

“Roots and Blossoms”

Homily by Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley

Flower Communion & Mother’s Day Sunday, May 12, 2019

Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, Va.

So let me ask you: How many of you knew that Count Dracula was a Unitarian? Well, okay, Count Dracula didn’t really exist. And if he existed, he was born about a century before Transylvania became a Unitarian country. Wait, what? Transylvania was a Unitarian country? Why yes it was, in the 16th century. I’ll get to that in a moment. But what about Count Dracula? Well, there’s a joke about that: What do Count Dracula and Unitarians have in common? Both were born in Transylvania and both cringe when you wave a cross in their face.

So, back to Transylvania. I will fully confess that I knew almost nothing about Transylvania until I started studying Unitarian history. In that study I was amazed to learn that in 1568, the king of Transylvania, John Sigismund (and now you know why my dog is named Sigismund) declared Transylvania to be a Unitarian country. He was converted by his court cleric, Ferenc David, or Francis David as some called him, to the idea that the trinity did not really exist. In fact, he came to believe that the Trinity was actually a dangerous notion, because it kept us as human beings too separate from God and from one another. In his view, “faith is a gift of God” that each of us should be free to exercise as each sees fit.

At that time Transylvania was host to a multitude of religions: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and he saw this as a way of creating peace among the people. No one, and I mean no one, of his stature dared to make such a declaration of tolerance. During those Reformation times wars

were waged ferociously across Europe over the tiniest interpretation of Christian scripture. So Sigismund's declaration was a small, shining light of openness and bravery in the midst of oppression and schism.

Unfortunately, his reign and edict didn't last long. Sigismund died childless and Frances David was imprisoned for his beliefs and preaching. But Unitarianism did not die with him. Despite Transylvania being tossed back and forth between Hungary and Romania and ending up imprisoned within the Soviet bloc, Unitarianism lived underground. And after communism was overthrown, hundreds of Unitarian churches re-emerged and rebuilt, having kept the faith for centuries. In fact there are over 100,000 Unitarians practicing now in Hungary and Transylvania. Many of these congregations have been in partnership with congregations here in the states, and I think some number from this congregation were involved in helping support them as they struggled to rebuild.

So why is this important? Are these our religious ancestors? The answer is not so easy. There is not a direct line from American Unitarianism going back to the Transylvanians, but we are all descendants of a radical idea that kept coming up throughout the history of Christianity. It's easy to forget that for centuries religion was not really about belief: it was more a fissue of imposition, of political power and cultural imperialism. Through religion, political powers could control their people. But throughout these struggles there was always a still small voice begging to see religion as a way for the spirit to break free. The idea of unitarianism, the unity of God, spoke to the desire to make the experience of God a human experience. It recognized that we are all equal creations in the eyes of God, the multitude of blossoms, as it were, that each bring their unique beauty to the world.

Last week in the Question Box sermon, someone asked about whether there are examples of Unitarian Universalists who would sacrifice everything for their faith. And there are: Frances David, who I just spoke about, died in prison. Faustus Sozzini, the founder of Socinianism, was burned at the stake around the same time. And what was so important to them that they would make this ultimate sacrifice? Some of it was about *what* they believed. That they wanted to see Jesus as human and that everything wasn't predetermined. They rejected the idea of original sin and believed in free will. But, [as quoted from David Bumbaugh] what was even more important, and what links them to us, "was *how* we believe. All of our European and American ancestors "were convinced that effective religion must focus on this world, on how we live with our neighbors and especially those who are least like us. Consistently, Unitarianism and Universalism have insisted that the way of true religion is freedom and reason and tolerance and love."

These radical ideas kept coming up over and over again, in various parts of Europe and eventually here and we are the beneficiaries of this consistent movement of spirit calling for freedom. All of these movements asked to not be defined by limitation or fear but in fact to "live by the courage of their dreams." The flower communion we just celebrated was about just that cry to see beauty over pain, courage over fear.

This is a legacy to which we must cling tenaciously. All about us people are trying to exert control of our spirits and our bodies in ways big and small. Our faith recognizes the primacy of the human spirit: that longing to connect to the divine, the desire to understand ourselves as serving a purpose beyond our own, the recognition that the impulse to love

beats always within us, even when it sometimes seems drowned out by the drums of hate.

Our roots are indeed tangled up with all these strands of human resistance and human desire to connect to that source of all existence which infuses us with love, creativity and meaning. We affirm, along with our siblings in faith throughout history, that this source of revelation was not sealed 2000 years ago but continues to speak to us through our lives and experiences to drive us toward love and justice. Thinking of these siblings over the ages gives me the comfort that we are not alone. We belong to a long line of dissenters and celebrators of beauty. May this power that lives within us forever blossom forth to bring joy to all.