

Sermon: “One Hundred Years of Flowers” (Laurel)

I find it comforting when things are old, especially traditions, practices that are well worn because they are so loved.

And this year marks one hundred years of this flower communion ritual. Can you imagine how many flowers have been brought to these altars of love over these last 100 years, not only in this congregation but all over the world? Can you imagine the courage it took to keep bringing those flowers when governments and people saw this sweetness as an affront to their power? Can you imagine that the antidote to violence is joy, clarity of vision, hope blossoming in communities?

June is pride month and it is both a time for joy and a time when our political landscape remains violent towards queer people, especially trans adults and children.

In these moments, it can be hard to hold faith in collective change. So I find it 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.

In the words of Howard Zinn, “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. One hundred years ago, 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.

Then, 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. Because it is moral exclusion, the idea that some people are more human than others, that makes violence against other people possible.

But we are Universalists, which is the opposite of moral exclusion - our conviction is that no one's humanity is ever conditional, that there is no way to be cast out of the circle of humanity. And we are people of a covenant, so this is not only a belief, but a promise. We promise to treat all people with inherent worth and dignity. We promise to never lead with cruelty or exclusion, to always draw the circle wider.

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 the words of Rev. Wayne B. Arnason, in the book we give to all our bridgers.

“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.”

Our flower communion ritual 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 common union between separate parts, for bringing ourselves together, for creating an abundance of color and courage. 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.

In just a moment we'll do the second half of flower communion. But first, I have a gift to all of you in commemoration of this flower communion centennial and all the work we have been doing to tend this garden together.

(Evan show slide of painting)

This is a print of the watercolor painting “Czech Flower Alphabet” by renowned artist and Unitarian Susan Loy. The painting shows the Czech flower alphabet in a wreath of thirty-one flower species common to the Czech Republic. Each flower is identified by its Czech common name, its Latin name, and its English common name. The painting includes the first stanza of a song by Norbert Čapek, “Kindle the flames of love,” hand-lettered in English and in Czech, which surrounds a large sunflower. The unifying motif in the wreath and border are the leaves and flowers of *Tilia cordata*, small-leaved linden or lime, the national tree of the Czech Republic.

The sale of these prints go to support three programs for the Czech Unitarian Religious Society:

- Czech Unitarian Summer Camp – a camp for all the Czech Unitarian youth, children, and families,
- Czech Ukrainian Relief – support for Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic.
- Czech Unitarian Academy – training for lay leaders and ministers.

May this most beloved congregation continue to kindle the flames of love.
Amen