustration and our envy of those more fortunate than ourselves,

Many: Help us remember the Love, O God.

One: Our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts, and our dishonesty in daily life and work,

Many: Help us remember the Love, O God.

One: Our negligence in prayer and worship, and our failure to commend the faith that is in us,

Many: Help us remember the Love, O God.

One: Accept our repentance, O God, for the wrongs we have done. For our neglect of need and suffering and our indifference to injustice and cruelty,

Many: we commit to measuring in Love, O God.

One: For all false judgments, for uncharitable thoughts toward our neighbors, and for our prejudice and contempt toward the earth itself,

Many: we commit to measuring in Love, O God.

One: For our waste and pollution of your creation and our lack of concern for those who come after us,

Many: we commit to measuring in Love, O God.

One: For our failure to protect those who most need protection, among them our lakes, rivers, oceans, and skies,

Many: we commit to measuring in Love, O God.

One: Restore us, O God, and let your anger be transformed to delight.

Many: Teach us how to measure in Love, O God!

Receiving the Ashes

One: Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth. May these ashes remind us to remain humble and to measure in love, through Jesus Christ our Savior.

Many: Amen.

You are invited to come forward to receive ashes. Please return to your seat by another path.

Your forehead will be marked with ashes in the shape of a cross, and the pastor will say:

“Remember the Love. Measure in Love.” When all have returned to their seats:

One: Accomplish in us, O God, the work of your salvation,

Many: That we may show forth your glory in the world.

One: By the cross and passion of our Savior,

Many: help us to remember the Love and measure in Love. Amen!

Scripture Reading – Psalm 84 (NRSV, *alt*)

How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! ² My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. ³ Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my Sovereign and my God. ⁴ Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. Selah ⁵ Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. ⁶ As they go

through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools. ⁷ They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion. ⁸ O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah ⁹ Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed. ¹⁰ For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness. ¹¹ For the LORD God is a sun and shield; she bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly.

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

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

“Beautiful City”

Stephen Schwartz

Anoka UCC Chancel Choir; Don Shier, Director

*Out of the ruins and rubble, out of the smoke,
out of our night of struggle, can we see a ray of hope?
One pale thin ray, reaching for the day. We can build a beautiful city, yes, we can, yes, we can.
We can build a beautiful city, not a city of angels, but we can build a city for all.
We may not reach the ending, but we can start slowly but truly mending, brick by brick, heart by heart.
Now, maybe now, we start learning how. We can build a beautiful city, yes, we can, yes, we can.
We can build a beautiful city, not a city of angels, but we can build a city for all.
When your trust is all but shattered, when your faith is all but killed,
you can give up, bitter and battered, or you can slowly start to build
a beautiful city, yes, we can, yes, we can. We can build a beautiful city,
not a city of angels, but finally a city for all.*

Prayer

One: Let us pray. We have given, and now we prepare to go from this place, Holy One, bearing the ashen crosses of reflection and penitence. We pray that we

might remember that these crosses are reminders to live humbly, not billboards that advertise our piety.

Many: Help us to stay humble, O God.

One: May these crosses, long after we wash them away, remind us that a faith that does not cry out and work for justice is an empty faith, for Jesus calls us to lives of action.

Many: Help us to stay focused on justice, O God.

One: May these ashen crosses leave an imprint upon our hearts, Mothering God, that lead us to speak and act with kindness always.

Many: Help us to be kind, O God.

One: Most of all, Ancient of Days, we recognize that humility, justice, and kindness are all facets of the same reality, the Beloved Community toward which you point us. Give us the imagination to measure the Love in ways that always build each other up and move us ever closer toward your blessed realm where all things are done on earth as in heaven.

Many: Thy will be done, O God!

One: And now, Lover of All, hear us as we pray to you together:

Many: *(The New Zealand Prayer)*

**Eternal Spirit, Earth-Maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all, Loving God, in whom is heaven:
The hallowing of your name shall echo through the universe!
The way of your justice be followed
by the peoples of the earth!
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom
sustain our hope and come on earth.
With the bread we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.
For you reign in the glory of the power that is love,
now and forever.
Amen.**

Reprise

“My Life Flows on in Endless Song” #476 (v. 4)

**I lift my eyes, the cloud grows thin; I see the blue above it;
and day by day this pathway smooths, since first I learned to love it.
The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing;
all things are mine since I am Christ’s—how can I keep from singing?**

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

Ash Wednesday is the gateway to Lent, the church season of confession and repentance, so I have something to confess:

I have the wrong Broadway song in my head.

It’s supposed to be “Seasons of Love” from *Rent*, the Pulitzer prize-winning musical by Jonathan Larson. That’s the song Don picked. That’s what the choir sang. But it’s not the song in my head. That belongs to a particular track from *Hamilton* called “Non-Stop,” and it features this particular line: **why do you write like you’re running out of time, write day and night like you’re running out of time...**”

Maybe that’s because Jonathan Larson died on January 25, 1996, the day before *Rent* had its first preview performance. It makes me wonder if he wrote like he was running out of time, even though he didn’t know in any conscious way that his heart was coming apart at its seams (he died by an aortic dissection that had not been diagnosed even though he had gone to the hospital several days in advance because of chest pains).

Rent was first performed as a staged reading in 1993. Then, for the next three years, Larson and his director and producers collaborated and edited the work until it was finally ready for its Off-Broadway premiere. Three years—but in hindsight, we know he was running out of time, and given the critical and popular success of *Rent*, it seems as if he used his remaining time well and truly. Larson will live forever in the hearts of all Broadway babies for his contributions to the medium.

Not to be morose, but we're running out of time, too. That's a traditional focus of Ash Wednesday. That's the point of the ashes. The traditional formula that I'm supposed to say when I paint your head with ashes is, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." It's a direct reference to Genesis, shortly after the first humans have disobeyed God and been cursed for their inability to follow a simple instruction. At the end of the curse at Genesis 3:19, God says, "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return." References to that show up periodically in the Psalms and in Job, among other places. They're pretty much always there to remind us that we're not all that. We're dirt. Dust. Formed out of the substance of the ground and given the breath of life, a breath that will one day depart our bodies, that our bodies may be returned to the earth and become dust again. **It's the Circle of Life.** Cue Elton John.

On Ash Wednesday we're supposed to focus on that mortality, in the hopes that it will teach us humility. But today, these ashes remind me that maybe we should be living as if we were running out of time. Or more to the point, we ought to be living a life that is measured in love. Maybe for some people that is cups of coffee! For many of us it's laughter. For too many it's strife. It's a little bit different for each one of us, for we each give and receive Love a little differently. But in the Church, there's a particular measurement of Love that we mustn't forget: *Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my Sovereign and my God.*

The Church hasn't always remembered that Love. That's why so many people fell out of love with the church—it didn't measure in love, but in sin. A lot of the time Ash Wednesday is about that. The traditional liturgies are rife with sin-talk. We're dirty sinners! We have to repent! We have to accept Jesus and set aside all our sinning or we're bound for the lake of fire!

The longer I've pastored, the less use I've had for sin-talk. That isn't to say it doesn't have a place; we do, after all, say and do things that harm ourselves and others. That disappoint God. That fail to let the Spirit in each of us shine like a diamond. But the Church has spent so long focusing on that to the exclusion of radical, unfettered, joyous LOVE that we shouldn't wonder why so many of our neighbors have little use for church. It's a real drag to be told all the time that you should be ashamed of yourself.

That was how it had been at my first church upon my arrival. They had had a pair of married pastors for only nine months before I came, pastors who held a much more conservative theology, and I half-wonder if during those nine months the congregation heard the word "sin" more than they heard the word "love." Almost immediately after I started, several church members pointed me toward a video of one particular Sunday morning in which the pastor, who had left the pulpit and walked all the way down to the first row that actually had people in it, preached angrily about how Christians are supposed to call out evil and sin, specifically naming prostitution and homosexuality. In an even more powerful piece of testimony, two different church members told me early on how weary they had been over the sin-talk, going home every Sunday feeling horrible about themselves.

We have to measure in Love.

Scriptures like today's remind me of that. Yes, we are ephemeral. Temporary. Altogether briefly in this life. As one of the Animaniacs once sang (it was a television cartoon from the early 1990s):

**It's a great big universe
and we're all really puny.
We're just tiny little specks
about the size of Mickey Rooney.
It's big and black and inky**

and we are small and dinky.

It's a big universe and we're not!

We could take lyrics like that, or hymns designed to push the same message, and walk out feeling a bit deflated. I get it. When the point is sin, that's how it goes. We're supposed to feel ashamed and guilty of our sin, so that we might feel more motivated to repent of it and live more wholesome lives. It's a big stick getting swung at our heads.

Maybe we should try carrots instead. Or if you're like me, let's measure that love in chocolate!

Because however much sin might abound in our historic liturgies and in the Scriptures, there's even more love. The Psalmist sings, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" That is the question! And the answer is *so simple*.

How can God not be mindful of us when God is Love?

How can God not be mindful of us when even the sparrow finds a home in the courts of the LORD?

How can God not be mindful of us when God *became* us just to be closer to us?

Why do birds suddenly appear,

every time, you are near?

Just like me, they long to be, close to you?

When the voice of heaven, by which I mean Karen Carpenter, sings the Good News like that, how can we keep from singing? How can we not just burst into song?

I know people who don't much love musical theater. They can't suspend their disbelief that people would actually just burst into song and sing out their joys and sorrows. They probably think we're heretics for doing Broadway during Lent! But if you ask me, spontaneous, musical exclamations of joy are a whole lot more inspiring and inviting than being shamed at church. On this Ash [Sunday], remember that. Measure in Love. Remember that the final lyric of the first story in Scripture is, "God saw everything that she had made, and indeed, it was very good."

It's time now to sing out

for the Story never ends...

... Remember the Love.

Amen.

Lenten Discussions Schedule

Our 2023 Lenten Discussions will center on expanding our awareness of our Indigenous neighbors and challenges they face in Minnesota and the United States today.

Each evening begins with a community meal of soup at 5:30p.m. in the Fellowship Hall. One of two available soups each night will be vegetarian. The education programming will take place in the Adult Education room and begin at approximately 6:15p.m.

- **March 8 – Legislative Priorities of the Indigenous Caucus**
Senator Mary Kunesh, a member, of the Indigenous Caucus in our state legislature, will share with us Indigenous priorities for the 2023 legislative session.
- **March 15 - Indigenous Communities and the Law**
Attorney Christine Jordan, a member of the Blackfeet Nation and an expert in tribal law, will share with us some of the legal challenges faced by Indigenous communities today.
- **March 22 – “Two-Spirit and Native LGBTQ+”**
We will meet and learn from Lenny Hayes, a member of the Sisseton Wahpeton-Oyate in South Dakota and nationally-known trainer who speaks on issues that impact the Two-Spirit/LGBTQ+ community.
- **March 29 – Members of Honor the Earth** will be with us to talk about their efforts to protect Indigenous lands and Minnesota’s natural resources.

◆ First Congregational Church UCC, Anoka, MN ◆



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Pastor – Rev. Chris McArdle

Minister of Visitation – Pastor Kelsey Renk

Director of Music Ministries – Don Shier

Keyboardist – Koki Sato

Moderator – Terja Larsen

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