

Walking Together

Sermon given by Maria Pap

Sunday, March 28, 2004

First Unitarian Universalist Church of Ann Arbor Michigan

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

I am very honored by this opportunity, honored and very happy; and I would very much like to be able to share my joy and somehow thank you for everything we've got from you. With your help, our little, struggling Unitarian congregation got a place of its own. With your help our youths were able to pursue their education. The occasions and times I spent with you gave me an insight into the life on an American Unitarian Universalist congregation and enriched my understanding not just of you, but of my ministry, too; and what a wonderful opportunity to be able to talk about a topic very dear to my heart.

As you know, today's sermon is about the partner-church connection, in the words of prophet Amos is about our "walking together".

What does it mean to walk together?

The Unitarian Universalist congregation of Ann Arbor, Michigan has been partner of the Unitarian congregation of Kezdivasarhely, Transylvania for many years now. We have been partners for a long time; we have been walking together for years. But did we really?

There are different ways of walking together with different lengths and different purposes. You can walk with a complete stranger and still feel comfortable. Did you have times in your life, when you met someone on a train or plane and disclosed your real self to that person? You were willing to tell things to a stranger you never even thought about telling your beloved ones. But then you see, you knew, that it's for a short while. You knew you could be open and truthful; you can be your real self, because you are not going to meet again. These encounters are always refreshing- there is no recrimination; no responsibility- just a short walk and you always see the end of it. There is a different kind of relationship and dimension involved with people with whom you are willing to embark on a long walk. There is a sense of commitment and responsibility, which makes it highly risky and at times even frightening.

How does a long walk start with someone?

In my opinion there are two ways: you either love them first and learn to know them afterwards or you know them first and learn to love them afterwards.

If I look at the partner-church relations between the American and Transylvanian congregations, most of the time I see the first case: one or several members of the Unitarian Universalist church “fell in love” with us, with Transylvania and this love is a driving force for them to find out more about us, to do more for us, to make their congregation more aware of this relationship.

Why are they doing it? Why spend so much time, energy, and money for Unitarians from another culture, in a little, forgotten part of the world?

I do not know the answer and sometime I wonder if they do. But does it matter?

We, as Unitarians, we are famous for having explanations for everything. But sometime in the tapestry of life it’s refreshing to have an unexplained hole. The commitment of this people it is like a mystery, which could have several answers.

It could be a sense of equity, it could be compassion, and it could be human solidarity-

Whatever it is it springs from love.
But is it enough?

Love is blind said the ancient Latins. Are we really the image of what you think we are?

For that matter, are you whom we think you are?

In Ecclesiastes there is a beautiful passage:

”For everything there is a season.
A time for every purpose under heaven:
A time to break down,
And a time to build up.”

In every partnership, be it between individuals or communities, there comes a time, when the present, the given, the taken-for-granted is not enough. There is a longing for depth, there is a longing for a vision of where this particular partnership is going, of where is this long walk going to take us?

And to fulfill this longing we have first to break down, to destroy. We have to start from scratch. We have to destroy, to clear the ground to be able to build again, to build anew.

We have to start on both sides by breaking down our presuppositions and assumptions about the other. We need to destroy the prejudices, the ideas that do not let us see the reality of the other.

I feel like the ancient prophets of Israel calling out for the death of the old, which does not let the new to be born. I am calling out, because I see that we live amid the myths we forged about each other, which might come out of love but still blind us and bind us.

As I see it there is an American myth and a Transylvanian one and we prefer living comfortable in their shadow, ignoring the challenge out of a mistaken sense of love and solidarity.

What is the Transylvanian myth about Americans?

First and foremost is the idea that all Americans are rich. We have an image of the land of every possibility; we have the notion of the “American dream” and the notion of the American rich uncle, who supports his poor relatives. We have some vague notions about the theological diversities in congregations, about a different congregational life but not real understanding of it. All other things, which do not fit into our preconceptions, are summarily dealt with under the heading: American peculiarities.

And what is the American myth about Transylvanians ?

Well let me enumerate a couple: very Christian, very hierarchical, and tradition-bound, moderately nationalist and very poor. Familiar images and topics: old and crumbling churches and parishes, carts and horses, gypsies, congregations always in need of money for different restoration-projects.

You think it is relatively simplistic and unfair?

Perhaps, but most of the time what we do know about each other would fit in this picture. It reminds me about the Englishman, who having heard a lot about the beauty of French women, decided to take a quick look. So he took a boat from Dover to Calais, but was too lazy to leave the boat. By chance, he finally saw a French woman. Back home he said: “ I saw the French women, they are not too much to write home about. They all have red hair and freckles.”

Yes, I think it is time and this time is now, to reassess our partnership, to break down the myths, which keep us apart.

I think it is time and this time is now to give a new dimension for our love by starting to learn about each other.

This is not an easy process, I'm talking about. We might find out the truth and the truth most of the time is hard to swallow.

But what a reward for us: we will learn that not all Americans are rich. We will learn that fulfillment and success are not bestowed on Americans as a birthright, but they earn it by hard work and sacrifice. We will learn that choosing one's own faith adds a new dimension to your commitment. And we will learn that there is strong sense of citizenship, of personal involvement in society's issues, a civil obedience and sometime disobedience, which for me personally gives the greatness of this nation.

And what a reward for you: you might learn that our Christian outlook has its strengths, that although hierarchy most of the time is a burden, can be very useful living under outside pressure, that ethnocentrism might be a question of survival and not necessarily narrow-mindedness, that being “poor” in economic terms is not lack of work or initiative but adverse conditions.

In this process of learning we might even find out the reality of our personal myths in facing the other. Are we really the individuals and communities we proclaim ourselves to be ? There might be interesting surprises in store for us.

Can we do all this?

I am confident that we can. I challenge you and us to do it because I know we can do it if we are willing to take the risks.

Would there be love left afterwards? Who knows?

But it's worth taking the risk. So far we loved and accepted each other, we embarked on a long walk together without really knowing each other, without really knowing where this road is going to lead us. This cannot be enough for the long walk. This cannot be enough for a meaningful partnership.

“Can two walk together, except they be agreed?”

Knowing each other first and learning to love each other afterwards, despite our differences, despite seeing our shortcomings, is the real basis of a partnership. This is the standing point from which we can acknowledge the past and we can decide the future, the purpose of our long walk together.

On this road, knowledge and love are inseparable.

This is the magic circle for you American Unitarian Universalists, for us Transylvanian Unitarians and for our common road:

To know is to love.

To love is to be willing to know.

Let us enter the magic circle. Let us walk together.

Amen.

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