

'Where there is faith' September 24, 2006

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Song/reading

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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, there is no need.

Sermon

Thank you to the choir for the lovely, contemporary rendition of this traditional Transylvanian house blessing. I have found this piece haunting from when we sang it last year—it runs through my head at night when I'd rather be sleeping. The words are on the cover of the Order of Service (see above). These are also the words you see on the embroidery I found in Budapest this summer, and on the plate from a roadside stall near the pottery town of Korund. It's very common.

And because I've sung the words so many times, the meaning has sunk in. Not that I understand it. But it intrigues me. It seems so sure, so certain, even if it does seem a bit circular in its reasoning. I find myself asking, "Does my faith have such a solid, concrete foundation?"

Foundations are very real for me right now, as AI is rebuilding the foundation of our 85 year old garage. The walls sat directly on the old concrete pad. However, as the years went by, the yard has been filled in to improve the drainage around the house, so soil butted right up against the wood walls, and ivy and morning glories grew right into the old cedar siding. The paint has faded, and leaves have accumulated along the wall. As the walls have rotted, they have literally slipped off their foundation. One wall was relatively straight still, but the other tilted significantly. It looked decrepit. And it leaked. You could see the holes in the roof when you stood inside and looked up. It was decrepit, shaky almost.

Following up on the theology in this song has inspired me to do a couple of things. First I joined a Partner Church Council sponsored conference call on the theology of our Partner Churches, in Transylvania and elsewhere. Eleven other folks joined me on an exploration of the topic, and of course, I raised this piece. “How do they live it out? How does it matter in their daily lives?” I wondered. No one had much of an answer to that.

I was also inspired me to attend a Theological Symposium held in Transylvania, in Koloszvar, Romania—where their denominational headquarters are located, and where their seminary students are trained, and where they have a Unitarian residential high school. In fact, it was in the high school lecture hall that we heard the presentations. This lecture hall put me in mind of my imagined Hogwarts, at least once inside the building built in 1796. Outside a backhoe was busily tearing up the battered sidewalk so that paving bricks could be laid. I saw the back hoe hit, and then back off, the very worn dished stone bottom step of the old school building. The sense of history was vivid—there were numerous large portraits of previous Bishops all around us on the walls. We sat on benches, with a long desk in front of each row.

The Transylvanian Unitarians are part of our Unitarian foundation. After the Protestant Reformation in the early 1500's, many people read the newly translated Christian Scriptures for the first time, and, through reason, rather than accepting the revealed Truth of the Catholic Church, determined that they could see only one God portrayed there. Of course, this was heresy, not easily accepted anywhere in Europe.

One of these people was Francis Dávid of Transylvania, now part of Romania. Dávid was ripe for change, and indeed converted several times; first from Catholic to Lutheran, then to Reformed, and finally to Unitarian. By the late 1560's, he was preaching a Unitarian Christian theology to large crowds, and with his charismatic oratory, gathered many followers, at least 300 congregations by the time of his death. The Unitarian King Sigismund died in 1571, and his successor, a Catholic, was not inclined to be tolerant. When Dávid kept coming up with new theological ideas, against the new rules, he was imprisoned. He died later that year, November 15, 1579.

In 2001, there were about 80,000 Unitarians in Transylvania, and more in Hungary. It's quite a contrast to Canada, where there are maybe 5200 confessing Unitarians, that is, adult members of congregations. I don't know that we ever have the only church in town, or form the majority even in a small region. Which the Transylvanian Unitarians do—or did in the past—in places, although they are also a Hungarian speaking minority within a larger and much less accepting population of both Hungarian speaking and Romanian speaking others. Catholic, Reformed Protestant and Orthodox others. Plus, a lot of folks who, thanks to the Communist era, do not go to church at all.

While I was visiting our partner church in Kobátfalva after the Symposium, I had the opportunity of witnessing the confirmation of two young folks at a neighboring church. The minister of our partner church had helped out this temporarily without a minister congregation with its confirmation class. North American Coming of Age programs help youth articulate their beliefs. In Transylvania, they are taught the catechism, all 136 questions and answers.

I watched with amazement as these two 14 year olds, a boy and a girl, answered question after question from memory, giving the answers word for word. No hesitations, no false starts. Just the answers, clear and confident. Rev. Csongor said he only asked some of the questions. Only about 40 of them, he said!

The confirmation ritual was part of a longer church service. The church had two main areas of seating. The men sat on the minister's left, facing the centre, and the women on the right. The new arrived minister, a young woman, then gave her sermon from the raised pulpit jutting out from the side wall, 12 or 15 feet in the air. Then, after a song, accompanied on an organ played by Rev. Csongor, he gave his admonitions to the young folks. It sounded like a second sermon! Then the questions and answers, alternating from one child to the other. Then the children took their first communion with the Minister.

It seems to me that this Transylvanian Blessing is, in some ways, a summary of their theology. The initial paper presented at the symposium was from the Bishop of the Transylvanian church, Dr. Árpád Szabó, and he gave us his interpretation of their theology. He says, "Unitarian religion comprises the essentials of personal religion, the close relation of the human soul to God, the reality of prayer, the consecration of life to the service of God by doing his will and by loving one's fellow

humans, the restoration of the sinner by repentance and forgiveness, the sense of deep and assured trust in God in all the changing events of life. There is no region of life where our religion could be left out as having nothing to say."

He emphasizes that we as Unitarians use our minds, our reason, to figure out what the Scriptures mean for us today, and what is right and wrong ethically. Indeed, he says, human experience is a more reliable guide than ancient authorities. Consequently, he says, the Unitarian faith is a progressive faith, and we follow truth as we see it.

He says, "We as Unitarians believe first of all and most profoundly in one God. We erect our churches for the worship of one God. This is the bond which unites us as a religious community. Beyond this, we formulate no creed. We assert that it is the duty of each human being to be diligent in his/her search for truth and faithful to the light God reveals to us. We reverence God so deeply that we feel we cannot fully describe him."

He relates the important principles of their theology: freedom of faith is first, the ability to discern the form—I think he means church institution—that best fits us as individuals, and freedom of thought, which comes with responsibility. Common sense and the requirements of truth must accompany freedom of thought. Inner authority, the use of reason and conscience and tolerance are also central values of the Transylvanian Unitarian faith.

They do not have a formal confession, or creed, although they do have statements that reflect their identity as Unitarians. Historically, they did not have a confession because in Dávid's time, it was dangerous to lay out new ideas so baldly. After all, he wasn't supposed to bring in any further innovations.

Bishop Szabó goes on to state that "Faith is a... precondition to the appearance of religion. Religion, church and theology [develop] from faith. Faith is an individual matter..., but religion and especially church are of many... it should be common with many others. [Without this commonality] it cannot maintain a religious community, and there is no hope for the future without a strong church institution that has as a basis a confession as source and frame of its religion."

I wonder if he was trying to tell us North Americans something. And so we are back to the beginning. Where there is faith. I don't know if this foundation of faith is questioned by many, or even any, Transylvanian Unitarians. I do know that they too struggle to fill their pews. Another speaker, addressing their liturgy, said that they attract only 10% of their members. Just because they are Unitarian doesn't mean they feel obligated to go to church, whether they live in the more rural villages, or live in the city. Have they lost their faith, or is it the liturgy itself that doesn't speak to so many people, especially the young folk? I have no answer to this.

But I am back to foundations, wondering "what is the foundation of my religion?" Is it crumbling and decrepit, in need of shoring up? Or is it strong and solid, quietly there when I need it?

Foundations are one of those things you don't often think about. Only when they fail do they come to mind, and failure may come most often in times of crisis or transition. I do know that when I was living out in my cabin in Newfoundland, what I missed most was a community such as this. That was the main reason we didn't just stay there.

So, for me, the religious community is central. The church. The older fellow who shares my taste in lemon meringue pie, and the other one who shares my interest in the outdoors. All those who want to question rather than accept easy answers. This knowing myself, knowing who I am, through the community of which I am part, is my foundation. The rest is built on this keystone.

There is so much built on top of that phrase "religious community." God, holiness, interconnectedness, the goodness of human nature, generosity. I won't describe these doors and windows.

My question for you today is, "I wonder what it is that grounds you in your daily life. What is your foundation? In what do you have faith?"

Amen.

