

Celebrating Flower Communion

A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

Delivered on June 4, 2017

By the Rev. CJ McGregor

I attended a Catholic school from kindergarten through eighth grade. It was St. Mary's Parochial School and I was labeled a troublemaker. I asked questions, didn't buy everything that was being sold to me, and was the class clown. The perfect storm for a Catholic nun. As we celebrate the Flower Communion this morning I am reminded of a ritual that we celebrated every May at St. Mary's. Each month of May we were required to bring flowers from home and during a school day process singing and offer our Flowers to a statue of Mary, Jesus' mother. The verse of the hymn we sang went like this (volunteer sings), "Immaculate Mary your praises we sing. You reign now in splendor with Jesus our king. Ave, Ave, Ave, Maria! Ave, Ave, Maria." It was in fourth grade that I decided that the words we sang needed to be changed. I changed the words and taught them to more than a dozen other kids on the playground over a three-week period. When the day came to sing this hymn, we shocked a few people. This is what we sang during the ritual in our fourth year at St. Mary's (volunteer sings). "Oh Sister John Helen your breath really stinks. Fire comes from your nostrils and burns everything. Oh. Oh. Sister John Helen. Oh. Oh. Sister John Helen. Your breath really stinks." I was the Kathy Griffin of St. Mary's Parochial School. Perhaps I went too far this time. I was yanked out of place by an angry nun and my fellow verse changers gave me up. I copied the Bible for the next week in solitary.

There is another flower ritual I want to tell you about this morning. You may already know that the Flower Communion is one of the most popular rituals celebrated by Unitarian Universalist congregations across the continent. Yet, very few of us know much about the remarkable man who created the ritual. Norbert Capek was his name. He was a Czechoslovakian ex-Catholic, ex-Baptist, liberal religious heretic who finally found his home as a Unitarian Minister. He is our most recent true Unitarian martyr. He dreamt of a new religion, unheard of in his country, founded not on dogma, but as he put it, "on the divine spark which is in each person's own soul." His life story and depth of spirit captured my heart. This message of hope, freedom, and joy he brought to his people in a time of orthodoxy, intolerance, and oppression is one we need to hear again and again, especially in the climate of increasing religious fundamentalism and political fascism.

Norbert Capek's parents were not well educated and didn't have much money. He was sent to live with his uncle and aunt in Vienna when he was fourteen and worked as a tailor until he was eighteen. When his relatives discovered that he no longer practiced Catholicism, and even worse, had been secretly baptized, they kicked him out. But instead of going back to his parents, Capek, with a fire in his soul, became a missionary for the Baptists. At the time, the state religion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was Catholicism. Anyone practicing another form of religion was subject to harassment and often violent attacks while the police looked the other way. "Baptist" was not even a recognized religion to check off on official forms. Even within the Baptist tradition Capek's ideas became progressively more liberal, so much so that the Catholics and Evangelicals were hinting at heresy. The Austrian censors increasingly refused to

print his articles and it came to a head when even his Baptist colleagues and members of his congregation turned on him and began to question his orthodoxy.

In 1914 a friendly police commissioner tipped Capek off that he was on the Austrian ban list and suggested he get out before he was taken to jail. At this point he was at the end of his rope so he and his wife and 9 children fled to New York City where Capek was offered an opportunity to serve a small Baptist church. Capek did not escape trouble with the Baptist church by moving to the United States. Later that year he was forced to stand heresy trial though was eventually exonerated. Five years later he left the Baptist ministry. He concluded in his diary, "I cannot be a Baptist anymore, even in compromise. The fire of new desires, new worlds, is burning inside of me." More than once Capek was told that his extreme liberal views were really Unitarian. After leaving the Baptist church to earn a living for his family, he became a journalist. As the editor of various journals, Capek continued to be quite outspoken in order to find a new spiritual home, he and his wife sent their kids out, like scouts, to do reconnaissance and explore the different neighborhood churches. Not unlike many of here that were unchurched as children and tagged along with friends on Sunday mornings. The kids would come home and tell their parents what they learned in Sunday school. When Capek and his wife, Maja, finally liked what they heard they decided to check out the church for themselves. That church, the one they ended up joining, was the Unitarian church in Orange, New Jersey in 1921. On a side note I wonder what children would go home and tell their parents about our church.

While at this church Capek convinced the minister that Eastern Europe was hungry for the good news of liberal religion. With financial backing from the AUA the family went back to Prague and started a Unitarian congregation. In just twenty years the Prague congregation became the largest Unitarian congregation in the world with 3200 members. Think of the parking problems they must have had. Like All Faiths the people in that congregation were spiritual refugees from many different backgrounds. Theologically they formed a very humanist, yet theistic, congregation who tended to distrust religious language and didn't like ritual. Hmmm. I wonder where I've heard this before? Capek believed it was important to have some kind of ritual to celebrate this diverse community. He created what he called the Flower Festival and held the first Flower Festival service in 1923.

Capek felt that orthodox Christianity's doctrine of human depravity was itself sinful. In a sermon, he called the human soul the "spark of God." He wrote, "There is in every soul a thirst for something that is higher and greater than all science, all art...We call it by different names but in essence it is nothing other than a hidden cry for harmony with the infinite...the soul of our soul and the life of our life. Closer than one's breath and one's heartbeat. Every person is the embodiment of the divine and in every one of us the divine struggles for a higher expression. We light the spark of the divine within ourselves when we serve others and bring a bit of glow and joy to other people's lives."

Capek's wife, Maja, was always a partner in the work and in 1926 was herself formally ordained a Unitarian minister. In 1939, she came to the United States to lecture and raise money for the fledgling Czech Unitarian network. It was then that she introduced the flower communion here, in our country, at the First Unitarian parish in Cambridge, Massachusetts. When the war broke out she couldn't go back to Europe, so she stayed in the United States and served as a minister in several congregations in New England. I imagine it must have been heart-wrenching for her to have been cut off from any news about what was happening at home. Frederick May Eliot, the

then President of the AUA, invited Norbert Capek, along with his daughter and son-in-law to come to the United States as a ministers-at-large for the AUA. They declined, choosing instead to minister to their people in those terrible times. Back home, the Germans were moving in. The Gestapo was now closely monitoring Capek - sitting in on his church services and listening to his sermons. At his seventieth birthday party Capek's congregation gave him a radio. It was a capital crime to listen to foreign broadcasts, but Capek did anyway. Every evening in secret, he would tune into the BBC for news of the war. He shared what he learned with his congregation in the subtle form of parables and stories – things the Czechs would understand but the two Gestapo officers wouldn't catch on to. In this way, he was able to continue to preach against oppression and minister to his congregation. He did eventually get caught. He and his daughter were both arrested for listening to and spreading news of the war. Capek was sent to Dresden for 11 months and then, just when his term was almost up, there was a crackdown and orders came to send him to a camp and his papers were stamped "return unwanted".

UU minister Richard Gilbert writes: "While [Capek] was in the camp his courage in the face of torture and starvation was a source of inspiration to his fellow prisoners. While in the camp he led (his companions) in worship, using the Flower Communion ceremony as the ritual. Each prisoner brought what flowers they could find in the camp to a service. At the end they took with them a different flower than the one they brought, to symbolize their sense of community. After the war, survivors testified that the Unitarian minister could not have been sent to a place where he was more needed." His inspirational presence encouraged the others in the camp to endure. One survivor wrote: "If it hadn't been for Capek I probably wouldn't be alive now, nor would others who survived." Norbert Capek was executed on October 12, 1942. Before he was put to death, he wrote this prayer, reflecting on his own life and the state of his spirit: "It is worthwhile to live and fight courageously for sacred ideals. Oh blow ye evil winds into my body's fire; my soul you'll never unravel. Even though disappointed a thousand times or fallen in the fight and everything would worthless seem, I have lived amidst eternity. Be grateful, my soul, my life was worth living. He who was pressed from all sides but remained victorious in spirit is welcome in the chorus of heroes. He who overcame the fetters giving wing to the mind is entering into the golden age of the victorious."

Norbert Capek created the Flower Festival ritual to bring the people of his congregation together. His congregation, like ours, had members from many different religious backgrounds. He wanted a spiritual celebration that would not exclude anyone, but would celebrate the whole community. Unitarian Universalism is a garden, wild with theological diversity. Members come in many varieties :Humanists, Pagans, Christians, Buddhists, Jews, Theists and Atheists and many combinations in between. We are most definitely not a monoculture garden – that is, a garden made with only one kind of plant, stripped of its wild spirit. Most gardeners will tell you that a "vast field of identical plants will always be particularly vulnerable to insects, weeds, and disease" – that is, susceptible to extinction. It is in times of extreme religious conservatism that our liberal religious community becomes all the more precious. As the occupation increased in Prague, Capek expected the numbers in church to dwindle. Instead he found the attendance swelling. Many people walked sometimes for hours to the Unitarian church on Sundays. Indeed, the spiritual community becomes life-giving. So many people I've talked with, especially when I was in the Midwest, testify to feelings of relief and gratitude for having found Unitarian Universalism. In a sea of religious fundamentalism, it is in Unitarian Universalism that they are free to express and discuss and grapple with their theological ideas without fear of judgment. In

that sense this little building with all its eccentricities, which I love, does truly become a sanctuary. There are some times when words cannot adequately capture meaning. That becomes the time for symbolism, for ritual. It's not a coincidence that the Flower Communion is one of the few rituals that most Unitarian Universalist congregations participate in annually. It is so simple, and yet expresses so much about who we are as a community.

A spray of many colors, textures, shapes and sizes mixed up together yet held collectively by a common container. "Rituals of communion in all their many forms share a power and blessedness that transcends words yet reveal the truth of who we are. And that's what we're about today, noticing within a small ritual act something at the very core of our being, of what we are and what we can be." We put our little flower in a vase, it gets mixed it up with flowers already placed there for those who have forgotten or missed the announcement, or are visiting us today because that is as it should be. We always welcome new friends to join us. Then we pick a different flower chosen carefully and brought by someone else and we take it home. It's simple and complex at the same time. We are all mixed up together. With our diversity of thought and belief we find ourselves drawn together by one spark described by many names. I love the celebration of the beauty inherent in diversity. I find myself at first simply marveling at the splendor of the bouquet and how the ritual binds us one to another. I then begin to ponder the fact that UU congregations all across the continent, and even throughout the world, celebrate the flower communion. I realize how amazing it is to be connected in this way to Unitarian Universalists and this congregation. I consider that the flower communion has been celebrated by hundreds of congregations for nearly eighty years. This simple ritual was life sustaining for people in a concentration camp. This is who we are at All Faiths. Our founders will tell you that this congregation was built on the rock of diversity and honoring all beliefs and welcoming all people. For us the flower Communion is a living testament to what we believe and honor. When we take a moment to contemplate all the people and all the history involved, this ritual becomes so much more than a flower exchange. It becomes a living vessel connecting us all through time.

May it be so.