



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

**Beauty as Well as Bread**

Rev. Lissa Anne Gundlach, Senior Minister

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

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For many years, I spent most Monday evenings in the basement of All Souls church, where their coffee-hour fellowship hall, nicknamed "Friendship Hall," was transformed into a dining room for over 300 guests.

Some of the guests were experiencing homelessness or had marginal housing. Some guests were couch surfing with friends or family or living in shelters, with little privacy, harshly regimented schedules and constant threats of violence or theft. All of these guests were largely invisible to most of the wealthy Upper East Side congregation, though some of them lived side by side in crowded rent controlled apartments, or close by in single room occupancies.

All Souls was famous for having the best soup kitchen in town. I once got in a cab across town and got to chatting about where I worked, only to have the driver share rave reviews about the chicken and the jazz pianist who frequented the dinners. It wasn't only the abundant, freshly prepared food and drink but the radical hospitality that the volunteers, many from the congregation, provided.

At the end of every Monday night, guests spilled out into the All Souls courtyard to smoke and chat. Many lingered in the garden as long as they could. Others went their separate ways and began to blend back into the city landscape once again.

I always took the subway home. On the platform, I started to recognize our guests. I remember the first time I noticed a gentleman who had recently dined at the church. He was dressed in tattered clothes and set himself apart from the crowd. What first caught my eye was a yellow plastic bag bulging with the take-out containers provided for leftovers each guest was offered. What I noticed next was a bouquet of flowers, stems carefully wrapped in another plastic bag, the same kind that held the take out containers. Not just any flowers, but unmistakably the chancel dedication flowers, beautifully varied in color and texture and arranged by a loving hand and careful eye.

I remembered that Monday afternoons, along with ensuring each table is meticulously set, an All Souls member lovingly disassembled the two enormous vases of chancel flowers, rearranging the flowers into a two dozen smaller vases, one for each table.

I'm not sure exactly why, but frankly, I was surprised. I'm not proud to say that at first a question arose in my mind, "Why would a hungry homeless person want to take flowers home with him? What would he do with them?"

As quickly as my thought came and went, heavy laden with my own judgments and assumptions, another feeling overtook me. I felt so moved that the guest had taken the time to wrap the flowers to enjoy and bring home. "Everyone needs beauty," I said to myself,

“everyone deserves beauty. Beauty makes a difference in people’s lives, if only for a few brief moments.”

I imagined the bouquet somehow softening him, providing a balm against the harshness of the life to which he returned. Just as the food nourished his body, the beauty of the flowers nourished his soul.

After that day, I began to see that many of the guests treasured the flowers as much as the food each week. Two young sisters delighted in taking the flowers with them at the end of the meal, quarreling over who got the prettiest ones. Another woman with long beautiful hair took azaleas and tucked them into her braid.

Like clockwork, each week I watched an older woman stayed till the last moments of the evening, then traveled from table to table gathering the remaining bouquets together into one large arrangement. I asked her if she liked to have the flowers in her home. “Of course, what else would I do with them?” She replied curtly in a heavy German accent. What else indeed but enjoy them? Why did I even need to ask why?

*Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike.*

*These words were written by naturalist John Muir in his 1912 book The Yosemite. He described beauty as a “hunger” shared by every person, from wealth or poverty. He said:*

This natural beauty-hunger is made manifest in the little window-sill gardens of the poor, though perhaps only a geranium slip in a broken cup, as well as in the carefully tended rose and lily gardens of the rich, the thousands of spacious city parks and botanical gardens, and in our magnificent National parks--the Yellowstone, Yosemite, Sequoia, etc. -- Nature’s sublime wonderlands, the admiration and joy of the world.

Muir was right. Beauty is fundamentally a human need. We seek out beauty, delight in beauty and need to create it in our lives. Beauty is as nourishing to our souls as bread is for our bodies. I know this is true in my own life. I come from a long line of gardeners, farmers and florists, men and women. Every spring in New York, I would haul pots of flowers and herbs and vegetable starts up three flights of stairs up onto my tiny fire escape to make a garden. I rushed to the farmers market every Saturday to buy fresh flowers, and delighted in my walks to the Botanic gardens. Beauty was not a luxury, but a necessity I cannot live without.

I think this is what Norbert Capek was thinking about when he created the flower communion nearly a hundred years ago. Most of his members had come from the Roman Catholic Church, and while they were eager for a new religious community they did not feel comfortable with the bread and wine of the Catholic communion ritual. Still, Capek felt that the bread and wine ritual bonded members to their faith and to each other. In a time not unlike today, with extremism and authoritarianism on the rise, he looked for a symbol in the peace of the pastoral

countryside, undisrupted by human conflict. No wars were fought in the name of the flower, no hatred or oppression, no bigotry or harshness. To Capek, flowers represented pure, boundless innocence, and the temporary but vivid pleasure of color and fragrance.

Capek felt that the beauty of flowers would challenge his members to discover the same sense of beauty in each other, even and especially because of their differences. While it is easy to see the beauty of a flower, seeing the beauty of another person is more difficult. And yet that is what our task is as a religious community—to bring out one another's beauty and to celebrate it. Von Ogden Vogt, 20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian theologian, knew this well -- he called beauty one of the "three liberal religious absolutes, alongside truth and goodness." Beauty was a fundamental spiritual need, an aesthetic end in itself but also a calling to understand the trinity of absolutes together as necessary for the flourishing of human love. Truth begets beauty, which begets goodness, and vice versa. He wrote:

Anything beautiful is an end product, and the joy we have of it an end in itself. But our satisfaction is not enough. The sense of beauty calls us to look and see the object in itself. It says see this flower, (...) see this person, they are beautiful in themselves. It says, see this person—not see this voter, this customer, this employer, this saleslady—but rather, see this person, as (s)he is in and for herself.

All those Monday nights spent at the All Souls soup kitchen taught me this well. As we chatted about the flowers, I began to really see the beauty of the guests as they were nourished body and soul. Our common humanity eclipsed the separateness of our lives.

Today, our communion charge is not only to see the beauty in the flowers, but to see the beauty in one another – friend, family and comrade, sometimes obscured by the common rhythm of our day to day. The thing about beauty is it is meant to be shared. I think about our members who gather up the beauty of their yards every week to create our flower arrangements every Sunday, or our member Mud whose ministry at Muir Ranch is to make incredible bouquets, and then give them away only for the pleasure and delight it brings others. Beauty is not meant to be kept to ourselves. We must take our beauty of our beloved community out into the world to share it with others who so badly need our deep and soulful nourishment. We must take it to the polls as we exercise our role as citizens advocating for our country's return to civility and politics of human rights and human dignity. We must take it out into the sanctuaries of nature as we celebrate and revel in the brief but bountiful blossoming of summer.

Amen and blessed be!