



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation

September 17, 2023 ♦ 16th 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

“Morning Has Broken”

We sing this hymn today in memory of Mary Beltman, who loved singing this song.

**Morning has broken like the first morning,
blackbird has spoken like the first bird.
Praise for the singing! Praise for the morning!
Praise for them, springing fresh from the Word!**

**Sweet the rain’s new fall sunlit from heaven,
like the first dew-fall on the first grass.
Praise for the sweetness of the wet garden,
sprung in completeness where his feet pass.**

**Mine is the sunlight! Mine is the morning
born of the one light Eden saw play!
Praise with elation, praise every morning,
God’s re-creation of the new day!**

* Call to Worship and Opening Prayer (drawn in part from Psalm 17)

One: Attend to my cries, Holy One, and incline your ear to my words.

Many: Show us your wondrous, steadfast love, O God, Mother of all who seek refuge in you.

One: Guard me as the apple of your eye;

Many: shelter me in the shadow of your wings.

One: May our bellies be filled with plenty;

Many: may our children always have more than enough!

One: Let us pray.

Many: Gracious God, too often we take our children for granted, trusting not in their Spirit-bestowed gifts that are so often unstained by the world. Too often we regard them as extensions of their adults, objects through which we might continue to make our mark on the world. But Jesus reminds us that if we are to achieve the Beloved Community, we cannot do it unless we live and love as children. Help us to welcome the little ones among us and honor their distinctive contributions to our communities, that they might not go astray from the flock. Remind us that our children can lead us back to the paths of grace and love! 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

“There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy”

arr. Marrolli

Kari Johnson, Laurie Elvig, and John Comstock

*There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy, like the wideness of the sea.
There’s a kindness in God’s justice, which is more than liberty.*

*There is no place where earth's sorrows are more felt than up in heaven.
There is no place where earth's failings have such kindly judgement given.*

*For the love of God is broader than the measures of the mind.
And the heart of the Eternal Is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful, we would rest upon God's Word.
And our lives reflect thanksgiving for the goodness of the Lord.*

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And our lives reflect thanksgiving for the goodness of the Lord.*

Scripture Reading – Matthew 18:10-14 (*there is no verse 11!*)

"Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. ¹¹ ¹² What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴ So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

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

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

"Like a Sheep That's Lost and Wandering"
Sung to BEACH SPRING #332. Based in part on Matthew 18:10-14.

Rev. Chris McArdle

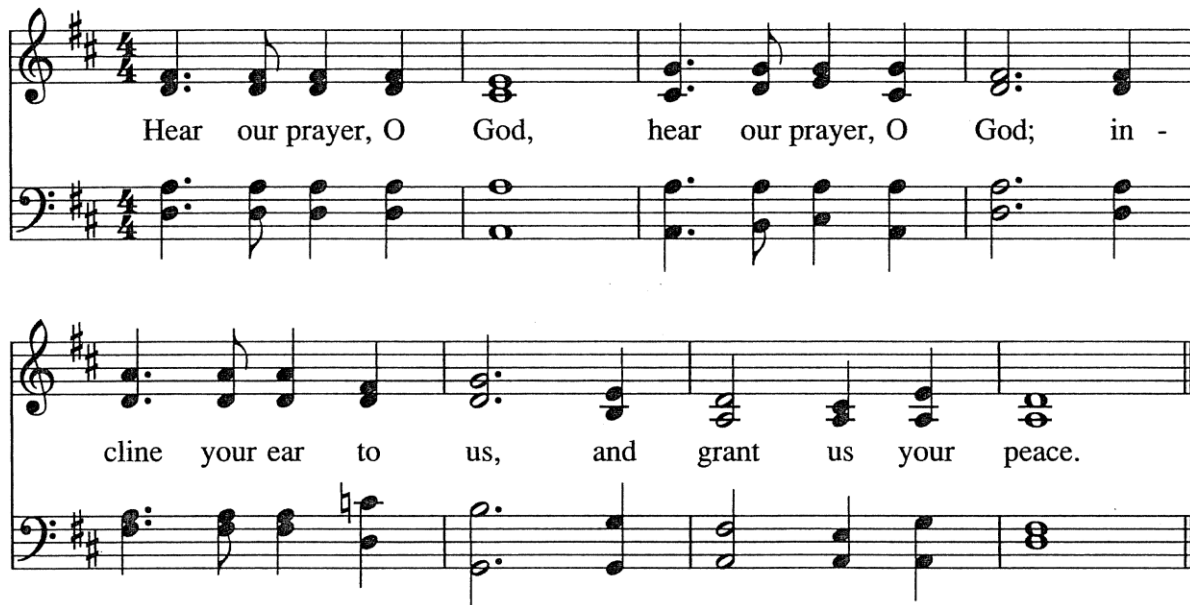
**Like a sheep that's lost and wandering, God we crave your watchful eye.
Look for us in hill and valley, everywhere under your sky.
We are frightened, we are lonely, lost and aimlessly we roam.
Never cease your faithful searching 'til you've brought us all back home.**

**God, our children ask us, beg us, to acknowledge them as whole.
That we greet them as our equals, fully loved in life and soul.
Courage, wisdom are not gifts you give to only those of age,
We must love like little children if this world we mean to save.**

Help us be just like the angels watching o'er us from above.
Helping, guarding, always watching, faithful presence, steadfast love.
Let us cherish children fiercely, wild protection, constant care,
Learning from them, loving with them, 'til our world is free and fair.

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

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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

“God of the Sparrow” #32 v. 3

**God of the rainbow, God of the cross, God of the empty grave,
how does the creature say Grace? How does the creature say Thanks?**

* 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.

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

There’s no way to know whether Luke or Matthew set down the Parable of the Lost Sheep first, but this much is sure: they use the story very differently. Luke’s version opens the 15th chapter in this way: “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them!’” In that telling, the one who has a hundred sheep and loses one is the Pharisee or scribe, and the sheep are likened to the rest of the listeners who are considered socially unclean.

Matthew’s version comes in the middle of a series of teachings that opens with two powerful lessons. Here’s the first:

(18:1-5) At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”² He called a child, whom he put among them,³ and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.⁴ Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

⁵ Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

The second lesson starts with this:

(18:6) ⁶ "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.

Though it seems in that first passage that Matthew has Jesus using children as an object lesson, it becomes clear by verse six that children are no object to Jesus. They're a *subject*—fully formed children of God, who loves them as vital partners in creation. That's not what I see happening in the world. We talk about children's developmental readiness for varying concepts. We even learn in seminary that a nuanced, complex theology isn't the kind of conversation to have with kids—and that's not really wrong. But has it led us to underestimate, and worse, undervalue the belief of a child? Matthew's here to set us on the right path, with Jesus assuring us that the faith of a child is not an immature faith, but a fully-fleshed one with equal validity to any adult faith.

Once we understand that, we can see that Matthew's version of the lost sheep parable is WAY different than Luke's. ***Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of [God].*** In other words, don't objectify the children. Don't take them for granted, or undervalue them. Don't dismiss them with, "Oh, they're just kids." Maybe think twice before saying, "You'll understand when you're older."

If we carry this reasoning through, it invites the question: why did the one sheep—child—go astray? Was it because the shepherd—and here I think it's safe to put our adult selves in the role of the shepherd—didn't give the little lamb its due? Did the lamb decide to go out on its own and experience the great big world that its protector *overprotected* it from? To learn about all those things that it couldn't wait until it was older? Perhaps along the way it does get lost. It's small, after all. Lost in traffic, lost in the hubbub of adult life. Not yet exposed enough to the tricks and pitfalls of life, such that it does still truly need help and now doesn't have it. So God goes searching until that child is found.

This might be the most Generation X sermon I've ever given, especially because there's a whole subgenre of social media memery out there that plays up the hallmarks of Boomers, Gen X-ers, and everyone else younger than that. We in Gen X, whether accurately or not, recall that we came home to empty houses. "Latchkey kids," yeah? We'd take off into the neighborhood and the woods to play alone or with friends, and our folks would say, "Come home by nightfall!" Or maybe like my neighbor Mrs. Masters, we'd just stick an arm out the door with a bell and ring it, signaling that it was dinner time. I can't tell you how many hours I spent slogging barefoot through the water-traps on the golf course, looking for shanked golf balls or capturing tadpoles. Running through the woods on the college campus near my home, watching wood ducks swim in a little pond. Cutting down trees I had no business cutting down and turning them into staffs and swords. Building forts with my friends and then going there with the small cooler stuffed with canned beverages and hastily-made sandwiches stuffed into plastic bags—Baggies brand—that didn't even have a zip closure. We had to use ***twist ties!***

It all makes me so mindful of how protective we are of children today, not that they don't deserve protection. So perhaps the better word isn't even "overprotective" as much as it is "dismissive." In our efforts to protect our children from the dangers of the world, do we shut them up in a box? Do we close them away? Do we put them in a closet and shut the door? Do we deprive them of the chance to experience not just wonder and awe, but shock and dismay?

Children are at the center of so many of our cultural struggles of late, but only in what I think is an objectifying way. You have read and heard it throughout the news: adults going before school boards and library boards to remove books that teach children about sexuality, gender, and race. As if teaching kids

about sexuality will cause them to run out and do it! I've heard parents angrily objecting on the grounds that it would teach children how to pleasure themselves—well, as I say to those parents, I don't know a child that actually needs someone to teach them that! As if teaching white kids about institutional racism will somehow make them into self-haters. Adults are up in arms lately about pronouns and gender and the pejorative word “transgenderism,” all ostensibly to protect their children from rejecting the male-female-God-created-them binary that they see written in Genesis. (Make no mistake; it's a theological argument.)

As a parent, I will admit with chagrin that, like my own parents, I've used that phrase, “Because I'm an adult and I know better.” Or, “Because I know what's best for you.” For sure, there are times when this is true! But there are also times that Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs” (Matthew 19:14). It's just one chapter after he said, “...unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus seems very much to be reminding us that the old Hebrew Bible prophetic call to care for the widows and orphans isn't just a one-way relationship. It's not because they lack the ability. It's because in a patriarchal society that hoards wealth and power in the hands of men, women and children who have no attachment to a man lack the *means*. Not the passion, not the faith, not the capacity. Just the means. Have we globalized that into a cultural prejudice that our children don't know what they want? That they don't know what they need? That they must be taught, but have nothing in turn to teach us? Did we forget the lyric?

***And you, of tender years,
can't know the fears your elders grew by
help them with your youth
they seek the truth before they can die.***

Linda sang for us just last Lent during our last Broadway series, “You've got to be taught to hate and fear... it's got to be drummed into your dear little ear.” If we carry that to its reasonable conclusion, that means that children have things to teach US. Things about grace and love and acceptance, all because they haven't yet been indoctrinated—oh, that word!—to hate and fear. Is Jesus suggesting that this very, unstained love is the love that unlocks the gates of heaven?

Does God seek out and save the lost sheep—the lost child—precisely because it is these little ones whose love can save the world?

I have to tell you, friends, that I love our youth group. I love the kids in it. And it isn't because I get to do Bible Study with them once a month or play Apples to Apples or watch *Twilight Zone* episodes or because I get to instill within them a love of the Gospel or whatever. It's because I learn so much from them. Perhaps even to be precise, I *unlearn* stuff from them. From time to time, I've been gently reeducated by our youth that something I've said is rooted in old prejudices, old contempts, old-fashioned ideas of the world that I didn't even know were still in me. And then, when it's been pointed out and I resolve to do better, there's no lingering angst. The fun continues. The love continues. We've all grown under their careful tutelage.

“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

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.