



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

October 29, 2023 ♦ 22nd 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 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

Koki Sato

The Church Bell Rings

* Medley for the Earth

“O Mighty God, When I Survey in Wonder” #35 (vv. 1-2)

**O mighty God, when I survey in wonder
the world that formed when once the word you said,
the strands of life all woven close together,
the whole creation at your table fed,
my soul cries out in songs of praise to you, O mighty God! O mighty God!
My soul cries out in songs of praise to you, O mighty God! O mighty God!**



**When your voice speaks in rolls of thunder pealing,
your lightning power bursts in bright surprise;
when cooling rain, your gentle love revealing,
reflects your promise, arcing through the skies,
my soul cries out in songs of praise to you, O mighty God! O mighty God!
My soul cries out in songs of praise to you, O mighty God! O mighty God!**



“To You, O God, All Creatures Sing” #17 (vv. 1, 4)

**To you, O God, all creatures sing, and all creation, everything
sings your praises, alleluia!**

**Your burning sun with golden beam, your silver moon with softer gleam
sing your praises, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.**

**To you, O God, day after day, your planet earth in every way
sings your praises, alleluia,
as savory fruit and fragrant flower show forth your glory and your power,
singing praises, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.**

“I Sing the Mighty Power of God” #12 (v. 3)

**On earth there’s not a plant or flower but makes your glory known.
The clouds arise and spread their showers by order from your throne.
All life is but a gift from you and ever in your care;
wherever people gather, you, O God are present there.**

“Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You” #4 (v. 4)

**Mortals, join the mighty chorus which the morning stars began;
boundless love is reigning o’er us, reconciling race and clan.
Ever singing, move we forward, faithful in the midst of strife,
joyful music leads us onward in the triumph song of life!**

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

“For What It’s Worth”

Buffalo Springfield

Anoka UCC String Band

*There's something happening here / But what it is ain't exactly clear
There's a man with a gun over there / Telling me I got to beware*

*(refrain) I think it's time we stop / Children, what's that sound?
Everybody look, what's going down?*

*There's battle lines being drawn / Nobody's right if everybody's wrong
Young people speaking their minds / Getting so much resistance from behind*

*What a field day for the heat / A thousand people in the street
Singing songs and they carrying signs / Mostly say, "Hooray for our side"*

*Paranoia strikes deep / Into your life it will creep
It starts when you're always afraid / Step out of line, the men come and take you away*

*(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 - Matthew 6:19-27

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ²² "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; ²³ but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! ²⁴ "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. ²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

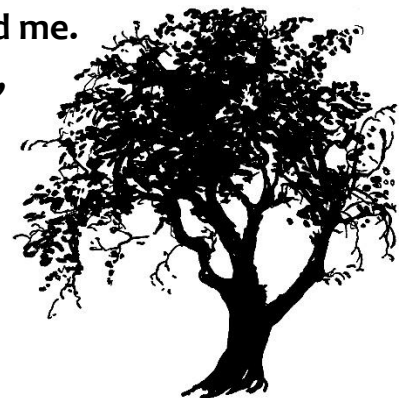
Hymn

"In the Bulb There Is a Flower" #433

**In the bulb there is a flower, in the seed, an apple tree;
in cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.**

**There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;
there's a dawn for every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will come the future; what it holds, a mystery,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.**

**In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;
in our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.**



Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

“Touch the Earth Lightly” #569 (vv. 1, 3-4)

**Touch the earth lightly, use the earth gently,
nourish the life of the world in our care:
gift of great wonder, ours to surrender,
trust for the children tomorrow will bear.**

**Let there be greening, birth from the burning,
water that blesses, and air that is sweet,
health in God’s garden, hope in God’s children,
regeneration that peace will complete.**

**God of all living, God of all loving,
God of the seedling, the snow and the sun,
teach us, deflect us, Christ reconnect us,
using us gently, and making us one.**



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

Koki Sato

* Hymn

“The Earth Is the Lord’s”

*This hymn by the Rev. Carolyn Winfrey Gillette is sung to ST. DENIO,
a tune known better to us in “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise” (#1)*

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.
Creation reminds us, O God, of your love.
By grace we are learning, as year leads to year,
we're called to be stewards, your caretakers here.

Your rainforests nurture the world that we share.
Your wetlands give animals shelter and care.
Your coral reefs cradle the life of the sea,
you've shown us, in love, what your good world can be.

May we be good stewards of all that you give.
Protecting creation wherever we live.
May we be a church that renews and restores
and lovingly cares for this earth that is yours.



* 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.*

COFFEE HOUR IS SERVED BETWEEN SERVICES.

Sermon Text

"Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

The implied answer in this passage is, "Yes, we're of more value than they." Or at least that's what the author of Matthew seems to be asserting here. He has Jesus lean into what I can only assume was a belief that people were of more importance than those birds, and if God cared for those birds, then certainly God would care ever so much more for people.

In the context of assuring people that God did, in fact, care for them, it's a good message. A comforting message. Yes, God loves you! No, the Romans aren't right to treat you that way, and it has nothing to do with your existential value! I'm sure it meant a lot coming from Jesus to hear those words.

But what if that's not the answer that Jesus wanted his listeners to hear? Or perhaps more to the point, what if the Holy Spirit is speaking to us through this passage with the opposite answer? What if we're supposed to realize that no, in fact we are NOT of more value than the nonhuman creatures of the world? What if we're supposed to understand in our religious convictions that the strands of life are all so closely woven together that we are NOT of more value than the birds of the air?

On some level, we know this. I feel like we learned it pretty powerfully, too, from the first nations that American settlers killed and displaced in their rush to claim all the land from sea to shining sea. I remember learning in fourth grade about the original, human inhabitants of the Great Plains. In eastern Nebraska, that largely focused on the Pawnee, the Otoe, the Omaha, and the Ponca. Between that and what I've learned in Minnesota, my awareness has grown about how those native peoples had a more holistic understanding of the natural world, especially of bison and wild rice.

What if the Spirit is reminding us powerfully in these words from Jesus of what the oldest creation stories suggest? They tell us that God put people in the Garden to "till and keep" it, but that phrase in Hebrew can also mean "serve and protect." There's a clear sense in that story that we took the whole notion of human dominance too far, and that "dominate" really should be more along the line of "living as partners" with the birds of the air, the beasts of the land, the fish of the sea, and so on.

Are we of more value than they? Given what researchers have unearthed in recent decades, I'm not sure we can answer yes at all.

The brains of orcas are far more intricately folded than human brains, a sign that their ability to process data may greatly surpass our own. The parts of orca brains that are associated with social and emotional intelligence are far more developed than in human brains. Knowing that, can we possibly think we are of more value than they?

In the 1700s and 1800s, trappers in North America harvested countless beaver. In my younger years, I would help my grandpa go trapping beaver along the river bordering the family farm. He believed that beaver predation of trees led to erosion and land mismanagement, but how wrong he was! Hydrologists consider beaver trapping one of the root causes of much of our environmental damage today. Beavers don't take trees indiscriminately; they take ones whose loss won't hurt the shore. Their dams create wetlands and filter up to 90% of silt, allowing fresher, cleaner water to flow downstream that promotes healthier habitats. Are we of more value than beavers?

Where I came from, farmers would use AR-15 rifles to rapidly kill prairie dogs, which they considered to be a verminous infestation that damaged croplands. Yet we now know that prairie dogs eat native prairie grasses in a way that promotes nitrogen replacement in the soil, leading to healthier plants in those regions. Those plants in turn, along with the dogs' burrows themselves, provide forage and habitat for all manner of other creatures. The prairie dogs also establish their colonies in the wake of passing bison herds, and moreover, we know that it is wolves that keep those bison moving in a way that keeps the soil helpfully churned and spreads seeds throughout vast regions. Are we of more value than prairie dogs, wolves, and bison?

Just before I began writing this sermon, I saw a brief video of a bunch of turtles swimming about. One was flipped onto its back, and it was frantically, but futilely wagging its flippers in an attempt to right itself. As the video progresses, you see about a dozen other turtles converge on their neighbor in distress, and when they're all close enough to provide leverage, one swims under the flailing turtle and flips it over. Even turtles love their neighbor; are we of more value than they?

The language of whales varies from pod to pod. Elephants mourn their dead. Bees pollinate both native plants and human-planted crops. Dolphins are known to use tools and they actually engage in sexual activity for pleasure. Ravens are better at planning than human toddlers. Pigs can be taught to play simple video games. Chimpanzees can recognize themselves in mirrors and on film, a skill humans don't typically pick up until they're four years old. Octopuses are so mysteriously advanced and aware of the

world around them that some people casually wonder if they're sentient aliens from another world! Are we of more value than any of those?

The authors of Genesis 1 imagine God creating the creatures of sea, sky, and land over the course of two days, two days that God saw were good. The creation myths of our religious tradition place before us the undeniable testimony that God delights in the world and all the things that live upon it. Knowing what we know now, might it be the height of arrogance to continue believing that we are of more value than our living neighbors of every kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, and species?

Jesus says that our heart is where our treasure is. Given everything we know, we should all be able to affirm that our greatest treasure is this good earth. We belong to it, not the other way around, and it is our spiritual purpose to protect our heart. We've not done so great with this, of course. We know this. I don't feel like I need to go into the details on that point; we're living with the consequences every day. We even know that sometimes when we think we're doing the right thing, we're doing it wrong, as I've come to understand about my grandfather's trapping of the Big Blue River.

Instead of asking the question Jesus does, "Are you not of more value than they?" let's ask a different one. "Given our knowledge of the intricate, interconnectedness of all living things in an awesome, global ecosystem, how can we not put our time, our talent, and our treasure toward the service and salvation of that ecosystem? Is it not of more importance than anything else?"

Or perhaps the questions might be different ones. On the very first day of Biblical Studies I at Eden Seminary, Professor John Bracke told us this: the Bible isn't history, it's theological reflection. And theological reflection is nothing more than the process of asking and answering two questions:

Who is God? and

What does it mean to be God's people?

From the moment God's breath brooded over the primordial chaos, the answers have been clear. God is the Creator who loves the Creation, and we are God's special servants, tasked with loving and preserving that Creation. Amidst so many critical callings, is there a greater calling than that?

Amen.

Acknowledgements

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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.