

***Religious Freedom:
Celebrating the 450th Anniversary of the Edict of Torda***

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org
Rev. Paul Beckel

Our different paths come together in this Holy place. Graced by the history of our free religious heritage. Let us be mindful of the forces deep within which call us to become more than we are. May this hour bring rest and renewal, comfort and challenge. May we be reminded here of our highest aspirations, and inspired to bring our gifts of love and service to the altar of humanity. May we know once again that we are not isolated beings, but that we are connected – in mystery and in wonder to each other, to this community and to the universe.

PRELUDE

We celebrate today an extraordinary moment when, in 1568, King John Sigismund of Transylvania, in the city of Torda, made an unprecedented declaration: that no one should be persecuted for their religious teaching. Well, at least for teaching Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, or Unitarianism. It was a good start.

Much has changed, of course, in four and a half centuries. Religious toleration (or, religious freedom) has expanded, contracted, and been reinterpreted many times over. Transylvania, which was then and remains ethnically Hungarian, is now a part of Romania. And Unitarianism and other types of religious liberalism, pluralism, rationalism, and free-thinking have popped up independently in a variety of forms around the world.

At Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship today, in addition to religious freedom, we'll be looking at the nature of partnership. Since the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989, American congregations have been partnering with the surviving Unitarian churches in Transylvania. There are about 150 left, mostly very small and located in rural farming villages. BUF is in partnership with the Unitarian Church in Magyarszovat, with whom we had rich opportunities to connect this past summer when 43 BUF pilgrims spent two weeks in the region.

And though we were hosted graciously, we found some unsettling differences. So today we're going to raise questions without easy answers. Questions about what tolerance might mean when we encounter disparities that we cannot simply consider to be matters of charming cultural diversity.

I've said "we" a few times already, but I was not one of the travelers this past summer. Rev. Tessie, BUF's community minister, served as our official representative in Magyarszovat. And she was received less than graciously -- as there was overt resistance to recognizing Tessie and her partner Lisa as a couple.

Today's examination of freedom and tolerance, of course, comes as we recognize the birthday of

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. This is a time of agonizing resistance in our own country to the principle of equality before the law for all people. And yet we struggle with how to further our ideals. Knowing that there is so much we have gotten wrong, we are determined to make things right. But how, in the midst of this righteous quest do we avoid self-righteousness, which only separates us further from our adversaries, and allies?

How do we reconcile our ideal of tolerance with the conviction that there are some things we must not tolerate: racism used as the basis for public policy; racism perpetuated through our own institutional normalities and formalities.

This is way more that we can cover in one morning. So Tessie and I will be coming back to you again within the next couple of months with a follow-up service. Today we ask you simply to live the questions. Because it would be illusion if we were to walk away from here with everything resolved in our hearts.

Let us press on, now, seeking justice, while walking humbly with our God, and with one another.

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As we light the chalice now we juxtapose [projected images] our American Unitarian Universalist symbol with that of the Hungarian Unitarians, which refers to their saying: “Be both wise as a serpent, and gentle as a dove.” May our covenant embody the fullness of our interwoven traditions.

GATHERING SONG *Let Freedom Span both East and West* #148

CHILDREN’S FOCUS *Luka’s Quilt*, by Georgia Guback

Summary: Little Luka and her Grandmother, once so close, find themselves upset with one another. Grandmother has made a beautiful traditional floral quilt just for Luka. But Luka felt she’d been promised a quilt like-a-garden-of-flowers, assuming that this would involve all of the colors she liked. Instead it was just green and white. And Grandmother insists that’s the way traditional quilts have to be.

Later, having called a truce, they attend a celebration in which children are making leis. Grandmother tells Luka: “just one color.” Luka responds: It’s my lei and I’m going to make it using all of these wonderful colors. Grandmother bites her tongue. Then, after sleeping on it, she decides to make a colorful quilted ring of flowers that can be set on top of Luka’s quilt. Luka likes this... and finds, too, that sometimes she likes the quilt just by itself.

ERACISM MINUTE David Curley

RESPONSIVE READING “They are with us Still” #721

MEDITATION / SILENCE (3:00)

PHOENIX ENSEMBLE “Oath”

A vigorous anthem composed by a Hungarian Unitarian minister on the theme of faithfulness to

our people, our god, and our land.

REFLECTIONS, Part 1

A few weeks ago, along with Protestant churches of many stripes (and some Catholics too) we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, initiated by Martin Luther's critique of the church monopoly which had dominated most of Europe for centuries. Luther's critique was about corruption and hypocrisy. And yet many Unitarians, who find it satisfying to point out corruption and hypocrisy in others, wondered: why are we talking about and associating ourselves with Protestant traditions that are so behind the times? Or even Christianity? What do these have to do with us?

Today we celebrate the 450th anniversary of the Edict of Religious Toleration because: freedom of conscience -- that's what we're all about, right? And yet, if we really paid attention to the Unitarianism which emerged there and then, or even that which is practiced in Transylvania today, would we recognize ourselves?

I wonder if we hesitate to acknowledge our debt to Luther because we know our Lutheran neighbors a little too well. Instead, do we embrace those who share our name half a world away, at least in part because we know so little about them?

It's not surprising that we know little about one another, because American Unitarianism emerged independently. So the Transylvanian Unitarians are not our ancestors but more like distant cousins.

Is our relationship, then, simply nostalgic? I confess: to some degree I see their villages as quaint. We received an email this week from the minister's wife in Magyarszovat. It began with a traditional greeting: "May God give you everything good, 5 to 6 egg laying hens, a fat pig, ham sausage, bacon, a full larder, nothing to worry about, may God grant a good planting season and a good harvest. May peace and love fill your hearts." Is there any chance that I see their hard way of life as honorable and romantic in its simplicity?

Am I secretly relieved that, since they are poor, it doesn't take much to keep them grateful for our American largess?

Are the language barrier, and geographic distance convenient excuses to remain in a "don't ask don't tell" relationship?

Is it possible that you and I personally, and all American UUs, and the good ol' US of A as a whole... is it possible that we are all indebted to Transylvanian Unitarians from long ago... AND, at the same time, that our partnership is more superficial than we'd like it to be... AND that by looking at this, forthrightly, we can make progress not just in our partnership, but in our own mission to be a personally and socially transformative movement... with courage to push ourselves to go onward... just as we sometimes like to tell others where they should go?

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In a meaningful partnership... and I think this applies to all kinds of partnerships, so even if you aren't interested in religious history I hope that this can be relevant to you if you are involved in any kind of relationship between equals...

In a meaningful partnership, we have to both KNOW each other AND allow one another to BE our authentic selves.

So, let's start with a quick look at who they are, and who we are.

The Edict of Toleration delivered by King John Sigismund of Transylvania, in 1568, was instigated by his court preacher, Francis David. Sigismund and David had evolved over the years through Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism... a path of peril in that time and place when religious exploration often lead to an early grave.

And though these traditions engaged in centuries of war with one another, they were all Trinitarian. Then, as now, Trinitarian Christianity was the only Christianity conceivable. But Francis David, influenced by the spirit of the times, began to critique both the heavy-handed authoritarianism of the church and the irrationality with which he felt the bible was being interpreted. He eventually concluded that there was no scriptural basis for the intricate formulations of Trinitarianism, nor for the dogma that Jesus was divine. King Sigismund, intrigued, called for a series of debates among the various preachers, and while he came out on the side of David's Unitarian version of Christianity, he came out as well with the realization that there is no way to compel anyone to believe that which does not arise from their own conscience.

Within a few years, though, King Sigismund was replaced. And while the next ruler did not exactly overturn the Edict of Torda, he said, essentially, "Fine, but now let's leave well enough alone... no more reform, no more innovation." David's teachings, however, kept evolving, so he ended up in prison, where he died. Our Transylvanian Unitarian cousins then rode through centuries of institutional uncertainty and suppression: religious, political, and ethnic.

Theologically, they remain deeply Christian, in the sense that they are devoted to the teachings and example of Jesus. They do not, however, understand Jesus as God (and hearkening back to Francis David, they are opposed to worshipping him). Still, unlike many, or most American UUs, they are explicitly theistic.

Transylvanian Unitarians reject the notion of original sin, which American UUs would probably agree with, but generally don't care about. Transylvanian Unitarians believe in the eternal life of the soul. American UUs tend to consider this a distraction from what really matters.

Transylvanian Unitarians understand themselves to be an ethnic church. Proudly Hungarian in an area that is no longer part of Hungary, into which Romanians are moving and diluting their culture. They do not dare fly the Hungarian national flag outside of their homes, but these are always on display in their church sanctuaries. The song we heard earlier, "Oath," has a nationalistic tone that might make American UUs uneasy.

Multicultural inclusion is not one of their ideals, as they worry that their cultural identity is under threat. Racial inclusion is not one of their ideals, and the Roma, the gypsy people, are not found in their congregations.

Men and women enter the church building from different doors, and do not sit together. And just a few months ago the church hierarchy declared that marriage can only be the union of a man to a woman. This has caused diplomatic tension with both the (American) Unitarian Universalist Association, and the UU Partner Church Council which coordinates the relationships and travel of the many partner churches. And yet, we could see it coming: as the Transylvanian Unitarians, residing in Romania but determined to remain Hungarian, receive financial support from the Hungarian government... along with a great deal of pressure to refrain from supporting gay rights.

And who are we? We are idealists promoting the kinship of all humanity. Modernists who can afford to take DNA tests and to revel in the evidence of our common ancestry. We are emphatically inclusive and proud to point to fifty years of advocacy for gay rights. And having gotten here ahead of our protestant neighbors, we can be a little self-righteous about it. We are fiercely independent congregations, proud not to be subject to a denominational hierarchy, and we're deeply reluctant to tell one another what to believe.

Despite our ideals, we are primarily white. Despite our tendency to look back at the civil rights era with pride, we are just beginning to understand how deeply our own institutional practices perpetuate white power and privilege.

We are rebellious, defensive, and barely able to acknowledge our place in the family of religions from which so many of us have been rejected. We are not always tolerant of more traditional Christian or theistic people or practices that we may perceive to dilute our post-christian identity.

Given our differences with our Transylvanian/Hungarian cousins, and our similarities, what are our prospects for partnership? Can we recognize ourselves in one another? Do we share a common mission, or at least some overlap in our distinct missions? Do we have anything to offer one another?

And why might we at BUF, today, wish to offer financial support to our partner congregation in Magyarzovat?

Are we providing charity, in the not particularly charitable sense of that word? Is it even possible to think of ourselves as equal partners when our relative financial strength is so unequal? (For the sake of comparison: can BUF members here within our own congregation be equal partners when some contribute thousands of dollars per year and some a small fraction of that?)

Despite all these questions, I am optimistic for our prospects. I believe that our ongoing generosity can help us to stay in relationship while we pursue a deeper partnership. I believe that any alliance is stronger when each of the allies is stronger.

I can imagine staying in this relationship long enough and sincerely enough to get to the point that we also find the humility and wisdom to articulate what WE need from this partnership, and we have the kind of relationship within which we can ask them to help us further our own mission.

And I believe that along with a big check today, we can send a more empowering message: We love you, we appreciate you, and we are grateful to call ourselves your partners in freedom.

COLLECTION

Cat McIntyre describes her experience of visiting with our partner congregation in Magyarszovat and the warm hospitality she received. She was not one of the summer visitors, though. She went the previous November when it was very cold. Today our partner congregation is specifically requesting our help in providing central heating for their sanctuary. Cat confirmed that this would make a tremendous difference for their community.

REFLECTIONS, Part 2

The story of Luka's quilt involves misunderstanding, seemingly incompatible expectations, distress and disappointment. And then: creativity, and compromise, or actually, something better than compromise, Luka and her grandmother came up with a win-win.

But that's not always possible. What can win-win mean when the primary goal of one side is to destroy the other? What does compromise look like between love and hatred? In the Christian Gospel of John, we read:

Now early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people came to Him; and He sat down and taught them. Then the Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?" They said this to test Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear.

So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw the first stone."

Now the Pharisees were the enforcers of the morality code, largely inseparable from the law. They were known for their lack of imagination -- their inability to discern the spirit of the law, beyond the technicalities. (For example, they somehow failed to see the significance that a man, too, had been involved in this affair.)

The story ends with an intriguing juxtaposition: the crowd wanders away and Jesus asks: "Where are your accusers? Do they no longer condemn you? Then neither do I condemn you." And yet, he adds, "Go and sin no more." So he does not judge, neither the woman nor the Pharisees. But

he does not flinch from the notion that some things are just wrong.

Is he teaching, without self-righteousness, that laws and social practices that deny human dignity are unjust, and unacceptable... just as personal behavior that denies human dignity is unjust and unacceptable?

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Following in these footsteps, Martin Luther King Jr. modeled for us, and called us, to transformation. The transformation of society, which is inseparable from our transformation as individuals. He showed us how the freedom of society is inseparable from the freedom of individuals. Today, again, his spirit calls us to be free. Free to follow our own consciences. Free from premature satisfaction with the status quo. Free from the illusion that we can be free while the systems that support our own freedom continue to oppress others.

How do we live, then, within the questions, the tensions inherent to the struggle for freedom? The struggle for serenity when the moment calls for monumental disruption?

American Unitarian Universalists may be highly uncomfortable with the militaristic tone and the nationalistic overtones of the song sung earlier by the Phoenix Ensemble. "Oath?" We are wary of anything so confining as an "oath," or "dogma," or "creed." And as much as we advocate for justice, we may find it unhelpful to anthropomorphize justice in the form of an all-knowing, all-loving, all-powerful divinity.

White Americans may be uneasy with the imagery of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," often referred to as the African American National Anthem. The text includes "true to our God, true to our native land" — almost precisely what we heard in the Hungarian Unitarian anthem, "Oath." Additionally, in "Lift Every Voice," we may find the violent imagery unsettling. Some of us sense that that imagery is real, but as white people, it is not ours.

And so, unreconciled, unsatisfied, and undaunted, we lift our voices in our shared and humble quest for a new day of freedom.

SENDING SONG

Lift Every Voice and Sing #149

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

"Gracious God" by Rev. Eric Cherry

Gracious God, We approach you as a diverse community in prayer –

Perplexed and secure,

Inspired and tired,

Connected and alone,

Broken and healed,

Comforted and afflicted,

Fearful and Full of hope

Be with us. Light the way. Guide our feet. Hold us together.

And help us to be the faith leaders we are called to be in our various occupations and ministries.

Help us to be patient, especially with ourselves. And, lead us back into confidence even when

doubt tugs at our sleeves.

Especially today, help us to consider the exemplars who came before – so often they had feet of clay, just as we do. But, their dreams and ours are so near to each other. Let that be a blessing, just what is needed for our imperfect work in our imperfect world. A blessing, a kiss, a sign of love and confidence. Let that carry us to tomorrow, with you.

Amen

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As we sing circle round for freedom I invite you to sing mindfully and humbly. Yes, we are powerful in our freedom. Yes, our work to promote freedom is profoundly meaningful. And yet there is so much we do not understand. To be mindful of this is not to feel guilty or righteous, but simply to acknowledge this reality and to stand with one another in this moment.

CIRCLE ‘ROUND