

The Flower Ceremony

Sermon by Rev. Rod Richards, June 11, 2023

UUSLO

The flower's ceremony or flower communion which you heard about in the reading that Janet shared - it began a hundred years ago. It's the hundredth anniversary of when this tradition first began in June of 1923, in the Unitarian church in Prague, created by the founder of that church, Norbert Čapek.

According to Reginald Zattoli, for some time he had felt the need for some symbolic ritual that would bind people more closely together. The format had to be one that would not alienate any who had forsaken other religious traditions. The traditional Christian communion service with bread and wine was unacceptable to the members of his congregation because of their strong reaction against the Catholic faith. So he turned to the native beauty of their countryside for elements of a communion which would be genuine to them.

This simple service was the result.

It is a simple service. Bring a flower, put the flowers together with all of the others during the service. As you leave, take a flower other than the one you brought.

Simple, beautiful, and if it were simply a service about the beauty of flowers, that would be enough right?

There is immense beauty there here, and I'm reminded of the beauty of flowers by many of the photos that my wife Hanji, takes, some of which are currently displayed on the walls in the social hall, and in the hallways and by the photos of flowers that many of you share with us.

And I am reminded of the beauty of flowers when I see them singly in people's hands, and when I view them together here, beautiful flowers would be enough.

But there is something more that occurs in this ritual.

Each of these flowers represents a person in this community as we view the beauty of each flower. We are also thinking of the beauty of each person, noticing, as Annie Dillard writes, in our hymnal, each other's beautiful face, and complex nature.

And as we take in the beauty of the flowers coming together, we are also thinking of the beauty of this congregation.

What a bouquet we are!

A flower is value, or beauty does not lie in its being a symbol for a person. Each flower has value and is beautiful on its own. A person's value or beauty does not lie in the comparison to a flower.

Each person is worthy and beautiful on their own, yet bringing these together in ritual that's kind of what ritual is about right bringing these together reminds us to notice the beauty of both flower in person.

Reminds us to nurture that awareness that can so easily slip away in the day, today. So much of what we do together is about reminding ourselves.

One of my favorite readings in our hymn book began with the words, "May we be reminded, may we be reminded of our highest aspirations, and inspired to bring our gifts of love and service to the altar of humanity..."

May we know once again, knowing once again is a lot like reminding. May we know once again that we are not isolated beings but connected in mystery and miracle to the universe. To this community and to each other.

We remind ourselves of some very simple and vitally important things.

Here today, we are each of us beautiful. When we join together, we create a stunning beauty all its own, a beauty that is beyond the beauty of each flower, but that would not exist in the same way without all of the flowers, without each and every one of us and as we leave our gatherings, we carry something from each other. We carry something from the experience of being and working and worshipping and laughing, and worshipping, and laughing and singing, and laughing and singing, and being silent, and crying, and sharing frustrations, and celebrating joys, and getting along, and not getting along, and helping each other get along, and simply being with each other.

It is a simple ritual, but it is not simplistic, nor does it skim the surface of life. It is, in fact, a radical ritual. Rooted deeply in compassion, and stubbornly growing in some of the most unforgiving soil of history.

Listen to this also. From Reginald Zottoli.

When the Nazis took control of Prague in 1,940, they found Dr. Čapek's gospel of the inherent worth and beauty of every person, to be as Nazi Court records show, too dangerous to the Reich, for him to be allowed to live.

Dr. Čapek was sent to Dachau, where he was killed the next year, during a Nazi medical experiment.

This gentle man suffered a cruel death, but his message of human hope and decency lives on through this flower ceremony.

These flowers we share both here in the sanctuary and in the homes of those connecting online. Their beauty is not frivolous or unrelated to the work of our mission.

A message of the flower ceremonies is that no person should ever be dismissed as collateral damage.

No person is expendable, and this message of resistance to the powers that we would dehumanize and disempower and destroy lives.

This message of resistance that Dr. Norbert Čapek carried throughout his life, was considered too dangerous for him to be allowed to live.

He was sent to Dachau, having actually served the sentence that had been imposed upon him with the callous note of a Nazi official that read, "return unwanted" which led to his eventual murder a year later. But in that year Čapek continued his work as one Catholic priest who was with him, bore witness.

"He achieved his greatest ministry there among the despairing, who lived in the very shadow of death. Without him we could not have endured."

To notice each other's face and complex nature - to notice the beauty therein - to freely join the beauty we carry together with the beauty of others. In common purpose to remind ourselves. We know once again, and then again, that we are connected, and to respond to the world with that knowledge.

These are radical acts.

This is a radical bunch of flowers here.

May we be reminded of our highest aspirations and inspired to bring our gifts of love and service to the altar of humanity in all circumstances, to the best of our ability.

Čapek never seems to have lost his sense that there is beauty in us, even when that belief was challenged in the most severe way imaginable.

We hold on to the recognition of that beauty, to raising the awareness of that beauty, to honoring that beauty, and how we respond to the world and to each other, and in reminding ourselves of that beauty, and coming together to know it once again, and once again, and again, and again.

Happy, one hundredth anniversary of the flower Ceremony.