

Flower Communion Homily

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

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Today we come together to celebrate one of the grandest rituals in the Unitarian Universalist tradition; Flower Communion. This is a celebration that is nearly universal among Unitarian Universalist Churches and Fellowships; well at least as close to universal as our liturgy is likely ever going to be. It is an important occasion on many levels, as a celebration of spring and of our Church community.

Flower Communion is one of the few traditions that has its origins in Unitarian Universalism and, to my knowledge, is an exclusive practice to us. Flower Communion began in the thirties in Prague Czechoslovakia by the minister of the Unitarian Church there named Norbert Chapek. Chapek lived in Czechoslovakia when it was ceded to Nazi Germany prior to World War Two. He was a very courageous man who spoke out against the racism and oppressive policies of the Nazis. He believed in freedom, and wrote many controversial articles for the underground newspapers in Europe. This made him persona non grata among the Germans who despised freethinking of any kind. The result was that Chapek

was captured and shipped off to the death camps at Dachau where he was killed in 1942. He was a martyr for the cause of liberal religion joining other such martyrs such as Francis David, Faustus Socinus, Michael Servetus, and later James Reeb. This is the price that has been paid so that we may have the freedom, and responsibility, to carry on the liberal religious tradition of Unitarian Universalism. And while I do not necessarily mean that we should all run out and be martyrs, it behooves us to remember them. For me it is heartening to think of the conviction for truth and justice of a Norbert Chapek. I find it reassuring that Unitarian Universalism is a faith with substance and heart.

Norbert Chapek began the flower communion with his congregation in Prague. According to the story, Chapek was so moved to see a field of wild flowers that he wanted to celebrate this beauty as part of worship. How often nature moves us to seek something deeper in life? I have often felt similar feelings in the fall with all of wonderful colors that adorn the landscape. And yet no group can ever capture the beauty of nature. It is Mother Nature's gift to us all. We can only live in and among the beauty; we cannot own it.

This morning we have no illusions about capturing or containing nature or subjugating it to our will. Indeed, the essence

of flower communion lies in the understanding of our natural oneness with nature. You see in the symbolism of flower communion, each one of the flowers in this vase represents the person who brought it. Each person, just like each flower, is unique and beautiful. Each person blooms in their own way and in their own time. Each person need to be nurtured by the elements around them, food, love, meaning and hope. Without these things there could be no person just as there could be no flower without the proper amount of light, water, and soil.

Just as each person, like each flower, is unique, so too is any particular arrangement of flowers. There is a beauty that comes from the way the flowers are placed next to each other, one yellow, then red, then violet. The colors themselves, when arranged in a pattern are greater than the sum of their parts. The beauty of all of these flowers coming together is greater than the beauty that any one of them could have on their own. In the same way when everyone here, grown ups and kids, women and men, gay and straight, rich and poor, short and tall come together as a community; there is something there that is created that no one individual could have produced. That is what these flowers in this vase represent, and that is what we will bless, not just with words, but in our coming together each and every Sunday to create a

wonderful collection of selves that points to some reality greater than any one individual.

Mahakashapa smiled because he understood that twirling a flower is a moment, an event. It is a brief opportunity for awareness and mindfulness. Awakening to the present moment is to just see the flower. No sermon the Buddha, or anyone else, could give would be able to tell you anything about the flower better than your own experience of it. When we are able to do this, then every moment is beautiful, precious, and unique.

In addition to giving something to our Church community, each and everyone of us, even someone here for the first time, receives something from our coming together every week. Communion would not be communion unless you received something. Annie Dillard once wrote that the reason she preferred the Catholic mass to the Protestant service was because of communion. During the offering, we ask you for something. We ask you for your contribution to the common good of the entire Church. But with communion, each person receives something. In Catholic theology, they believe that you consume the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. While I cannot promise you that exactly, flower communion offers you something just as amazing. As you leave the service today, come up and take a flower out of

the vase. The only rule is that you cannot take the flower you out in initially. You can only take a flower that someone else has brought. This is meant to represent that we all receive something from someone at Church, and that person may not even be aware of it. This happens to me quite a bit. One of the best feelings in the world, I think, is when someone comes up to me to tell me how much a service meant to them or something that I said in a counseling session or even just a casual conversation. This is a wonderfully open group in that sense. It is a feeling that has ministered to me many times, and makes all of the hard work worth it. If I could bottle that feeling and sell it I could probably start my own cartel.

But this is not limited to me. I know, just by working in this Church over the course of the past year, how much the people of this congregation touch the lives of their fellow churchgoers. Think of some of your favorite moments of the past year, the Friday Night celebrations, the Wednesday Night worship services, the Brown Bag groups, the social justice activities, the installation and the return of Rev. Bar Barbara from sabbatical, or any other moment in which you felt that warmth of love and acceptance. That is the beauty of a Church connected, and yet able to function as individuals. This is a tremendous gift that we have

received from people whom we may not be able to name but they are there. It has truly been an amazing year.

As you leave the sanctuary today, remember to take a flower that you did not bring. This represents the gifts we receive from each other, often without knowing that we have given them. As you take it home, remember that it came from someone in your church who is as beautiful as a flower. Think of the hard work, love, and creativity of the universe that nurtured and sweated and worried over the flower you hold in your hands. And when you do, smile like Mahakashapa smiled. Amen Blessed Be.