



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

October 8, 2023 ♦ 19th 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

Koki Sato

The Church Bell Rings

* Opening Hymn

“O Christ Jesus, Sent from Heaven” #47 (vv. 1-3)

**O Christ Jesus, sent from heaven, Love Eternal, crucified,
welcome Savior, mission bearing, dwell among us, now reside.
Alleluia! Way of Anguish, sow your peace, with us abide.**

**O Christ Jesus, our salvation, Shepherd kind, life’s Bread and Wine,
Word Made Flesh, God’s Blessed Servant, washing feet shows your design.
Alleluia! Living Water, slake our hearts with grace divine.**

**O Christ Jesus, Father-Mother, Spirit, Triune Source of all,
claim our wounded, halting witness; we surrender to your thrall.
Alleluia! Truth Incarnate, stir us with your servant call.**

* Call to Worship and Opening Prayer (drawn in part from Psalm 27)

One: The Fire of Sinai is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

Many: the Ark of Safety is the strength of my life; whom shall I dread?

One: One thing I asked of the Fount of Life – to live in the house of the Womb of Life
all the days of my life,

Many: to behold the beauty of the Wellspring of Life and to inquire in her temple.

One: Hear my cry, Faithful One, when I cry aloud!

Many: Be gracious to me and answer me!

One: If I but believe, I shall see the goodness of She Who Is Faithful in the land of the
living;

Many: Let us wait for the Living God in strength and courage. Let us wait for God
Whose Name Is Holy!

One: Let us pray.

Many: Holy One, help us to pray these prayers with others and not just on our own. In our necessary focus on ourselves and our wellbeing, help us to not forget the “we” in our focus on the “me.” Remind us that “Love your neighbor as yourself” covers both the personal and the collective, that neither is complete without the other. Expand our hearts even as you expand our awareness, that we may look outward even as we look inward. In the name of Jesus we pray; 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

“Alleluia, the Great Storm Is Over”

Bob Franke

Randy and Alice Getchell; Kari Johnson; Mike Benz

*The thunder and lightning gave voice to the night; The little lame child cried aloud in her fright.
Hush, little baby, a story I'll tell, Of a love that has vanquished the powers of hell.
(chorus) Alleluia, the great storm is over, lift up your wings and fly!*

*Sweetness in the air and justice on the wind, Laughter in the house where the mourners have been.
The deaf shall have music, the blind have new eyes, The standards of death taken down by surprise.*

*Release for the captives, an end to the wars, New streams in the desert, New hope for the poor.
The little lame children will dance as they sing, And play with the bears and the lions in spring.*

*Hush little baby, let go of your fear
The Lord loves his own, and your mother is here.
The child fell asleep as the lantern did burn,
The mother sang on 'till her Bridegroom's return.*

Scripture Reading – Matthew 25:31-45 (*alt.*)

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you all that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you all from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you all gave me food, I was thirsty and you all gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you all welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you all gave me clothing, I was sick and you all took care of me, I was in prison and you all visited me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you all did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you all did it to me.' ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You all that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you all gave me no food, I was thirsty and you all gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you all did not welcome me, naked and you all did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you all did not visit me.' ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you all did not do it to one of the least of these, you all did not do it to me.'

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

"God of the Ages, Who with Sure Command" #592

**God of the ages, who with sure command brought
forth in beauty all the starry band
of shining worlds in splendor through the skies,
our grateful songs before your throne arise.**

Your purpose, just, envisions mortals free;
God, set our path toward human liberty.
Still be our ruler, guardian, guide, and stay—
your Word our law, your paths our chosen way.

From war's alarms, from deadly pestilence,
with steadfast care be ever our defense;
your love and faith within our hearts increase;
with bounteous goodness nourish us in peace.

Refresh your people on life's toilsome way;
lead us from night to neverending day;
with truth and love guide us through error's maze,
and we shall give you glory, laud, and praise.

Prayers of the People

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

Koki Sato

* Doxology

NUN DANKET

“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

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

Reprinted music is covered under OneLicense.net #A-715296.

The Call to Worship is largely in the words of Dr. Wil Gafney.

The Scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright ©1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Sermon Text

I feel bad for the goats. They’re so similar to sheep, for starters, and where sheep famously give us wool, goats give us mohair and cashmere. Goat’s milk cheese is amazing, as are other goat-milk products. Flocks of goats are sometimes used to manage landscaping because it requires far less fuel and no pesticides. They can reach terrain that you’d never want to mow. They’ll eat almost any plant, including poison ivy. Their poo is rich in nutrients. Goatscaping helps control erosion and improves biodiversity. It

helps promote oxygen production, carbon dioxide reduction, and pollination. Despite all of this, because Jesus made goats the scape... goats, Satan ended up getting a goat head, cementing the role of goats in an unfortunate melodrama.

It certainly didn't help that Bible authors decided Jesus was a lamb, either. The Lamb of God, right? The one, final, pure, ultimate sacrificial lamb to put people back into God's good graces? In addition to being a generally harmful theology, this whole lamb/goat binary reinforces classical notions of heaven as this place where you go if you've been good, and hell as the place you go if you like to eat Creeping Charlie.

All kidding aside, the real problem here isn't actually about sheep and goats or where they go. The real problem is, in very much the same way that happens when we're talking about the letters of Paul, we tend to fundamentally misread the message. By that I mean that we misunderstand just who Paul—or in this case Jesus—is talking to.

Spoiler: it's US, not ME.

I freely admit that I've misread this thing for years, and it took reading Dr. Wil Gafney's comments about it in her lectionary to put me on a firmer path. Because here's a key moment in this long, oft-cited passage that so many progressive people of faith embrace as a core teaching: **“All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them from one another.”** It turns out, though, that this phrase gets translated very differently depending on your Bible. The New Revised Standard Version which I print in the bulletin says, “All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate **people** from one another.” Several others follow that lead, but the old King James and several others translate it as I initially said: he will separate THEM, meaning THE NATIONS, from one another. I'd also note that the word “people” isn't in the Greek. That's a choice, not a direct translation.

That change from “nations” to “people” makes it that much easier for us to live into one of our most common, Christian habits: individualizing the text. As a result, when we think of sheep and goats, we're worried about whether **I** am a sheep or a goat. Whether **YOU** are a sheep or a goat. Not about whether **WE** are sheep or goats together.

How would our understanding of Matthew 25 change if we recognized that Jesus is talking about **the nations**, and not really about the individuals who make up those nations?

At the risk of being overly snarky, I suspect that some people would shout, “that's socialism!”

But understand, friends. Jesus's prophetic perspective is the same as all the prophets that come before him. The prophets speak a word to the *nations*. Israel's identity in the Hebrew Bible is a collective one. Sure, from time to time the prophets rail specifically against kings, but those kings are stand-ins for the whole nation. Israel concluded during and after the Exile that their kings were to blame—but only inasmuch as the kings were the leaders of the nation to which all Israelites belonged. It was a collective confession, not an act of casting blame elsewhere.

That's hard. There's an ethic in our society that demands each person face up to and own the impact of their own actions. There's far more resistance to us doing the same from our collective, national identity. We teach loudly about Nazi concentration camps, but far less prominently about American ones in California where Japanese-American *Star Trek* actor George Takei spent his childhood. As a nation, we boil racism down to individual acts of discriminatory hate while proving far more resistant to conversations about how we all, collectively, have helped to uphold a system of entrenched unfairness that continues to make life harder for people of color.

Let's put it in the Matthean perspective. When we call upon each other to feed the hungry, our society lifts up those individuals who donate to food shelves. We're far less upbeat about welfare

programs. As I have noted before both inside and outside of this pulpit, the Minnesota law that funds free breakfast and lunch for all public school students met great resistance.

When we talk about welcoming the stranger, stories abound of individual families who welcome immigrants and refugees into their homes, especially lately with the many Ukrainian families fleeing the war. But when we look at this from a macro perspective, the whole conversation devolves into arguments about walls and borders and the pejorative “illegal aliens”.

Jesus celebrates the sheep who took care of the sick, but did he envision a time when sick people would have to crowd-fund their medical care because we, as a nation, have failed to support each other’s health in effective ways?

Jesus also begs us to visit the prisoner. But a supermax prison hardly leaves room for visitation. Solitary confinement, by definition, rules out visitation. Rather than tearing prisons down and finding more holistic ways to respond to crime, we simply build more prisons.

If Jesus were to come back and sort the nations into sheep and goats, would we Americans be wearing wool, or cashmere?

The gospel of American Exceptionalism contends we are sheep; yet claiming to be the Greatest Of All Time sets up a telling acronym.

These aren’t the most uplifting words, but there’s a reason for that. When Jesus lifts up the sheep, he consigns the goats to eternal punishment. Who wants an entire nation to be punished eternally? But remember, friends, that Jesus speaks in metaphor more often than not. He’s using the language of post-mortem existence to comment upon PRE-mortem existence. Those nations he labels sheep have striven to create heaven on earth by working toward the comfort of all their neighbors. Those nations he labels goats have not cared for their neighbors. They have not been their brother’s keeper. They have created hell on earth by leaning heavily into punishment instead of penitence.

But the Good News is that Jesus wouldn’t be telling us this if there were no hope. I believe that his hope springs eternal. God’s hope for us springs eternal. Might that not be one more meaning we can derive from Eden? God warned that the first humans would die if they broke the big rule—but when they did, discovering both guilt and shame, God’s first act, even before punishment, was to recognize that they were naked and provide them with clothing. Grace came first. Then, despite God’s frustration and anger throughout the Scriptures at the failings of humanity, God keeps sending them prophets to call them back on the path of righteousness. Would that even be a thing if God did not have confidence that we are capable of more than we achieve? That we have the power, imagination, and courage to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the prisoner if we but reach out and embrace those Spiritual gifts?

The Story of our faith incorporates a critical conviction: that God came to understand that creating people of free will led to some sorrowful outcomes. But rather than starting over again and getting the same result, God would spend God’s time and love persuading us to be better. Reminding us that we CAN be better. Inviting us to pray every day that God’s will might be done on earth as it is in heaven. Because where there is God, there is hope. And where there is hope, there is possibility. And where there is possibility? There is always the courage to make it so.

Amen.

♦ **First Congregational Church UCC, Anoka, MN** ♦

1923 Third Avenue, Anoka, MN 55303 ♦ (763) 421-3375

Pastor – Rev. Chris McArdle

Minister of Visitation – Pastor Kelsey Renk

Director of Health Ministries – Jessie Waks, NP

Director of Music Ministries – Don Shier

Keyboardist – Koki Sato

Moderator – Terja Larsen

Website: <http://www.uccanoka.org> ♦ Email: office@uccanoka.org

Text-to-Give: 844-334-1477



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.