

“WHAT TRANSYLVANIA CAN TEACH US”

A sermon by Rev. Anthony David Makar, Senior Minister

Unitarian Universalist Church of Atlanta

September 18, 2016

LIGHTING OF THE CHALICE

UNISON AFFIRMATION

Our chalice lighters today are UUCA members who, with Rev. Makar, recently undertook a pilgrimage to visit the oldest existing Unitarian churches in the world, in a region of Romania known as Transylvania. Caryll Rinehart joins them, and we are especially grateful for her. Although she did not herself go on the trip, her organizational leadership made it possible.

Will our pilgrims come down to light the chalice? These good folks will be in the parlor immediately after the service, so go and ask them about their experiences! Note that they bring with them a new cloth for our chalice table. The tablecloth features the distinctive look of Transylvanian craftwork.

Please say with me the chalice lighting words, printed in your order of service:

May the light of this flame
illuminate our tradition of seeking,
invite all who yearn for acceptance,
and ignite our passion for justice and peace.

CALL TO WORSHIP: Rev. Makar

26 years ago, UUCA felt called to start a relationship with a Unitarian congregation in Szekelyudvarhely, in the region of Romania known as Transylvania. World War One and then Two had triggered a radical rearrangement of national borders and so the ethnic Hungarians who are the Unitarians in Eastern Europe found themselves living in a strange land. And then came Communism in 1948, which ushered in a time of terrible terror and fear. With the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, freedom was born again, but it was a freedom unsupported by economic opportunity and basic working infrastructure. That's why the Partner Church Movement began: as a way of supporting the oldest Unitarian congregations in the world. Helping them through the devastation of Communism to recovery.

They are simply too precious to lose. To lose them is to lose our history.

26 years ago, we felt the call to take care of extended family. But our extended family is doing much better, and now our purpose in the partnership is not so much a matter of paternalism as it is about mutual knowing, and sharing, and being together as equals as we all face the challenges of the 21st century world.

To that end, nine pilgrim Unitarian Universalists from Atlanta crossed 6000 miles to see the land that gave birth to some of our most precious history: King John Sigismund, the only Unitarian King in history; the Edict of Torda of 1568, the first statement of religious tolerance in the entire Western hemisphere; Francis David, one of our most inspiring teachers of Unitarianism, bar none.

This is what calls us to worship this morning. History. Family. The Spirit of Life, calling us to claim our heritage, and to know it is larger than we could ever have imagined.

GREETING ONE ANOTHER ANTHONY

Let's now greet each other with a handshake or a hug, as the Beloved Community we are....

SINGING

READING ANTHONY

Today's reading is an excerpt of my Transylvania pilgrimage blog, which is available in full on my blogsite called Soul Seeds. <https://anthonyuu.wordpress.com/2016/08/31/blog-trip-to-hungary-and-romania/>

Sunday, Sept. 11, Székelyudvarhely, Part 1

SLIDE 1 (church building)

Friday afternoon we were greeted at the Székelyudvarhely church. Rev. Moses Kedei and a group of congregants met us with wonderful warmth, and they ushered us into the church building, where we saw this:

SLIDE 2 (sanctuary)

The group then sang some songs for us:

SLIDE 3 (singers)

And then we were ushered into Rev. Kedei's study, where, among other things, we saw a great framed picture of Francis David, preaching Unitarianism at the Diet of Torda in 1568:

SLIDE 4 (David)

And it was underneath his gaze that we were offered a traditional greeting meal of bread and palenka (which is distilled fruit brandy, often clear but it can come in any number of colors—delicious but deadly). The bread was passed around, shot glasses of palenka were handed around. Mozes offered yet another greeting and then I said a few words. I said, "All throughout the world, the very basic things that people need to sustain life are symbolized by bread and water. But today you give us your special version of that, and we are honored and grateful to be here." It got big laughter, and I'm glad.

This is one of the scenes around the table, after the first round:

SLIDE 5 (people)

SLIDE 6 (UUCA people)

To say "welcome" in Hungarian is literally to say, "God brought you." It felt like that.

Sunday, Sept. 11, Székelyudvarhely, Part 2

Each pilgrim from UUCA was hosted by one of the Székelyudvarhely families. My hosts were Kati and Erno Kosma, with their daughters Nora and Kristina.

SLIDE 7 (Kati and Erno)

SLIDE 8 (Nora and Kristina)

Kati is the President of the Board there in Székelyudvarhely. She and her husband, Errno, own and operate a successful printing business.

Saturday morning before breakfast, Errno and I are in the kitchen. We are talking about Friday night's meal at the restaurant and I ask him if the family goes out a lot. He does not speak very much English, but the meaning of what he's trying to say is clear. There are more hungers at stake than just for food. There is a hunger for belonging, there is a hunger for the feeling of being together, there is hunger for family. That is why they don't go out to restaurants very often. Something being made at home has far more nutritional value, on more levels, than anything from a restaurant....

Breakfast is eye-poppingly good. I find myself worrying that, from all the consistently excellent food I've been eating, together with a radical drop-off of my usual exercise regimen, Sunday morning will roll around and I'll need to wear my suit (since I'm preaching) and the pants won't fit!

Aaaand, I go ahead and take another bite! I guess the worries aren't big enough to stop me.

During breakfast, I find that I'm having a heck of a time cutting one of their delicious garden tomatoes. Errno gestures that I should use the other side of the blade. I had been using the side that curves, as we do in America. That's the sharp one. But here, it's the OTHER side of the blade that is the sharp one—the straight one that ends at a point. And that does the trick. Tomato, you are MINE!

But what's funny is that I caught myself reverting back to the American side of the blade, and the entire family saw too, and we all laughed. Then I just decided to come clean about how goofy I felt about the whole thing and I turned the blade completely around and started cutting my tomato with the handle. A slapstick moment.

Sunday, Sept. 11, Székelyudvarhely, Part 3

Worship this morning with the church in Székelyudvarhely. My heart is full:

SLIDE 9 (Anthony and Mozes)

SLIDE 10 (choir)

SLIDE 11 (sanctuary)

Tuesday, Sept. 13, Victoria Hotel in Kolozsvár

It's 3am. In an hour I'll need to be down in the lobby, where we'll call some taxis to take us to the airport. Our flight leaves at 6:15-ish. To Bucharest, to Munich, and then to Atlanta, with a scheduled arrival time of 3:30pm.

No more 7 hours ahead. It's like entering into a time machine. We go back in time.

Endings and beginnings. Or, as I like to say, endBeginnings.

Our entrance into our partner church town, Székelyudvarhely, was interesting. From out of the Homorod Valley, we had taken some back roads, risky roads. Coming upon a bridge, we all got out because our

driver Istvan was unsure about the bridge's strength. We walked across, and then came the bus. Soon after this, a rock got stuck between the right double tires in the back and the sound of our passage was THUMP THUMP THUMP. Istvan got out with a hammer. BAM! BAM! BAM! The darn thing wouldn't budge. Our beginning in Székelyudvarhely, our entry song, would sound like THUMP THUMP THUMP.

But it was not to be. Still a couple miles out, all the physical forces of our arrival were too much. The rock flew out and our sound was solid and clear.

And it continued to be so. The visit with our partner church families was amazing. More stories than I have time to tell right now. I was so sad to leave.

Monday morning Kati and Errno were both in the kitchen preparing breakfast:

SLIDE 12 (Kati and Errno)

It was a very busy morning. Kati and Errno's daughters, Nora and Kristina, were starting another year of school that morning. Here is one of Nora's notebooks, crisp and new, with words of encouragement written upon the front cover:

SLIDE 13 (notebook)

I wish all these things for her, for Kristina as she begins her new year, for their parents, and for all us pilgrims, on whatever journeys we find ourselves on. GO FIND YOURSELF. GRAB THE CHANCE. LAUGH LOTS. BE CLASSY. STAY AWAKE.

SERMON, PART 1: "Our Shared Living Tradition"

My sermon today is in two parts. Part one is what I preached at our partner church in Székelyudvarhely, although there I had to pause every once and a while for Rev. Kedei to translate what I was saying into Hungarian. I want you to hear what I had to say to them. Here we go:

I bring you greetings from your sister congregation 6000 miles away. But despite the distance, we are at one in heart:

Where there is faith, there is love;
Where there is love, there is peace;
Where there is peace, there is blessing;
Where there is blessing, there is God.
Where there is God, there is no need.

Amen.

Now, I begin by noting something perennially tragic in human history. Always the haves and the have nots. Always insiders and always the rejected, the outcast. Two thousand years ago, Roman rulers spoke of this as a kind of peace. The peace of Rome was a way of life in which the Emperor was at the top of the pyramid, then wealthy men right below. Only these had inherent worth and dignity; everyone else was a tool to be used, controlled, subjugated, humiliated. No compassion for these people: women, poor men, slaves, and the conquered.

But this was the way of Rome, the way to a unified empire, the way to true peace. Fight Rome on this—serve any gods that contradict the Roman way—and it's war.

And now begins our Living Tradition. It begins with the grungy followers of a discredited rabbi whose teachings were judged as treasonous and he was crucified. Pontius Pilate thought it would have been enough to crush the spiritual rebels but it was not to be so. The love of Rabbi Jesus was too powerful to die. Rabbi Jesus died but his spirit was resurrected in the lives of his followers, who refused the peace of Rome. They refused to be pacified. They resisted and it was all about Love. Justin Martyr, one of these early Christians, who lived around 70 years after Jesus' death, said, "We who formerly valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possession, now bring what we have into a common stock, and communicate to everyone in need; we who hated and destroyed one another, and on account of their different manners would not live with men of a different tribe, now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them, and pray for our enemies." That's what the Jesus followers did. Religion wasn't so much a matter of what you believed as what you did. To care for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the poor, the sick. Subvert the perennial tragedy of human history. Resist the peace of Rome. No more have-nots.

Everyone get inside the circle.

So you can imagine how Rome felt about the apostle Paul when he said, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"—which is to say that everyone has inherent worth and dignity and not just some. Teachings like this made Paul and every person who received them into their hearts criminals.

Suffering is no stranger to our Living Tradition. One of the greatest gifts that our Transylvanian Unitarian Churches have given the world was Francis David. Back in 1568, he was warned by a debater from the Calvinist persuasion, "If I win this debate you will be executed." He replied, calmly, "If I win this debate, you will be given the freedom due to every son of God." Because David knew: faith is the gift of God. A person's faith is their secret way of being with the mystery, and it cannot be compelled by any external force, it can't even be compelled by the person in question gritting their teeth and trying to force themselves to believe. It comes from a place within that's deeper than trying, it comes from the soul, it comes from God.

For almost 500 years, this has been our tradition. Tolerance is synonymous with who we are.

But suffering is no stranger. We know how the story ended for David. Tolerance met with intolerance. The power of Rome reincarnated. Rome rearing its ugly head yet again. The last book David ever wrote was one line scratched upon the wall of a prison cell, as he was sick and pitifully weak: *Egy Az Isten*. God is one. He died of neglect on November 15, 1579. His body was thrown into an unmarked grave, and not one person, to this day, knows where he actually lies.

But now listen to something else about our Living Tradition. It does not quit. It does not quit! Does not matter that the grave of the great Francis David is unknown. Does not matter how he died. The last book he ever wrote—those precious three words scratched upon a prison wall—are above the door of every Unitarian church in this land. They hang on the wall of my home congregation, on a beautiful banner which was a gift from you.

The spirit of Francis David, just like his Master Jesus, can never die.

And neither can the spirit of love that Jesus magnified and his followers caught and taught, despite the opposing power of Rome and every reincarnation of Rome up to this point in time, including Communism, including the Donald Trumpism of my own country. Despite all their promises of peace...

When Rev. Kedei visited my congregation back in May of 1998, he said, “Through centuries of persecution, of depravation of our rights, we learned well the lesson of history: we could survive only if we help and love each other. It remained a proverb from those times: “They love each other like Unitarians.”

As we together--you here in Romania and we in the United States—navigate the complexities of the 21st century, let us love each other like Unitarians. Our partnership has lasted for 26 years, since 1990, and let it last for untold years more. We are both religious minorities surrounded by majority upon majority. We can feel so small at times. But our shared Living Tradition transcends geography and transcends time. It is like a river with a far distant origin and purpose and we are at the forming edge of it and it goes beyond us too, on and on. Our Living Tradition. All our heroes. All the stories. And also this: the *something* that is universal. How we are all one in the Spirit of Life, the Spirit of Love, which bears all things, hopes for all things, endures all things, is greater than faith, greater than hope, never ends.

I don't care how powerful Rome was, or its current versions.

Let us love each other like Unitarians, and all will be well.

SERMON, PART 2: “Pilgrimage to Transylvania”

The Living Tradition of Unitarian Universalism has a geography. At certain places on this earth, the finest things it stands for—and the incidents and people that embodied what was best in it—are made visible. We can touch and see and even smell them.

One of these places is most certainly New England—Boston and its environs—which was the cradle of American Unitarianism and Universalism. Another is the deep South where the Civil Rights movement began and so many of our leaders joined in the struggle, hand-in-hand-with others, and some even became martyrs.

And then there is Transylvania, a word that literally means “the land beyond the forests.” Before the French settled Canada in 1604; before the English established a colony in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607; before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620; before all of these, the Unitarians in Transylvania had already been proclaiming a Jesus who was not a God but a great teacher who affirmed the inherent worth and dignity of not some but all. They had already been proclaiming the political right to religious toleration, so that they could affirm *Egy Az Isten* (God is one) in security and in peace and others could affirm their own vision of the Divine in security and in peace as well. They had already been doing this for over half a century, before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth!

Don't let visions of “I vaaant to suuuck your bloooood” cloud over the amazing thing about our spiritual roots in Transylvania. It's much, much more than that. I know it hits a funny bone. The Dracula connection is kind of funny, and folks in Transylvania tolerate it or even benefit from the T-shirt sales. But the historical truth is sobering: everywhere else in Europe in the 16th century, our ancestors were hunted down and killed mercilessly. Transylvania was the only place our people were safe. Poland too, but that's another story.

It was the only safe place. And even that proved fragile....

It's 1568. The brilliant Francis David has just returned to Kolozsvár (which is the Rome of Unitarian Universalism) after winning a debate with the leading Calvinist scholar of the time, and the townsfolk meet him at the gates. Today, that would happen to a sports team. But back then, the heroes were the religious leaders. They meet him at the gates and beg to know what happened. Francis David starts to go through

the debate but you know what? The brilliant and charismatic man was also a short man. So they have him stand on a boulder so more people can hear him. He goes into impassioned oratory and inspires his countrymen and, that day, the town of Kolozsvár becomes Unitarian. The boulder marks the occasion.

We saw that boulder. It was in a room of the First Unitarian Church of Kolozsvár, and our pilgrimage guides ushered us there and we stood before it feeling a bit stunned *because the great Francis David had been there*. He had stood on that rock. We are face to face with history! I also loved it because I never knew that Francis David was short. He was just a mere mortal, proclaiming Love. It made me care for him even more. It reminded me of all our mere mortal limitations and failures, and yet our task today is to stand tall, no matter what.

A time like this is when you know you are on a pilgrimage. This is not mere tourism, where it's all about entertainment. Pilgrimage is about understanding where your basic values come from; connecting with the stories of your faith tradition in direct ways; and even being transforming in who you are, reaching new depths of knowing....

One of those transforming moments was in the Homorod Valley. There, the communities are all small villages of farming families, and these families have been Unitarian for almost 500 years. They got the message from Francis David, and the message stuck.

So UUCA's little band of nine pilgrims found their way to one the Homorod Valley villages called Homorodkaracsonyfalva. The evening we were there, dinner was at the parish house, and it consisted of a slug of polenka, sour cherry soup, mashed potatoes with meatballs, and dessert. During our walk back to the bed and breakfast, we saw cows returning home for the evening. Water buffalo also. Enormous moos. Excrement everywhere on the street, and the sour/rich smell blending in with everything. Clop-clop-clop of horses carrying wagons filled with hay. Sun-weathered farmers who could not possibly read William Ellery Channing or Ralph Waldo Emerson, never mind the scientists or postmodernists of current day. And I thought: who are we to say that only smart people or cultured people can "get" Unitarianism? Who are we to limit the forms it can take? A people almost 500 years old are proving all our preconceptions to be lies.

The next morning, we had a conversation with the minister's wife Enikő Benedik. In this ancient village of 500 people, in an area more rural than you can imagine, she spoke about Match.com and how several village marriages had come out of it, but nevertheless there seemed in it to be a cheapening of the mystery of two people coming together. She spoke about email and Facebook and smart phones and the Internet but what does that do to family time together? What does that do to relationships?

What I heard in all this was the echo of our own worries 6000 miles away. We are so far apart but we are also right together in some of our concerns. More unites us than divides us.

It was crystallized in a T-shirt I saw someone wearing, while walking down a street in Kolozsvár: "Be ~~with~~ someone who makes you happy" but the word "with" was crossed out. The message was that no one else can make you happy. That's for you to do yourself. "Be someone who makes you happy."

More unites us than divides us.

It was a pilgrimage we were on. I wish it for you. I wish it for all of us.

And I will never forget. The sounds of place names:

Kolozsvár

Deva
Gyulafehérvár
Sibiu
Sighisoara
Homorodkaracsonyfalva
Szekelyudvarhely

I will never forget:

*The smells that only thousand-year-old places can have.
Egg yolks that are the color of Orange Crush.
The sharp taste of palenka, and the burning that goes all the way down.
The richness of the Hungarian language, as when to say “welcome” is literally to say, “God brought you.”
The weight of the robe that Rev. Kedei lent me, to wear during worship.*

And also this: Utterly unexpected moments of grace, as when the father of my host family explained why his family didn't eat out very much, and he didn't speak English very well at all but the limitations of language didn't matter. The message was heart-to-heart. There are more hungers at stake than just for food. There is a hunger for belonging, there is a hunger for the feeling of being together, there is hunger for family. Home cooking has far more nutritional value, on more levels, than anything from a restaurant...

All of this. All of this and more.

There is only one way to end my message today.

From your sister congregation 6000 miles away, there in Transylvania, I bring you greetings. Despite the distance, we are at one in heart:

Where there is faith, there is love;
Where there is love, there is peace;
Where there is peace, there is blessing;
Where there is blessing, there is God.
Where there is God, there is no need.

Amen.

BENEDICTION ANTHONY

Let's join together for the benediction—feel free to connect as you will: hold elbows, hold shoulders, if not hands....

Once again to our visitors—welcome and we really hope you've found something here today that feels like home. Come again!

So now, let us love each other like Unitarians.
As our Transylvanian brothers and sisters and siblings have taught us,
To do that is to be able to weather any storm.

And let love like that stir in our nation, in our world.
No matter what your version of shortness looks like, stand tall like Francis David.

Stand tall and proclaim freedom!

As Unitarian Universalists we affirm:

Love is our one source

Love is our one destiny.

No one left out.

The worship ends

but now our service in the world begins.

Go in peace!