

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

Sunday, May 17, 2020

Andrew Frantz, contract minister

Flower Service

Introduction

Happy Flower Service, everybody. This is my favorite UU holiday. I mean, there are really only two UU holidays, but I love this one. Just as Christians have Easter and Christmas, just as Jews have Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashona, just as Muslims have the holy month of Ramadan, Unitarian Universalists have two special holidays: the Water Communion, or the ingathering, which we celebrate in the fall, bringing together our own pieces of water and blending them together as a metaphor of our unity; and the Flower Service, or Flower Communion, which we celebrate in the spring.

It is a beautiful ritual because—traditionally—we are all invited to bring a flower to place in the common vase where they mingle together, representing our variety and diversity, our unique gifts that we bring. And, traditionally, everyone at the end of the service would take home a different flower—representing the way in which we take from this place the gifts of others, we are enriched by this company, and we go away different than we came in.

Of course, today's service is far from traditional because we are separated by distance and we are sharing flowers virtually today. Earlier in the week, I asked you all to send in your favorite photos of flowers. I also asked you to send in a few sentences to respond to the question, "Where do you find beauty?" Those words and those images, provided by you all, will be shared in this service in the place of actual flowers. Before we do that, however, I want to talk about the history of this service and about Norbert Capek.

Norbert Capek

The flower service was created in a specific time and place, and created by a specific person. The person was Norbert Capek, a minister in the Unitarian Church; the time was 1923; and the place was the Czech Republic. Norbert Capek was born in the Czech Republic, he lived in the United States for a while, and returned to the Czech Republic where he eventually died. He was a minister in the Unitarian Church, which is one of the roots of modern-day Unitarian Universalism.

Unitarian Universalism in America today came from the merging of two liberal Christian churches that existed for centuries: the Unitarian Church and the Universalist Church. They merged in 1971 to become the Unitarian Universalist Church, and in the 50 years since then, this religious movement has evolved from being a liberal Christian church to being a multi-religious denomination, one that welcomes people of any religion or no religion: Christians, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists, as well as Atheists, Humanists, and Pagans.

The Unitarian part of our religious ancestry, the Unitarian Church of America, has roots in the Unitarian Church of Europe. Settlers from Europe brought Unitarianism with them to the United States. We have especially deep roots in Transylvania and in the Czech Republic, and we continue to have connections with the Czech Unitarian Church to this day. Norbert Capek, then, represents a tie to that ancestry. We are practicing a ritual created by a minister of our faith from almost a hundred years ago, from across the ocean.

Consecration of the Flowers

When Norbert Capek had gathered all the flowers from the individual members of the congregation into a common vase, he spoke the following words to consecrate the flowers. I'll speak these words to consecrate the flowers that are here on the altar, a gift this week from the garden of Jim and Liz Dealing.

I am filled with emotion as I prepare to speak this consecration, because I know how Norbert Capek's story ends. He was killed by the Nazis in a concentration camp. These are the words of Norbert Capek to bless the flowers:

Infinite Spirit of Life, we ask thy blessing on these thy messengers of fellowship and love.

May they remind us, amid diversities of knowledge and of gifts, to be one in desire and affection and devotion to thy holy will.

May they also remind us of the value of comradeship, of doing and sharing alike.

May we cherish friendship as one of thy most precious gifts.

May we not let awareness of another's talents discourage us, or sully our relationship, but may we realize that whatever we can do, great or small, the efforts of all of us are needed to do thy work in this world.¹

Norbert Capek

May it be so.

Speaking and Acting for Love and Justice

I want to honor Norbert Capek today for his acts of conscience in the time and place he was living. He lived during the Nazi era in World War II, and in spite of being targeted and interrogated by the Gestapo, he kept preaching his message of love. He was eventually arrested and killed for his liberal religious message. He died at Dachau 1942.

I hereby affirm our kinship with Norbert Capek. This man dared to speak and act for love and justice in his time and place. I affirm that he is one of us, that we too dare to speak and act for love and justice in our own time and place. May it be so.

Gifts of Beauty from the Congregation

As I said before, you all were invited (if you get our weekly email announcements) to share two things for this Flower Service: photos of flowers and responses to the question, "Where do I find beauty?" About twenty people sent in photos, and I have been sharing them on the screen during the service. Also, ten of you shared words about where you find beauty. I would like to read all ten of those responses here.

Remember that in a traditional flower service, everyone brings a flower that represents everyone's beauty and gifts that they bring to the congregation; and everyone takes home a *different* flower to represent the fact that we are enriched by each other's gifts. As I read the following words and show the images of flowers on the screen, please consider this as the gift that you take away with you from today's service.

The entrance to the music building at the University of Nebraska had this quote, "Of all the arts, music is the art to raise the soul above all earthly storms." Music always brings beauty into my life.

Beth MacLeod

I find beauty on the shore of Lake Michigan where there are big dunes and white pines. I often visit such a setting in the UP where I can be alone in that setting, with waves smashing and water birds chirping, there is even a wonderful sound when the wind moves the white pine branches and needles. Overwhelming beauty and energy there.

Carolyn Hancock

I see beauty in a person through their eyes, as these are the windows to the soul. A sincere smile also reveals their beauty to me. I see beauty in nature through perfectly imperfect irregularities, such as the wings of a bee that are seemingly too small for its body, and the differences of every petal in a single flower.

Candi Tomlinson

I find beauty in the movement and sounds of water.

Laura McBride

I find beauty almost everywhere. I try to create an aesthetically pleasing and comforting space in and outside of my home for myself and my family. Flowers are a big part of that aesthetic.

Roxanne Fleer

I find beauty in the flowers, the trees, and especially right now, the green grass! I'd also say that there's beauty all around us if we just stop and look.

Sue Martin

Almost daily our son in California takes our new grandchild for a walk early and they listen to music. The baby loves touching flowers and we get a picture. These are two important things of beauty to us.

Jerry and Helenann Cavalieri

I find beauty in the vistas of the 4 Corners region of the desert southwest. Being able to see horizon to horizon punctuated by the rock and sand formations of nature induces serenity of mind.

Glenn Lewandos

Where do I find beauty? In the smile of a small child (toddler) who has just learned something new; In the smile of a young adolescent who has just accomplished a task they didn't think they could do; In the smile of a wizened old woman or old man upon seeing a baby or small child.

Norma Bailey

I see beauty in my two sons now working together at the Pit Stop Quick Lube.

Victoria Sladek

Blessing

May each of us know that we bring our gifts and our beauty to this Fellowship. Each of us is unique, just as each flower is unique.

May each of us be enriched by the beauty and wisdom of others in the Fellowship. May we take home with us some beauty, some compassion, some connection, some gift that we find in one another in this congregation.

May it be so.

¹ Reading #724 in Singing the Living Tradition. Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993.