

## **“Flowers in the Face of Fear”**

### **A Flower Communion Sermon**

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We are the roots for our senior high students, bridging today into young adulthood. You are some dazzling flowers. No matter how far you travel, or how much you grow and change, though, we are still your roots, we are part of what has made you.

To be ignorant of your history, writes Cicero, is to never grow up. We cherish our freedom and independence, and we also must cherish our common history. We must cherish our roots, and the people who helped make us.

So let me tell you some of your story, some more about who you are as a Unitarian Universalist. Let me tell you something about our people. Let us return to Czechoslovakia, this time in the 1930s and '40s. The church had become wildly successful. Norbert Capek's church in Prague was, in 1942, the largest Unitarian church in the world. They boasted 10,000 members among the mother church and its mission churches in little coal-mining and factory towns. They had services on Sunday, and Tuesday evening. They had begun a religious education school for adults called the School of Religious Science. Business, as they say, was booming. And why was this? They were, quite simply, desperately needed.

To live in Czechoslovakia then, was to shiver in the terrifying and growing shadow of the Third Reich in Germany. You would be poor, your country was part of the world-wide economic depression. The other countries in Europe, your so-called friends, had just sold you down the river in the Munich Agreement, to keep peace with Germany. One third of your land was put under Nazi rule. At the same time, 250,000 international refugees came pouring into the other 2/3s of your country that was not completely occupied, and you didn't know how you would feed them. Curfews were set in small towns, and permits were needed to go from one town to another. You could be jailed for what you said, or wrote. You could even be tortured for it. You were under greater and greater pressure to look, act, speak, and think a certain way. That is, if you could.

It would be easy to feel more and more like you couldn't breathe. A church that preached a message of freedom, that taught that you had worth and dignity, that claimed that the spirit of God dwelt in each and every person no matter who

you were or what you believed – you would go to that church to be able to breathe. A church like that would feel like air to you.

Likewise, it would be easy to wall yourself off. If you saw hatred and fear all around you, if neighbors were encouraged to report on the “suspicious” behavior of neighbors, it would be easy to join in. Survival, rather than love, would take over your heart. If you found a church that showed you that people could love one another, a church that created a sacrament where you must “*confess* that you accepted others as brothers and sisters without regard to class, race, or other distinction, acknowledging everybody as your friend who is human and wants to be good” – you might feel your heart open. If church somehow helped you do that out in the world - that church would become like your own heart. Your own heart opened up and able to love again.

Above all, it would be easy to give up hope. To decide that nothing you could do would make any difference at all. But listen to Capek’s words to his congregation in 1938, telling them about his experience working with the Czech resistance demonstrators. He writes, “They are hurt to the depth of their souls. I saw their tears and their rage. Some of them didn’t want to live anymore. But I didn’t hear a single cry against the Germans or the French or the English. We retained our sense of humanity and human solidarity. [Facing our children and grandchildren], we will never have to feel ashamed of the fact that as a small nation in the middle of Europe, we were ready to defend human dignity, freedom and justice.”

If you went to church and heard that, and you were surrounded by people who believed it, you might start to believe it, too. If your church helped evacuate children, encouraged the resistance, and provided them shelter, your church would feel like hope.

Norbert Capek wrote many hymns, a few of which are in our hymnal. His hymn, “View the Starry Realm” (#28 if you’re curious) writes of God, “You, the one within all forming in my heart and mind and breath, you, my guide through hate’s fierce storming, courage in both life and death, courage in both life and death.” That is what people found in that church. That is what they found in that circle of flowers.

The courage of that community must have helped Norbert Capek, himself. He and his family were offered a safe haven in 1940, when the Gestapo was starting to crack down on clergy. He received a letter from the president of the American Unitarian Association, promising him passage to America, and funds to

support his family here. And he turned it down. He turned it down. Can you imagine? I need to stay with my people and fight, he said.

In 1940, the year Capek turned 70, he and his daughter Zora were arrested for treason. He had been avoiding arrest by preaching in code in his congregation, using phrases and images that only his Czech congregants would understand. But for his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, he received a radio, which allowed him to follow the BBC broadcasts. His daughter Zora, told a friend about what she heard in the broadcasts, and even agreed to type them out. When these transcripts were found, they arrested father and daughter. They seized Capek's many writings when he was not at all careful. Even then, a good German lawyer was building a case for their freedom. When the Czech resistance forces successfully assassinated a brutal Nazi officer, there were no releases for anyone. Norbert and Zora were sent to Dachau. But not without inspiring hope and freedom and dignity in thousands of Czech Unitarians.

The problems of the world and their country, must have seemed too big to fight. Not unlike today. We still see problems that look unsolvable. The deep economic recession is still putting thousands of Americans out of work. The oil spill shows in the Gulf Coast shows no sign of ending. It is coating the birds and the animals, turning the beaches orange and docking the shrimp boats. It would be easy to just be afraid or to try to forget about it. Instead we must build a church that gives us courage in this difficult time.

In Arizona, it is now legal to arrest someone for speaking Spanish and looking Mexican – because they might be an illegal alien. People have been put in jail for being Arab, and if you travel in Washington, D.C., you will see signs on the highway and in the Metro, encouraging you to “report suspicious behavior”. I always thought that was a rather dangerous blank check to be handing out to the public.

In our own church and neighborhoods, we still see incidents of racism and fear. We are encouraged to suspect people who are different from ourselves. We need to be the church that says no to that, we must be the church that protests that and stands up to unfair laws and a church that will not cooperate with suspicion. Our allies for racial justice and partnership with Canaan Baptist church are helping us to build the church where we stand up, where we remember that we don't have to be afraid.

Norbert Capek and the Czechoslovakian churches are a part of you, and they are a part of me. They created what might seem like just a sweet little ceremony

where people exchanged flowers from their gardens and the countryside. But it was their ritual to help remind them of the beauty of diversity and the dignity of freedom, to remind them of their commitment to respect and love across differences. And it is ours.

We are a very old church, we were founded in 1866. We've seen world wars, the cold war, the Korean war, Vietnamese war, and gulf wars. We have seen segregation and riots and 9/11, and all manner of crises together. We are that church. And we are the new church that we build each time we come together, the church that serves the world today. We are the bright flowers that rise above these roots. So may we practice our faith, drawing on our ancestors, with courage and love. Amen.