

Unitarianism in Transylvania: The History of a Courageous People.

Our Partner Congregation, Unitarian Church, Kézdivásárhely, Romania

Sermon by Rev. Kenneth W. Phifer, Senior Minister,

Followed by remarks by Gretchen Jackson

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There are two great traditions in the saga of Unitarian Universalism. Universalism is almost completely an American experience. In contrast, Unitarianism has deep roots in Europe, none longer, deeper, or richer than those found in Transylvania, now a part of Romania.

Beginning in the middle years of the 16th century, Unitarian ideas and practice and institutions have had an unbroken history of 437 years in this turbulent land. To today's Unitarians in Transylvania, that history is very much alive. As Professor John Erdo expressed it, "Those who remember the past find in it directions for the present and the future...It is the duty of each generation to study history...so that in the light of the past it may see clearly what is its own special task." In Transylvania Unitarian history are to be found many examples of courage and insight that offer guidance for the challenges of this day.

Transylvania in the 16th century was one of two centers---the other was Poland---of the newly emerging Unitarian understanding of Christianity. Remarkable and important events happened in both places, but the Polish experience was brief, ending in the middle years of the 17th century. Many of the Unitarians (Socinians) driven from Poland fled to Transylvania, where Unitarianism proved to be of greater durability.

Transylvania is situated in what is now central Romania, mostly surrounded by mountains. The area was originally inhabited by the Dacs, apparently thousands of years ago. It was then settled by descendants of Attila the Hun, the Seklars, and by the Magyar people from Russia. About a thousand years ago the Hungarians began living there, and Saxons were invited to settle there 300 years after that. From the days of King Stephen of Hungary until the 16th century---a period of over 500 years---Catholic Christianity was the state religion of this land, throughout this period a province of Hungary.

Transylvania became independent in 1545 and remained so until 1711. This little kingdom was bounded by Catholic Hungary to the west, Protestant portions of Bohemia and Poland to the north, Ottoman Muslims to the east, and Orthodox Greeks and Slavs to the northeast and south. Understandably Transylvania became embroiled in the fierce religious arguments of the 16th century as each of the various religions whose territory bordered the land sought to gain influence there.

Lutherans, Calvinists, and then Unitarians began to argue with the Greek Orthodox and the Roman Catholics over what was the correct version of Christianity:

Was the Lord's Supper a symbolic event, or were the bread and the wine actually transformed into the body and blood of Christ?

Was God a Trinity or a Unity?

To whom should one pray: only to God, Christ as well, God and Christ and the saints?

Such questions as these were the subject of intense debate in Transylvania and everywhere else in Europe.

So turbulent were the disputes and so divided the people of Transylvania that the Queen and her legislature issued a decree of toleration in 1557. It failed to calm people down because it did not have sufficient authority behind it. The Queen soon lost her throne. The legislature disbanded. The battle raged on.

Another attempt was made six years later by Queen Isabella's son, King John Sigismund, but this effort also failed, and the dispute continued.

Listening to the various proponents of Christianity, John began to be attracted to the Unitarian approach. In 1566, he sponsored the first of what were to be three major national debates on the questions of what was true Christianity. The outcome of these debates would determine the state religion of Transylvania.

At that first debate, a man named Francis David spoke passionately and persuasively for Unitarianism. He was the first person in modern European history to use the word Unitarianism. He had a most unusual religious history.

He began his adult life as a Catholic religious educator. In 1550, when he was 40 years of age, he was converted to Lutheranism. Ten years later, he was a Calvinist, and in 1565 he became a Unitarian. In each of these religious movements, Francis David became the Superintendent of the country's churches and the chief spokesperson for each in turn.

His guiding principle as a Unitarian was that true doctrines originate in the Bible and must not be offensive to reason. Thus he rejected the doctrine of the Trinity because it is not in the Bible. Thus he argued against the typical Christian understanding that religion is to teach us how to praise God. David thought religion was to help human beings to attain higher levels of morality. Otherwise religion becomes unreasonable and meaningless, whatever words are found in the Bible.

David also believed in toleration. Unlike the Orthodox Church of Romania, the Roman Catholic Church of Austria, the Islamic faith of the Ottoman Empire, or the Lutheran and Calvinist movements of Hungary, all of which played a role and wanted to play a large role in Transylvania life, David asserted that there should be no suppression of any religion. Neither state nor church power should be used to coerce any one.

David insisted that only the individual conscience could determine truth, so saints and sinners alike should be given freedom to pursue their beliefs. David warned against the easy comfort of thinking we always know what is right and that when others disagree with us, they must be wrong.

At all times, be respectful and be careful. Think! Truth is always more than what we know or believe it to be.

At the center of David's theology was a richly developed humanism. What matters, what really matters in life is how we treat one another, what we do to ease pain, our zeal in pursuing goodness and justice, our efforts to make the world a happier place. He rejected the idea that human beings are profoundly sinful and unworthy creatures. He did not accept the notion common among all the other religions in his day that only the true religion could enable people to find salvation.

His humane and thoughtful religious teachings were persuasive to the king, and in 1566 David became the court preacher. As such he was the primary debater in the great debates of 1566, 1568, and 1569. These debates ranged over many weeks, with participants arising at 5:30 a.m. to begin and ceasing only with darkness. The whole country literally hung on every word, the way 21st century people do on the outcome of World Cup soccer matches.

The crucial year was 1568. In January of that year the king called an assembly in the town of Torda to hear the various proponents argue their separate cases. To the horror of the Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists, but to the delight of the Unitarians, King John concluded the Diet of Torda with the Act of Toleration and Freedom of Conscience. This was the first **comprehensive** act of toleration enacted by a government in the western world.

John Sigismund issued this decree at a time when Calvinists were still rejoicing at the execution of the Unitarian Michael Servetus by John Calvin, when the Catholic Inquisition was still murdering Protestants in the Low Countries for their heresies, when England was still burning people at the stake for holding viewpoints counter to the established religion---first Catholic, then Anglican, the Catholic again, then Anglican again---a time when prison was the best that people with unorthodox views could expect.

This is what the Act of Toleration and Freedom of Conscience said in entirety: "His majesty, our Lord, in what manner he---together with his realm---legislated in the matter of religion at the previous Diets, in the same manner now, in this Diet, he reaffirms that in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well, if not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the previous statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching, for faith is the gift of God, this comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God."

The one time in history when Unitarians were in governing power, unlike all the other religions around them, they did not use their power to impose their ideas. They insisted on religious liberty for all people.

There is a mural on one wall of the town hall in Torda that depicts Francis David arguing at the Diet of Torda for both Unitarianism and for toleration. David's proposal was for all to be allowed

to teach and to write, and out of these diverse instructions and thoughts the truth would emerge. Reproductions of that mural are said to hang in almost every Unitarian home to this day. One hangs in our home, and one hangs on the wall just to the right as you leave the sanctuary.

In March of 1568, another debate took place in another town (Gyulafehérvár), after which David returned to his home in Kolozsvár. There he was met by huge crowds, who urged him to mount a large rock outside of town and preach to them. That rock proclaimed that God is One, *Egy Az Isten*. That rock has the same kind of value that Plymouth Rock has for Americans, arguably even more.

Three years after the Act of Toleration, King John Sigismund, the only Unitarian king in history, died at the age of 31. Catholic relatives succeeded him. They diminished though they did not repeal the tolerant policy of King John. David lost his influence at court and by 1579 was in prison. His offense was to refuse to yield in his view that one could pray only to God, not to Jesus, who was, like us, only human. David died shortly after being imprisoned.

Within a few years, Transylvania became part of the battleground between the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Empire, between Islam and Catholicism. As the power of the Habsburgs increased, so too did the oppression of religious minorities under their control.

Unitarians throughout the 17th century were beleaguered. One example was the Accord of Des in 1638. This mandated that Unitarians must worship and appeal to Jesus, must baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, could publish books only with the approval of the Catholic Prince, and were denied the right of doctrinal clarification and amendment.

All of these requirements were antithetical to the meaning of Unitarianism. Jesus is not thought to be divine and so is not to be prayed to nor used in baptismal rites. Changes in doctrine are essential to a religion that believes that neither truth nor revelation is sealed, but gradually unfolding, gradually being discovered, gradually being created.

Because it was virtually impossible for Unitarians to abide by these demands, many of their churches were seized, their property confiscated, and their religion in large measure silenced.

But Unitarianism continued. The voice of the liberals was never completely cut off. Imre Gellert did a comprehensive study of all the surviving sermons from Unitarianism in the late 16th century into the 20th century. He found a number of critically important ideas in 17th and 18th century sermons.

Among them are these:

- eternal life is not the point of religion, but life on this earth more morally conceived and lived;
- whether there is eternal life is beyond this life is an open question to which honest persons must admit ignorance;
- that while there are constraints of body and soul, human beings are essentially free to choose good or evil.

Without ever explicitly stating it, these early Unitarians were nonetheless setting aside the doctrines of original sin, salvation by grace alone, and the structure of heaven and hell, critically important elements of Christian theology.

The Enlightenment was the central intellectual force of the 18th century in Europe. Although centered in Western Europe, its influence was felt in the east as well. As a challenge to all authority, but especially to conservative, traditional authority, the Enlightenment sent shudders of fear through all the monarchs.

In Transylvania, now part of the Catholic Habsburg Empire, this meant an increase in religious oppression for the minorities, like the Unitarians. Printing presses were confiscated. Publishing houses were closed. Lands and buildings that had been the property of Unitarians and other Protestants for centuries were seized by the Catholic Church without recompense. Services and classes, if they were allowed at all, had to be held in private homes.

This continued for most of the century, until Emperor Joseph II's Edict of Toleration in 1781.

It is not possible to know exactly how many Unitarians there were in those years, but literally hundreds of churches in hundreds of villages have survived. Historical markers and collective memory speak of many more. It is likely that there were, as there are today, tens of thousands of Unitarians in Transylvania, regardless of who ruled the land or what hardships were imposed on Unitarian believers.

One of the striking things about Transylvanian Unitarianism is that whenever writing was permitted, whenever the religion could be affirmed in public, it was always done so with a sense of optimism, a sense of forward movement, as though in the quieter, more oppressive periods theological and religious work was going on quietly behind the scenes, awaiting the day when once again the people could speak their faith.

Consider, for example, the great Transylvanian preacher and thinker Janos Kormoczi. Writing in the last years of the 18th and the early years of the 19th centuries, Kormoczi hailed the freedom of human beings and the power for good that that made possible. He celebrated the partnership of religion and reason, which he saw as being too long delayed. The task of these two forces, he wrote, was to "*lead humanity into the church of happiness.*"

Kormoczi was convinced that the challenge before the world in his age was to create a new human being, on the outside in terms of individual behavior and the restructuring of society's institutions, on the inside in terms of ideas and attitudes.

He was not a fool. He understood the dangers of overestimating humanity's capabilities. He specifically warned against arrogance and laziness. It is not enough, he said, merely to proclaim that we are new humans. We must strive constantly to become so.

Ultimately, he grounded his faith in human possibility, not in the Bible or in Jesus, neither of which he mentioned very often.

The Revolution of 1848 and its failure to dislodge or alter the ways of the Hapsburgs led to a suppression of the Unitarians and others and an enforced period of silence. The monarchy rightly regarded the Unitarians as one of the sources of revolution, citing the words of ministers like Antal Koronka. Koronka declared that *“if freedom is our natural right, let there be freedom! ... The mission of religion is to give divine sanction to civil rights, to make citizens aware of their rights, to support all social struggles of the nation.”*

The preaching for the next century, mostly at holidays and special occasions, was largely historical, devoted to encouraging people to draw strength from the example of earlier Unitarians' endurance and the continuing assertion of religious liberty. The preaching was grounded in a humanistic understanding of the purpose of religion. Religion is to serve people and help them to become more virtuous while it helps society to become more just. This preaching led to a brief period of oppression in the 1860's, followed by a time of changed theological direction when the bans were lifted.

This new approach was to look inward, to seek the divine in the human heart, to find out as much objective truth inside human beings as we found outside ourselves. One of the historians of Transylvanian Unitarianism has called this the third founding idea of the movement.

The first was David's notion of the Unitarian rather than the Trinitarian conception of the Deity. This idea was developed into the teaching that God is everywhere, that God can be worshipped anywhere, and that all human beings are centers of truth and revelation, not just those people mentioned in the Bible.

The second founding idea was the deep commitment to reason. The Unitarians of Transylvania insisted that one of the standards of religious truth must be its rationality. Religion must comport with the knowledge we have of the world and the wisdom of how to live in it that is part of the heritage of humanity and our advancing understanding. Religion, in other words, must make sense, not flout it.

The third great idea was to elevate feeling, intuition, and emotion into places of importance as channels of truth.

In the later years of the 19th and the early years of the 20th centuries, Unitarianism in Transylvania began to flourish. They broadened earlier ties with both British and American Unitarianism. These friends were particularly helpful in providing both much needed funds and in providing educational and worship materials. Journals were started. Books were published. Ruined and run-down church buildings were restored. Significant internal growth characterized this period leading up to the Second World War.

While the two world wars were hard on the Unitarians, it was the years after the Second World War that were to prove most difficult for them. The worst religious persecution the Unitarians had ever known was in the time of Communist power in what was by now Romania.

It was the worst religious persecution in part because the Communists did not take religion seriously. They undermined it casually in financial, political, and legal ways, assuming its unimportance.

It was the worst religious persecution also because the Communists took it very seriously, actively trying to disable the religious enterprise as much as possible. The Cult Law of 1948 removed religious liberty. President Ceausescu exacted a pledge of fidelity to the state from all religious leaders in 1968, a devastating requirement.

Sandor Kovacs, the minister of Third Unitarian Church in Kolozsvár, described the situation of ministers and congregants this way: *“Communism, corrupt leadership, injustice, loneliness, and sometimes simple fear have seemed to govern the life of our Church ... Generations have grown up without Sunday Schools or without religious education other than their confirmation classes. In many instances, the minister could not trust the members of his congregation, and in just as many, the congregations did not trust their ministers. Informers were everywhere. All too often, ministers learned that taking their work too seriously could place them in jeopardy.”*

In the late 1980's yet another dreadful decree was issued by which a policy of territorial restructuring would be implemented. On March 3, 1988, President Ceausescu confirmed the rumors that had been circulating that the number of small villages was going to be reduced. Some 13,000 villages would be destroyed, 7700 of which were Unitarian villages with ancient church buildings, historical sites of deep meaning, and comfortable ways of life dating back hundreds of years. The people – more than 100,000 of them Unitarians – would be transferred to ugly, concrete buildings in new agricultural-industrial centers.

Led my Hungary, with assistance from the United Nations, the United States State Department, the Unitarian Universalist Association, and Unitarians around the world, an outcry rose up that stalled the plans until the Communist government was driven from office and the plans dropped.

It was during the decade of the 1980's that partner church relationships were re-established with congregations in the United States. We joined those efforts some eight years ago. After a slow start, our involvement over the last two years has grown. Of that involvement, our coordinator for our partner church in Kézdivásárhely, Gretchen Jackson, will now speak.

First Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Ann Arbor, Michigan

in partnership with

Unitarian Church

Kézdivásárhely, Romania

Remarks by Gretchen Jackson

February 13th, 2005

In 1997, the members of this congregation voted to establish a partnership with the Unitarian Church of Kézdivásárhely, Romania, a congregation located in a small town in Eastern Transylvania. We joined over 150 other North American churches in making this commitment to develop a relationship with Unitarians who were struggling to recover from years of repression.

What does partnership mean? When she preached in this pulpit last March, Maria Pap, the minister of our partner church, referred to it as “Walking Together.” And that is what it is, two disparate groups of people connected by a common religious heritage, learning to walk together.

Partnership is both easy and difficult. It is easy because establishing a partnership only requires a “yes” vote from members of two congregations involved. It is difficult because it requires a personal commitment on the part of the individuals who voted yes. A partnership does imply some financial commitment, but for Americans the financial commitment is often the easiest part.

The real challenge in partnership is that the personal commitment takes time and energy, is highly risky and, at times, even frightening. It involves the development of a personal relationship with others who reside in a distant land, who speak a different language, and who live their lives and practice their religion in a very different culture. It is also difficult because it is open ended – it will continue as long as there is a commitment to it – from the members of both congregations.

We have taken the first steps in this relationship:

- On several occasions we have provided financial support for projects they identified as important to their church. Most notably was the purchase and repair of an apartment that they now use for their church services and activities as they do not own a church building.
- Several people from this church have visited Kézdivásárhely. They have gotten to know Maria [the minister, Maria Pap], Ildiko [Ildiko Bucs] (the lay president) and members of the congregation. And they have shared with them various aspects of our lives here in America and more specifically in the Ann Arbor UU Congregation.
- And on two occasions Maria Pap has visited our church, most recently with her family last March.

But this is just the beginning of a long road and the next steps require a greater commitment. As Maria said in her sermon here last March: *“In every partnership, be it between individuals or communities, there comes a time when there is a longing of depth, a longing for a vision of where this particular partnership is going, of where this long walk is going to take us.”*

So where are we today and what are our next steps?

- We have just begun the process of listening to our Transylvania partners – of learning from them.
 - Learning the actual reality of their lives rather than just continuing with our assumptions.
 - Learning more about their religious practices, their faith.
 - Simply learning about them as individuals struggling with the pressures of daily life.
 - It is time for us to sit down with members of the Transylvanian congregation and talk about their visions and desires for the future of the partnership – THEIR visions and desires as well as ours.
- It is also time for this partnership to become more visible here in Ann Arbor. For more to become involved.
 - For all of us to be aware of its existence – of the reasons we made this commitment and took the step of establishing the partnership back in 1997 and what has happened since.
 - It is also time to actively share this with the children and youth in our congregation.

As a first step in this direction, Peggy [Garrigues-Cortelyou] will be leading a group pilgrimage to Transylvania and Kézdivásárhely this coming July. In addition to seeing some of the interesting and historical Unitarian sites, we will be spending three days with our partners.

- Staying in their homes
- Sharing meals with them
- Working on a joint project
- Attending their Sunday service
- Presenting a Sunday service “in our own style” for them
- And talking with them – about everything! Our lives, our dreams, our challenges. But primarily our vision for the future of this relationship.

I hope some of you will be able to join us on this trip. I hope all of you will come next fall when the travelers gather to talk about what we saw, what we learned and our plans for the future. This will be a time when “looking at the travel photos and hearing the stories” of another’s adventure really can impact all of our lives.

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