The Beauty of the Flowers

Sermon by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

September 11, 2022

It is indeed so good to be together this morning: to celebrate the beginning of a new church year, to welcome autumn, and to return to one another. We do this, as we do many significant things in life, through ritual, this morning, through our flower communion.

Each person comes to church with a flower, perhaps from their garden or even the woods or the vase outside the sanctuary, and at a certain time in the service comes forward to add that flower to the arch. As the processional begins, there is ample space and the wood shows between each stem. As time goes on, the arch becomes more and more full until people are bending and reaching to find the perfect spots for their flowers. It is fun and meaningful to watch. It is sacred.

Each of these flowers represents one of us, and those of you online are part of this too, as we will start the ritual by placing flowers for you on the arch. Each flower is different and has its unique beauty, as does each of you. Together each stem-and-blossom combination is stunning; put together with other such combinations, they are magical. Think of them as a gateway to peace.

The Flower Communion was created nearly 100 years ago, in 1923, by a Unitarian minister named Norbert Čapek (CHOP-eck) who lived in Prague, Czechoslovakia. He started the Unitarian Church in Czechoslovakia, and his church grew to become what is known to be the largest ever Unitarian Church with, some say, 5,000 members.

Though Rev. Čapek created the ritual, it was his wife Maya who brought it to the United States in 1940 when she was visiting the Unitarian Church in Cambridge, MA. Now it is done annually by Unitarian Universalist congregations around the country and the world.

Here is the story of why Rev. Čapek created this ritual, adapted from a story by Janeen K. Grohsmeyer in her book *Lamp in Every Corner*.

Though Rev. Čapek's church had a building, it did not look much like a church. It had no bells, no steeples, and no organ to make beautiful music. It didn't even have a piano. It had no candles or chalices. It had no flowers. It had four walls and a ceiling and a floor. It had a door and a few windows. It had some wooden chairs. But that was all.

Except... the church had people who came to it every Sunday, a lot of them actually!

Rev. Čapek had been the minister at the plain and simple church for two years. Every Sunday, he spoke to the people while they listened, sitting quietly and still in those hard wooden chairs, sometimes for hours. When he was done speaking, the people talked a little bit among themselves, and then they went home. And that was all—no music, no candles, no food. Not even coffee or doughnuts.

He knew something was missing, and it came to him – the world was beautiful! They needed beauty in their church. The next Sunday, he asked all the people in the church to bring a flower or a budding branch, or even a twig.

"What kind?" they asked. "What color? What size?"

"You choose," he said. "Each of you choose what you like."

And so, on the next Sunday, the people came with flowers of all different colors and sizes and kinds. There were yellow daisies and red roses. Pink and purple, orange and gold—there were all those colors and more. Flowers filled all the vases, and the church wasn't so plain and simple anymore.

Minister Čapek said to his members and friends, "These flowers are like ourselves... Different colors and different shapes, and different sizes, each needing different kinds of care—but each beautiful, each important and special, in its own way."

This first flower communion happened in March 1923. Rev. Čapek led the ritual in his church every year until 1941, one year after his wife had brought the ritual to the United States. March 1941, the last year Rev. Čapek led the ritual, was during World War II. The minister had reason to believe there were both Jews and Nazis in the pews. That fateful day he issued a direct challenge from the pulpit to the occupiers. "Truth

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and crude strength are incompatible," he said. And then he went on to refute point by point a recent speech of Hitler's.[1] That was the last sermon he preached. Five days later he was taken away to a concentration camp, where he died.

His wife Maya made her home in the United States until her death in 1966. When asked about the ritual, she said this: "The flowers are used as symbols of the gifts which each person can make to the church and through the church to other persons. The exchange of the flowers means that I shall walk, without reservation, with anyone, regardless of social status or former religious affiliation, as long as he is ready and willing to go along in search of truth and service."[2]

Like the Čapeks, we live in challenging times. As I wrote in my recent pastoral letter, there is more than enough fear, hatred, and division in the world right now. We all need a place where we can go to find solace, restoration, and inspiration. We all need people with whom we can remember the essentiality of spirituality in life, especially at times like this. We all need peace if we are to create peace in our lives and corners of our world.

We have recommitted ourselves this year to make Sunday worship a time of sanctuary, a place you can turn to and return to, to find peace, connect with your soul, and know that, somehow, all is well and all will be well. You can read more about this year in my letter, copies of which are out in the vestibule.

In a moment we are going to sing a hymn written by Rev. Čapek titled "Mother Spirit, Father Spirit," and then we are going to bless the flowers. After that we will place flowers on the arch for those people with us online and then invite you to come forward to add your beauty to this arch. Please come down the front aisle and return to your pews down an outer aisle.

1   Rev. Barbara Child, "A Ceremony of Flowers," Unitarian Universalist Church of Indianapolis, March 22, 2009.

2   Ibid.