



Message

This Communion was inspired by and drew upon The Communion Book edited by Carl Seaburg

The Story of Norbert Capek

I want to tell you the story of Norbert Capek this morning. Norbert was born in Czechoslovakia to a very poor and very Catholic family in the late 1800s. As he grew up it became clear how very bright he was and that he would never reach his full potential at home. He was sent away to his uncle's to work and to study. But as Norbert Capek grew up, he began to question his Catholic faith. He started looking for a new way to be with the God he believed in, and he found that way in the Baptist Church. The Baptists welcomed him in, and paid for him to go to seminary and become a minister. Before long he found himself the head of all the Baptist Churches of Bohemia. But there was a problem. It wasn't safe to be Baptist in Czechoslovakia, much less the leader of the Baptist church. Fearing for his life, he fled to the United States and began anew in New York City. But again, he started questioning his faith. Again, he looked for a new way to be with the God he believed in. He found that way in Unitarianism and he made this religion his spiritual home.

He also met his wife, Maja, in New York City, as well as many Czechoslovakian exiles. They watched the situation in their home country carefully, waiting to see if it would ever be safe to go home. And then, it looked like things were getting better, so Norbert and Maja decided to return and start a Unitarian Church because they believed that a religion dedicated to freedom, acceptance, unconditional love, reason, and responsibility could be a healing balm to their divided country.

Many people joined their church, people who had also found that their religious needs could not be met by the religion of their childhoods. Because many of them came to his church in rejection of other churches, they had difficulty agreeing on symbols and rituals. And yet, there was a strong need to feel connected, and the need to symbolize those connections in ritual.

The Flower Communion was Norbert Capek's response to that deep need. People were asked to bring a flower of their choice. When they arrived at church a large vase stood waiting for them. Each person was asked to place their flower in the vase. This signified that it was by their own free will that they joined with the others. The vase itself was the symbol of their united church fellowship. Later, all were welcomed to take a flower different than the one they brought, symbolizing their willingness to be changed by their community, to value and treasure everyone there. The Communion worked. The symbol of the flower was both neutral enough and meaningful enough that most everyone felt free to participate. And the ritual was born.

Norbert and Maja Capek's church flourished in the years between the world wars. It quickly became the largest Unitarian Church in the world. But things changed fast. With the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Nazis, the church was threatened with extinction. Many members were beaten, imprisoned, tortured and executed. Capek was threatened many times and told to be silent, but his conscience would not let him do that. He continued to preach his message of radical love and connectedness, that we are the embodiment of that large all-powerful love that is both of us and larger than us. When we truly feel our connections to one another, when we refuse to be divided from one another through fear and judgment,



those who benefit from fear and division and judgment cannot win.

The threats continued, but Norbert continued to preach, and after a sermon where he openly criticized the Nazi occupiers, he was arrested and sent to Dachau, a concentration camp. He was executed shortly after he arrived. He was simply too much of a threat and no doubt his captors could not risk the spreading of his message to the other prisoners. After the war, his wife Maja was determined that his story and his message not die with him. She returned to the country where she and Norbert met and one fateful Sunday introduced his Flower Communion to a Unitarian congregation in Cambridge Massachusetts. Those participating were so moved not only by the power of the ritual, but also by the devastating truth of what had befallen its creator. There arose the determination that his message should not die, nor should the ritual that embodied it. The Flower Communion began to spread through our churches and is now a yearly tradition in congregations around the world.

You are all welcome to participate in this communion, whether you are here for the first time or the hundredth, whether you brought your flower or received one as you walked in the door. By exchanging flowers, we show our willingness to walk together in our search for truth, disregarding all that might divide us. This communion of sharing is essential to a free people of a free faith.

So let us begin our communion. You may come forward as you are willing and able and place your flowers in the baskets at the front. If you would like us to bring the basket to you, please raise your hand and we will do so. Let us begin.

The Giving of the Flowers

The Blessing of the Flowers

From Capek's Original 1923 Blessing of the Flowers

Leader: In the name of the Providence which implants in the heart of the seed the future of the flower, and which implants in our hearts that unrest which will not be quenched till people live lovingly with each other, we bless these flowers.

People: In the name of the Highest, in which we move and take our being, and in the name of the Deepest, which makes father and mother, sister and brother, lover and loner who they are, we bless these flowers.

Leader: In the name of the prophets and sages who sacrificed their lives to hasten the coming of the reign of mutual respect, we bless these flowers.

People: Let us renew our resolution, sincerely, to be brothers and sisters regardless of the barriers which estrange.

Leader: May these flowers be for us the sign of the glory and variety to which we aspire, knowing the whole while that we are One Family, the Family of Spirit and Nature.



Unison: In this holy resolve may we be strengthened by the spirit of love, that we ourselves may bloom, bloom in splendor of a joyful life, and endeavor to be ever more perfect in our days. Amen.

(adapted by Janne and Robert Eller-Isaacs)

The Receiving of the Flowers

Simply by being here, simply by being who you are, you belong here in this place in this time. Each of us has the deep spiritual need to be generous, each of us has the deep spiritual need to receive the generosity of the other. In this giving and receiving, we become as the hand and the heart of the Holy. We are one with all that is.

So now, let us prepare to receive that which has been so generously brought into this community of faith. We will pass the baskets through the sanctuary. As the basket passes you by, take a flower, treasure it, be strengthened and renewed.

Flower Communion Closing Words:

Let us enter into the spirit of prayer and meditation:

Infinite Spirit of Life, we are the messengers of fellowship and love, our bodies and spirits the communion vase, the vessel for the giving and receiving of that infinite love which knows no bounds. Nothing can rob us of our capacity to share love. Not even death can take from us the love that is exchanged between people. It is with us as long as we have love to offer. It is with us whenever we are open to receiving love from others. By offering what we can, and by making room to receive the offerings of others we carry with us the hope for our future. Amen and blessed be.

Homily Precious Gifts

Sometimes a story like Norbert Capek's feels very far from us. We know that there are human rights violations happening every day, that freedom is not a given for many people, even for us sometimes, but it is hard to feel the reality of that in our every day lives. Most of us work hard, try to take care of those we love the best we can, and seek to live in a way that is good and true and moral. It can be hard to comprehend the reality that the liberties and freedoms we take for granted need to be protected. But sometimes, reality has a way of crashing through, and we can glimpse the truth that freedom is not free. Freedom has to be created, sought after, and protected.

A bit of that reality crashed through for me this week, I think. Perhaps you saw the headlines "Dunkin' Donuts accused of promoting terrorism!" Did you see that story? Apparently a Dunkin Donut ad for iced coffee featured a chef wearing a scarf that conservative critics said was the checkered scarf, or kaffiyeh, worn by Palestinian men. Those critics argued that the ad opened a door to Islamic Jihad. Dunkin Donuts argued that the ad did nothing of the sort. The scarf was chosen by a designer for effect, that's all, but the



critics persisted, threatening to start a massive boycott of Dunkin Donuts. Well, the company relented and pulled the ad, and those same critics praised Dunkin Donuts for supporting democracy.

And I found myself thinking about Norbert Capek, because he found himself face to face with a similar kind of thinking, a paranoid kind of thinking dependent on a black and white view of the world, that made sweeping judgments again huge groups of people and used those judgments as the basis for sustained violence. Norbert Capek experienced first hand what happened when free speech and diversity and tolerance was perceived as a danger to national security and identity and actively suppressed.

I found myself thinking of how very dependent this nation has become on fear and division, and how readily people seem to need demons. This is about much more than an ad for coffee being pulled because it offended the public. This is but one example of many where national security is used as a cover to justify racism and discrimination, and to suppress free speech. By no means do I want to diminish the danger posed by terrorism. Nor do I want to suggest that coffee and donuts are the best way to measure the health of our democracy! But I grow more and more convinced that when manufactured panic goes unchallenged, the threat to liberty and democracy increases. Those who would call themselves our enemies no longer have to do much to crack the foundations of our democracy. We are doing fine on our own.

We need rituals like the Flower Communion more than ever. We need every antidote we can get our hands on to build the spiritual strength to resist manufactured danger and cultivated fear. I believe that Unitarian Universalism is one of those antidotes for the same reason that Norbert and Maja Capek believed that Unitarianism had much to offer their troubled nation. This is a religion of hope and compassion, unconditional love, freedom of conscience, reason, and moral responsibility. We hold as one of our core values the breaking down of those things that separate us from one another. Whether it be our own prejudices, our own assumptions, our own privileges, or the prejudices, assumptions and privileges of others, we hold these things to be antithetical to what it means to manifest the presence of the holy in the world. If we are not questioning and bringing reason and an open mind to the questions of our day, we cannot be those vessels of unconditional love, which is the only power that can bring true peace and justice, the only power that can transform minds and hearts and souls and this troubled world.

One of the things we hold to be true is that our houses of worship are to be places where we support the rebuilding of wholeness, where we engage in the work of healing, and examine the ways that we have been barriers to the unleashing of that unconditional love, so that we may become servants for the building of beloved community.

There is wonderful definition of community that I came across this week. Developed by Patricia Hughes in her book *Gracious Space*, she says that a true community accepts a new individual unconditionally, and only rejects them if they later PROVE they do not belong. Most communities work the other way, waiting until someone proves they BELONG to count them as a member of the group. In the first case, trust is unconditionally given. In the second case, trust is held back as a reward, and potentially denied for as long as the community finds reason enough to distrust.

Those who criticized that ad had the second understanding of community. Distrust until trust is earned. Assume at first that the situation is untrustworthy. Assume that the scarf that looks like something a



terrorist might wear. Assume that this is an approval of terrorism. Hold onto your distrust like a prized possession. The judgments that flew from those critics say much more about the critics than they do about a company that sells donuts and coffee.

I hold that this kind of distrust is spiritual violence. Distrust improperly placed is a form of spiritual violence, doing great harm to all it touches. Not only does it diminish the person who is denied the trust, it diminishes the person who is distrusting.

The power of Norbert Capek's ministry and his Flower Communion is that he invited everyone to a place at the table, into a community in which he asked that they trust and accept each other, that they assume the best of every person who walked in. And that is what we are called to do. To ascribe the best of intentions to everyone we meet unless they prove otherwise. This is a profound kind of generosity that I think few of us have had the good fortune to experience enough of – either in the giving or the receiving.

Now I'm sure that each of us can look at moments in our life where we modeled that first kind of community, that generous unconditional gift of love and trust. And I'm sure that all of us can point to times where we stepped into that second model, where distrust was the first resort. And when you look back at times like that, I want you to think not about the object of your distrust. I want you to think about the impact of that distrust on you. What did it do to your soul? What did it do to your spirit? How did it affect your outlook on life? How did it affect your ability to be in right relationship with those you love? Distrust poisons us from the inside out, and I am afraid it is poisoning this nation.

We know that none of us are perfect, and that we're going to fall into those places, but we are called, always, to a higher way of living, where we freely place our flowers in that vase, and with the trust and confidence take back another flower, knowing that the whole of humanity has the potential to be blessed for it. That's what we're called to, it's the gift we can offer each other and this community.

We can do better than poorly thought out distrust. We can do better than quick judgments. In the words of Norbert Capek, we can renew our resolution to be brothers and sisters regardless of the barriers which estrange. We can be reinforced in the truth that we are One Family, the family of spirit and nature.

May it be so.