



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

November 12, 2023 ♦ 24th 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

Centering Music

Gideon Scheeler

The Church Bell Rings

* Opening Hymn

“Now Is the Time Approaching” #609

**Now is the time approaching, by prophets long foretold,
When all shall dwell together, secure and manifold.
Let war be learned no longer, let strife and tumult cease,
all earth a blessed garden that God shall tend in peace.**

**Let all that now divides us remove and pass away,
like mists of early morning before the blaze of day.
Let all that now unites us more sweet and lasting prove,
a closer bond of union, in blessed lands of love.**

**O long-expected dawning, come with your cheering ray!
Yet shall the promise beckon and lead us not astray.
O sweet anticipation! It cheers the watchers on
to pray, and hope, and labor till Christ’s new realm is come.**

* Call to Worship and Opening Prayer (based in part on Psalm 148)

One: Praise the Almighty!

Many: Praise the Exalted One from the heavens; praise her on the heights!

One: Praise her, all her angels and starry warriors!

Many: Praise her, sun and moon and stars of light!

One: Let all praise the name of the Eternal, for her name alone is exalted;

Many: her glory is above the earth and the heavens.

One: Let us pray.

Many: We praise and thank you, Holy One, for reminding us that your love knows no end. Help us to live out that radical Good News in every way that we can, and forgive us when we get it wrong. Renew our conviction that “all are welcome” must truly mean ALL! We pray this in the name of Jesus, by whose life and ministry we learned anew the boundlessness of your love. Amen.

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.

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

“Won’t You Come and Sing for Me”

Hazel Dickens

Alice and Randy Getchell, Kari Johnson, and Mike Benz

*I feel the shadows now upon me / And fair angels beckon me.
Before I go dear sisters and brothers / Won’t you come and sing for me.*

*(refrain) Sing those songs we sang together / In that plain little church with the benches all worn.
How dear to my heart, how precious the moments / We stood shaking hands and singing a song.*

*My burden is heavy, my way has grown weary / I have traveled a road that is long.
And it would warm this old heart my dear brother / If you come and sing me one song.*

*In my home beyond that dark river / Your sweet faces no more will I see.
Until we meet where there's no more sad parting / won't you come and sing for me.*

*(10:30) 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 – Revelation 21:10, 22-27

And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

²² I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³ And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵ Its gates will never be shut by day-- and there will be no night there. ²⁶ People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷ But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

“O Day of God, Draw Near” #611

**O holy city, seen of John, where Christ, the Lamb, does reign,
within whose four-square walls shall come no night, nor need, nor pain.
And where the tears are wiped from eyes that shall not weep again.**

**O shame to us who rest content while lust and greed for gain
in street and shop and tenement wring gold from human pain,
and bitter lips in deep despair cry, “Christ has died in vain!”**

**Give us, O God, the strength to build the city that has stayed
too long a dream, whose laws are love, whose ways are your own ways,
and where the sun that blazes is your grace for all our days.**

**Already in the mind of God that city is prepared:
oh, how its splendor challenges the souls that greatly dare,
yes, bids us seize the whole of life and build its glory there.**

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 9WKLGX8TRZCN.

Offertory

Gideon Scheeler

“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

Gideon Scheeler

*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 BETWEEN SERVICES.

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

At Bible Study last Thursday, I remembered and shared a quote that is, for me, one of the most impactful interpretations I’ve ever encountered about God in Scripture. Unfortunately, I can’t remember who said it, and I’ve never been able to find it again! I’m 99% the scholar was a woman, but that’s as far as I can get. Anyway, here’s the quote, inevitably a paraphrase: “In the Bible, we are watching God learn how to be God.”

Isn’t that amazing? In the beginning, God creates people with free will, and those people immediately begin making choices that turn God bald. From that point forward, it’s as if God is learning not just how to be a God, but learning how to love in a way that doesn’t look to those receiving it like cruelty. God floods the world, and then promises not to do that again. God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and then—at least according to one school of thought—stops, as if saying, “Oh heck this is a terrible idea; don’t do that!!” Then God makes a rule later on reflecting that. Flash forward to the

Christian accounts of the life of Jesus, and we get God choosing Life over death by NOT doing to Rome what God did to Sodom—burning them to a crisp for not aiding the poor and needy.

What's equally amazing but not in a good way is that in the New Testament, we can also see a progression, if not one about God. No, this one is about the Church. The earliest books of the New Testament are the seven undisputed letters of Paul, which are 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans. When we combine those with the Gospels, we get an understanding of Jesus that is really lovely. Jesus and the Jesus Movement that sprung up in the wake of his death are out there trying to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. We see the Jesus Movement trying hard to reject the discriminatory theologies and social demands of their time. They give authority to women. They touch the untouchable. They even try to share all of their possessions collectively and then redistribute that wealth to help the poor and hungry.

But round about Colossians and Ephesians and especially through the Pastoral Epistles of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, all letters purported to be written by Paul but almost certainly weren't, we begin to see the change as the Jesus Movement starts to morph into an institution that would become known as the Church. Women are removed from their positions of influence and authority. Women are once again firmly placed under the authority of their husbands. Paul's earlier comments about honoring earthly leaders get carried to quite an extreme, as evidenced by the total merging of Church and State after Constantine Christianized the empire.

There's no faster way to see this unfortunate evolution play out than in the youngest book of the Bible, Revelation, in chapter 21, a chapter which would mostly otherwise be an absolute vision of loveliness:

I see no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there.

Isn't that amazing, too? A vision of a New Jerusalem. A vision of how the world will be ordered when we have fully co-created the Beloved Community: a place where there's no reason to shut the gates against our neighbors, because all are truly welcome, loved, and celebrated! It's one of my favorite passages in all of Scripture—that is, until you add one just one more verse:

But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written into the Lamb's book of life.

Oh, John of Patmos, you almost had it right! You were so close! But there, in the flip to a new verse, the stratification of society and the Church rears up and undoes all of the amazing grace that preceded it. Dang it.

Happily, orthodox Christian teaching about those gates is not all-encompassing, for we are far from the only corner of the Church where keeping those gates open is a core conviction. But putting a doorstep in those gates does not come without its own pressures. I've been engaged in a conversation this weekend on social media where a few folks have just flat-out called me a false prophet. Folks have accused this church of co-opting the rainbow based on a religious conviction that God *created* the rainbow in that moment of the Flood Story for the explicit purpose of telling people "no more floods." My interpretation that it was a sign that God regretted the violence and the rainbow was a self-reminder that violence isn't the right answer was met with, let's just say, disdain. And of course, our neighbors from down south feel that it's very important to come up here during the parade and make sure we all know just how wrong they think we are.

But here's the good news. When we stick our voices and bodies in that opening and force the gate to stay open, it creates a pathway out of misery. When we show forth the love of Jesus that was so radical, so amazing, so full of acceptance and grace, it heals that which has been wounded. It tells people that *no one* is an abomination. That's what being public witnesses for love is all about: someone, somewhere is going to be touched by that love and find that life is a little less hard. If it saves even one life, isn't worth it?

I don't actually know when our church's mission statement was first developed; perhaps someone here who's been around for a while can educate me on that. But I think this is a good moment to bring it up, because I think this is amazing, too. It acknowledges and honors so much of what it means to be human and to be the people of God, in all of our glorious messiness. I leave you with these powerful words.

The purposes of this church are as follows.

1. to embody the uniqueness of every kind of individual person with diverse, compatible, and conflicting characteristics;
2. to work at accepting and fully encountering the nature of our individual humanness;
3. to provide an experience of a community always struggling to become more caring, open, inclusive, and accepting; and
4. to expose and examine our individuality and community in the light of the truth of Jesus and the Christian approach of redemptive love.

Redemptive love. For that to work, surely the gates must remain open.

Amen.

◆ First Congregational Church UCC, Anoka, MN ◆

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Director of Health Ministries – Jessie Waks, NP

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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.