

Walking Together II

A Sermon delivered by the Rev. Maria Pap
at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Ann Arbor
Sunday, March 28, 2004

Welcome and thank you for sharing this opportunity of being together, of worshipping together, of strengthening a bond of affection and understanding between American Unitarian Universalists and Transylvanian Unitarians.

My sermon's motto is from the prophet Amos: "*Can two walk together, except they be agreed?*"

Today and now two worlds are meeting here, two roads or two rivers, which started from the same source but had taken different directions. You know very well one of them – it is your own; but you may know little or nothing about the other.

Who are we, the Transylvanian Unitarians? Where is this Transylvania anyway? Why are Unitarian Hungarians and their country called Romania?

Let me start by telling you a story from Talmud.

Once two farmers were fighting over a piece of land. Each one claimed the land belonged to him, and each one presented evidence to the other to prove his point. The first man said: "This land is mine! My grandfather planted figs here when he was a boy!" The second man said "This land belongs to me! My grandfather and grandmother built their first home here!" They argued and argued but could come to no agreement. Finally they decided to take their case before the town rabbi.

The rabbi listened to each of them for a long time. But even he could not decide who was right. At last, he came upon a way to discover the truth.

The rabbi took the two farmers to the field they were arguing over. As they stood there watching, he slowly bend down and put his ear to the ground. The two farmers looked at each other in confusion. What did the rabbi think he was doing? He stayed there for some moments in silence. Then he stood up and looked again at the two farmers.

"My friends," he said, "I have been listening to the land, and the land has spoken. The land says it belongs to neither of you, but rather, that you belong to the land."

I told you this story because it is the story of my land, the story of Transylvania. And my story, the story of Transylvanian Unitarianism, the story of Francis David, starts in this land. A faraway place for many of you, perhaps a never, never land for many Americans, a wonderland for me – the land beyond the forest – Transylvania.

A land disputed and advocated by two nations, fierce in their ownership, a land of love and hatred, a land of fights and fears, of glory and defeats, of half-truths and oppression – the land of Francis David and Transylvanian Unitarianism.

Francis David was born around 1520 in Kolozsvár, one of the major towns of Transylvania, with a multicultural background, German and Hungarian, and he died as prisoner in the castle of Deva, 1579. For me personally Francis David is the symbol of the seeking man. The person who seeks the truth, the happiness, the meaning of life; the person who struggles for his/her faith.

Francis David came a long way in struggling for his faith.

He started as a Catholic, who in going to German universities got to know the teachings of Martin Luther. He came back to Transylvania as a Lutheran and he became the first superintendent or bishop of the Hungarian Lutheran Church. But he couldn't rest; he still had questions. He learned about a new theologian, Jean Calvin, about a new approach to the Bible and he realized that Calvin's teachings were closer to his beliefs. So he became a Calvinist. He had to be an interesting and forceful personality, because again he was elected the first bishop of the Hungarian Calvinist Church. But he still had questions to wrestle with. He kept reading the Bible (actually he was famous for his intimate knowledge of it) and through the light of intellect and reason started to analyze the faith.

In 1566 he finally "saw light." He started to unravel the biblical narrative about God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost. In January of that year he preached for the first time against the trinity, as a theological construction defeating reason and being alien to the teachings of Jesus.

The deconstruction of the Trinity led him to another major issue: the divinity or humanity of Jesus. Was he God, whom we have to adore and to whom we should address our prayers? Or was he a "mere man," whose greatness lay in his humanity?

The deconstruction of the Christian image of Jesus was his opera magna. He talked about the man Jesus in the time, when even those, who were against the Trinity, considered Jesus not wholly human.

Imagine this kind of attitude in the sixteenth century. Imagine the impact of his ideas in a society wholly permeated with fundamental Christian teachings and intolerance.

Francis David started to preach, he started to gather followers, and the first timid flickering of light became a flame. King John Sigismund of Transylvania became a Unitarian and together with Francis David brought into being in 1568 at the Diet of Torda the first Edict of Religious Toleration in the European history. This Edict was based on the fundamental right of the individual to choose his/her own religious way, because "faith is the gift of God." This Edict is the base and the starting point of the Transylvanian Unitarian Church as institution. An institution which has survived more than four centuries of oppression and intolerance both on religious and ethnic grounds. An institution which survived the death of its founder because, as in Jesus' case, not the person, but the teaching was of primary importance.

Let me remind you of the words of Theodore Parker:

“...after a great truth of humanity is once set a-going, it is in the charge of mankind, through whom it first came from God; it cannot perish by any man’s death.”

Francis David did not stop in his quest. He was put in prison because he dared to think, dared to dream, dared to question in a time when people took religious matters for granted. His guiding vision of our faith was “*simper reformanda*,” which he would not give up. He chose the life of the soul, the courage of his convictions, losing the world, losing his life. But the Church he founded embodied his truths, his teachings.

And I would like to emphasize “his teachings” and “his spirituality.” The American Unitarian Universalism is closer in spirit to David Francis, to his ideal of “*simper reformanda*” than we ever have been. Why?

Because we had to survive.

We survived because we gave up some of our freedom, because we stopped in our quest. When I look at you, when I look at the history of your denomination, at the present of the American Unitarian Universalism, your theology and your social concerns, I see what we could have been if the conditions were different. And sometimes I’m envious and sometimes angry with you for not treasuring more what you have, for taking the present for granted, without dwelling on and knowing more about the past. But although I see the possibilities we missed, I’m grateful for what we still have.

Unitarianism as an ethnic religion sets us boundaries, which we dare not or want not to trespass. But these boundaries hold us together; these boundaries helped us keep the faith of our ancestors. And who knows, perhaps in the years ahead we will be able to choose a way which will help us recapture some of our founder’s spirituality.

Our 435 years of history as a church have been years of struggle and oppression because of our faith or ethnicity or both. We endured Turkish, German, Russian, Romanian armies and we have behind us 40 years of Communism from which we are struggling hard to get free. In all these times, our Unitarian Church and faith was the source which gave us strength and sustenance to keep us going.

It did not shelter us from deceptions, from treason, from secret police, from suspicion, or from everyday miseries but taught us the importance of community and human solidarity; the importance of faith in times of adversity.

Since 1989 we have been trying to learn “democracy” but the burden of the past is heavy.

We were oppressed for so long that we forgot the taste of freedom.

We had to keep silent for so long that we do not know how to use the freedom of speech.

We had to live in fear for so long that we rarely have the courage to stand up for our rights.

We had to live in suspicion for so long that we feel vulnerable in bestowing trust.

We were told what to do for so long that we are confused and frightened to make our own decisions.

We are living now in a different world, but the wounds of the past are hard to heal. We have to relearn the lesson of freedom and democracy and all that it entails: trust, tolerance, responsibility for others, and ourselves the importance of the common good.

For us, America was always the symbol of freedom and democracy, of the land where people who fled all kind of oppression and who came from various cultural and ethnic background, live together in harmony.

We looked upon you as our “saviors,” our big brother who will step up and deliver us from oppression. We waited for you.

We have waited for you so long (and I just tell a date – the Hungarian Revolution of 1956) and you did not come. During the darkest years of communism, when there was no food, no electricity, no heat, the only thought which kept us going was “the Americans will come.”

And you did not.

But then something miraculous happened.

You came. And you came in a way, which assuaged all our misapprehensions and made true our hopes and dreams.

You as Unitarian Universalists were looking for your roots, for our common history and faith. We, Unitarians from Transylvania, were looking for help, for sustenance and solidarity. We found each other; our communities through the partner church program found each other and this opened up new ways of understanding ourselves and enriching our lives.

In Marosvasarhely there is a well-known sculptural group. It is the statue of the two Bolyai, father and son. Both were famous mathematicians, but the son surpassed the father. He was the founder of non-Euclidian geometry, which stated among other things that parallels do meet in infinity.

Let me describe to you the statues: the father is sitting, looking lovingly at his son; the son is standing, leaning toward his father with tenderness.

This image could be symbol for the relationship of Transylvanian Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists:

We are the old ones, with roots firmly grounded, with cobwebs here and there but looking forward to a future symbolized by you, relying on your strength.

You are the youth, looking with tenderness to the old, seeking wisdom and rootedness and having all the confidence of youth that you can make a difference.

And you did really make a difference in many, many lives. The ongoing relationship between our congregations has had and continues to have a huge impact on the lives of Transylvanian Unitarians.

Your visits to Transylvania taught us about the strength and ommitments to your chosen faith and the wonderful feeling of not being alone.

Your financial support helped us educate our youth, helped us acuire our building, keeping treasures of the past for the future generations to come.

The Harvest Hope program helped and helps economic development in trying to work for economic justice.

The Balazs Ferenc program brings here every year a Transylvanian Unitarian minister, to learn, to grow in order to serve our community better.

We learned from you the importance of walking together, we learned that we are all in a “virtual community” and everything we do in our communities for the benefit of all, helps this virtual community grow.

Your dedication and solidarity reminded us that faith and religion is not about abstract theological debates, but about love, about caring for one another, about working for justice and peace for all of us and in all of us.

And that is why I would like to honor today Transylvanian Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists, living or dead, who worked or work for this virtual community of ours, and in this walk we have so much to teach each other.

I would like to tell you, members of our partner church congregation, that in the scheme of things you can play a major role in our lives, if you wish to. You can teach yourselves about us, about our common heritage. You can strengthen already existing bonds or you can start new ones. You can work for social justice and economic equity all around the world. You can teach yourselves and others to give us a place in their hearts and minds through compassion and solidarity and enduring faith.

And what can we learn from you”

As a Transylvanian Unitarian let me tell you about those things which I would like to learn from you and take back home:

1. I would like to learn and take back with me the smiles on your faces when you encounter a stranger.
2. I would like to learn and take back with me the courage of your convictions, as I've seen it on a bumper sticker: "Speak your mind, even if your voice shakes."
3. I would like to learn and take back the respect for every human being, no matter his race, color of skin, background or faith. You taught me this lesson, through my daughter Abigel. When we took her to school, I wanted to make her integration as easy as possible, so I wrote the English version of her name. She accepted it, but in her notebook she would write it in Hungarian. The teacher saw it and she changed her nametag to the Hungarian version. I wanted to make it easy, but you do not want the easy way, you want the right way. And I am thankful for it.
4. I would like to learn and take back with me your sensibility for social concerns, your "keep on trying" policy, which does not give up the hope that every small deed makes a difference, that there is no lost battle if you are patient and strong minded enough.
5. And I would like to take back for personal use a bumper sticker. There are few women ministers back home, so sometimes we have gender issues. I am not a fervent feminist, but I saw this sticker, which might enliven the atmosphere of our ministerial gatherings. The bumper sticker says: "When God made man, she was only joking."

You see, there are so many things we can learn from each other in this partnership if we really want to and we do not have to think alike, to love alike.

We need one another in this long walk.

Let me conclude with the verses of Richard Gilbert:

"In all our times of truth and triumph, of faith and fortitude,
Let us celebrate what we share.
We are, after all, in this together."

So be it. Amen.

Copyright 2004, Rev. Maria Pap