

“Flower Communion”

June 14th, 2020

Rev. Laurel Gray

This is our last Sunday service of the church year. How strange that is to understand. The achiever part of me wants to be able to sum it all up, make sense of the journey we've been on, package it in crisp edges and perfect bow. And that would be dishonest. We're in the midst. In a whole multitude of ways, we find ourselves in the midst even as we mark the end of this church year.

Yesterday two different friends asked me when I thought all this would be over, the quarantine, the distance, the not hugging our people. The true answer is that I don't know. None of us know. Both friends talked about the incredible feeling of uncertainty that we find ourselves in, how it looms bigger and more terrifying than ever before. And yet some of you have shared over these last few months how accustomed you had already become to uncertainty in your own worlds, how the strangeness now is that the feeling is collective and not just personal.

Here's what I know now. When we met in August, when I became your new minister, we didn't know that a pandemic was coming, that so many cities would burn with pain and moral clarity, that our own lives would contain a myriad of losses big and small. But in August the future contained all the uncertainty we are now living. Uncertainty is the not knowing, and we didn't know then how different our worlds would be now.

In some ways, I'm thankful for that, for getting to live moment by moment. In the midst of setting up our new Zoom church reality, our Office Administrator Elisa told me that she couldn't have imagined our going through what we were going through, and that it was comforting

to know that we were actually capable of handling it. Somehow, we find our way through the things we couldn't have imagined facing.

See, there is some spark that dwells within us, that guides us on the path towards the next right thing, that calls out in prayer, that finds hope in the desert. We have it in us to adapt, to grow and to change. And that is something we do together, both because we all belong to this single fabric of history and because that same spark of possibility exists in all of us. The last service we had in person was about listening to the wisdom held in our bodies and our being, it was about tapping inwards. The following Sunday, after quarantine had so swiftly begun, I recorded a sermon about the wisdom of trees and the idea that all flourishing is mutual.

The moment we find ourselves in seems strung between these two points of tension - the need to look inward, to tend to our health and plumb the depths of our own privilege and ignorance - and the need to live in solidarity with the collective, to live the truth that what we do affects the whole.

The two friends I talked to yesterday spoke about not feeling grounded or centered, overwhelmed by the sheer intensity of the last few weeks and months. I can say that I share that. And in those moments of being swept away in it all, it can be hard to trust ourselves, to imagine that we have it in us to proceed, that it's possible to find our way back to center. In those moments it can also be hard to remember that we're not alone, hard to hold faith in collective change.

In these moments, I find it's helpful to acknowledge the disconnect and the ambiguity. And then it's helpful to remember the stories of people who lived from their center, who had the courage to stand alone, whose actions created untold ripples of love and influence.

As Howard Zinn wrote in our opening words, “If we remember those times and places - and there are so many - where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.”

We celebrate Flower Communion because of one such person. He was a Unitarian minister named Norbert Capek and he lived in Czechoslovakia around the turn of the last century. In 1923 he created a ritual for his congregation, hoping to draw together people from Christian and non-Christian backgrounds and to celebrate the inherent worth of all people.

When the Nazis took control of Prague in 1940, they found Dr. Capek’s gospel of the inherent worth and beauty of every human person to be, as Nazi records show, “too dangerous to the Reich [for him] to be allowed to live.” He was arrested and transported to Dachau, where he was killed the following year.

Flower communion was then brought to the US by Capek’s wife, Maja. The ritual we perform today honors the inherent worth of all human beings and the sacredness of diversity – a belief that has the power to crack the foundation of systemic oppression. As I said in my sermon two weeks ago, it was the idea that some people are more human than others that made slavery and the genocide of native people possible. And it continues to make mass incarceration, lynching, the removal of trans protections, and all manner of violence possible. We live in a time when radical love remains a radical idea.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to live into Capek’s legacy, to find our courage and plant our roots. I know that can feel daunting, even exhausting. But remember, all flourishing is mutual. We do this together.

In our bridging service a few weeks ago, I used these words from Wayne B. Arnason.

“Take courage, friends.
The way is often hard,
The path is never clear,
And the stakes are very high.
Take courage, for deep down, there is another truth:
You are not alone.”

The flower communion ritual that we would normally do on this last Sunday of the church year is a celebration of diversity. Of the glorious specificities and multitudes in all the ways that people become themselves. But we don't just bring flowers and sit in our pews and call it a day. This is a communion service - a moment for creating union between separate parts, for bringing ourselves together, for creating an abundance of color and courage. When we do flower communion in person, we all bring our different flowers towards the front of the sanctuary to make heaping bouquets of wild beauty. And before we leave, we all come forward again to find a new flower to take with us.

Here's what I know. In finding our own well of spirit and courage, in living a life that holds the balance between our individual realities and our collective flourishing, we call each other into the place of courage.

We can trust ourselves to grow, to adapt, and to change. And we can trust each other to meet us in the place of flowering, the place of hope, the place of courage.

May we close this year grounded in the knowledge that we are not alone, that we will find our way. That more is possible.

Amen.