



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

So Much Is In Bud

Rev. Lissa Anne Gundlach, Senior Minister
June 7, 2015

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

What a joy it is to be together in worship this morning. What a special morning it is, to celebrate the Flower Communion together in a new way, sitting together in a new way!

The Flower Communion's creator Rev. Norbert Capek was a seeker, born a Roman Catholic whose spiritual curiosity led him first to leave his religion of origin, to seek ordination as a Baptist minister, and then discover Unitarianism. Capek's ministry attracted thousands of other seekers wanting to explore spirituality more openly in the context of a community, making one of the largest if not the largest Unitarian congregation ever to exist in the world. Most had come from the Roman Catholic Church, and while eager for a religious community did not resonate with the symbols and rituals of their faith of origin. Still, Capek felt that the spirit of the communion ritual bonded members to their faith and to each other. In a 1961 letter to American Unitarian Association, Maja Capek explained Norbert Capek's choice to use the flower as the symbol of the new ritual:

As a symbol he used flowers because in the name of a flower or flowers no wars were waged as was the case with the Cross of the Chalice.

The flowers are used as symbols of the gifts which each person can make to the church and through the church to other persons.

Because a large variety people are able to express their individuality, the exchange of flowers means that I shall walk, without reservation, with anyone—regardless of social status, or former religious affiliation, as long as [they are] ready and willing to go along in search of truth and service to all.

The ritual has gained meaning and power for our Unitarian Universalist community over time, both for the story of the Capeks, and for the beauty of the ceremony itself. It is truly a uniquely Unitarian Universalist ritual, of which we have few.

Today, as we celebrate our first flower communion together, I am reflecting on your incredible beauty, as individuals and as a gathered whole.

Over these past weeks, I have taken so much joy in beginning to get to know you better. Listening to your stories, meeting your families, seeing what you love about the church through your eyes, and what you are hopeful will change. I've noticed a few things about you and I want to share. First, you are a committed community who freely share your gifts, contributing in so many ways, from teaching religious education, to serving on our board of trustees and countless committees, to financial stewardship. Worship is truly a production of the community each week, from welcoming and greeting, lighting

and sound, chancel flowers and ushering to the music of our choir, bell choir, and other talented musicians of all ages. You like to have fun, and you like to get things done.

I have also noticed that you are a community that cares deeply for each other, and for the world. Many of you know each other well. You check in with each other, and look out for those people who may need a little extra support. Some of you long to know each other better and to develop closer connections, whether you have been here a long time or have just joined.

I've also noticed that you are a really smart, thoughtful community from a wide range of diverse life experiences. You identify with many religious orientations, racial, ethnic and cultural expressions, as well as sexualities, gender identities and family formations. You are open to exploring spirituality, and have unique religious backgrounds, both within Unitarian Universalism, world religions and along the spectrum of atheism and secular humanism. You enjoy engaging your differences, with respect, curiosity and a hearty sense of humor. You are committed to our Unitarian Universalist principles, starting with honoring the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

I get the sense that you did not decide to make Neighborhood church your spiritual home because you wanted a community where everyone shares the same beliefs... you are here because you want a community where everyone shares the same values. If you wanted to join the atheists, or the Catholics, or the Buddhists solely, my guess is that you would.

The Flower Communion celebrates the gift of our free religious community worldwide. With the story of the Capeks, we know this is not something to be taken for granted. In a world where fundamentalist religious strife, violence and intolerance dominate, it remains crucial to honor and celebrate the flowering of our liberal religious communities around the world, especially in places where religious freedom is threatened. Places like Neighborhood Church where religious differences are celebrated are rare. Our vision is of a beloved community that reflects the diversity of creation and yearns to live in harmony with creation, not one of assimilation or dominance over creation.

One of the things I am most looking forward to about living in California is having a garden. For years, I longed for a tiny piece of earth to grow flowers and herbs. One of my favorite concepts in gardening is companion planting. The concept is that different plants complement one another in creating a harmonious ecosystem.

Planting herbs, flowers and vegetables together support a more sustainable and healthy garden than simply planting crops alone. Some plants attract insects that can help, others repel insects that can harm. Bright colors attract bees and pollinators. Some plants make the soil more nitrogen rich soil while others need it.

Might we consider the diversity of our congregation in the same way? Diversity at Neighborhood is not simply a “value” we have, it is essential to our flourishing. Our differences create the most fertile, generative ground for our congregation’s growth. We thrive on a diversity of contributions of our gifts, our talents, time and our resources. We are energized by the rigorous exchange of ideas and beliefs. We are blessed by a rich diversity of identities, generations and life-experiences. We are refreshed by the perspectives of newcomers and nourished by the deep roots of our long-time members. We need the contributions of different kinds of bodies and abilities. The Flower Communion shows us how beautiful that bouquet of our community can be, the colors, shapes, sizes and fragrances present.

But participating in a diverse community of faith is not always an easy path. According to studies on multicultural religious life, 90% of people of faith choose to worship in places where 90% of the people are just like them. Only 4% of American congregations are intentionally multicultural. There are pitfalls to diverse communities, they are not always comfortable. We can make assumptions about each other, make mistakes and stumble along the path. We unintentionally hurt each other and cause each other pain, even as we do our best to navigate conflict with grace. Our theological or generational differences can sometimes become barriers rather than bridges to greater understanding.

And yet, in the striving together, we uncover a sense of resilience and gratitude for the challenge. You have shared with me how conflict has helped this community to emerge stronger, more connected, enriched, rather than torn apart by differences.

We need a ritual like the Flower Communion to bind us back to our common liberal religious quest. The meaning of “liberal” does not so much have the left-wing political meaning our contemporary culture assigns to the word, although many of us find ourselves tending in that direction politically. Liberal religion is a way of life that is open and inclusive, valuing curiosity, acceptance and relationship. It is critical of any extreme beliefs that diminish the humanity of any individual or group. Our tradition is “living,” it is always in process of unfolding and fulfilling its promise. It is generative, reconstituting itself over and over again with the fresh insights of each generation, evolving to meet the emerging needs of our world. Our tradition, like our lives, is in “process.”

Theologian Catherine Keller, from the Drew University is a noted scholar in what is known as “process thought” or “process theology.” In her book *On the Mystery, Theology in Process*, she writes: “Theology is not ever identical with faith or with belief, but rather, motivated by faith - it takes all our beliefs into the evolving perspective of its interactive process.” By Keller’s definition, faith is what motivates, not what defines, our theological exploration. Faith inspires and gives us the security to explore our theology and beliefs, individually and in community.

You might remember this quote from the New Testament, it’s from the book of Hebrews: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

What is this faith that we share? We have faith that as members and friends of Neighborhood church we are participating in a continuing process of healing, growth and transformation. We have faith that no matter how challenging the problems of our personal lives and the crises of our world, we know we will not face them alone.

The poet says: “How can we tire of hope, so much is in bud.” Today, we celebrate what is blossoming, what is already beautiful and unique about this congregation. And we recommit to our faith in what is in process, what is in bud, what we are becoming but cannot yet see. Together, we reaffirm our shared faith.

Blessed be, and Amen