

23rd June 2024 – ‘Flower Communion’ Led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC ‘Flower Duet’ Delibes

https://youtu.be/C1ZL5AxmK_A

WELCOME

Welcome everyone to our service this morning.

Today’s service is going to take the form of a FLOWER COMMUNION, a service originally designed by Rev Norbert Capek for his Unitarian congregation in Prague in 1923, and which has become a popular service in Unitarian churches all over the world to this day. It’s a celebration of diversity and acceptance, of giving and receiving. We will be using some of Capek’s own words, taking part in the flower communion ritual which he devised, and hearing a little about his life and legacy.

CHALICE LIGHTING

Let’s begin by lighting our chalice candle, as is our custom, as a symbol of our free religious faith. And if you’re joining at home you might like to light your own candle.

We strive to be a welcoming people of diverse beliefs who commit to nourishing the spirit, broadening the mind, nurturing the earth, and building community. May this flame remind us, today and every day, to commit - to ourselves and to each other - to love beyond belief.

1st HYMN 33 (P) Enter, rejoice and come in

Enter, rejoice and come in.

Enter, rejoice and come in.

Today will be a joyful day;

enter, rejoice and come in.

Open your ears to the song.

Open your ears to the song.
Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice and come in.

Open your hearts everyone.
Open your hearts everyone.
Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice, and come in.

Don't be afraid of some change.
Don't be afraid of some change.
Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice, and come in.

Enter, rejoice and come in.
Enter, rejoice and come in.
Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice and come in.

Words and music by Louise Ruspini

MEDITATION ON YOUR FLOWER

Most of you have brought a flower to this service, or were able to pick one up when you came in. (If you don't have a physical flower with you, you might like to picture one in your imagination during this meditation – any flower of your choice.)

Artist Georgia O'Keeffe explains how she decided to paint flowers in a huge scale, so you could not ignore their beauty....'When you take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it's your world for the moment,' she said. "I wanted to give that world to someone else."

So let's begin by taking your flower in your hand and really looking at it. Consider

how you have come to be holding this particular flower. What has brought you and this flower together on this day, in this moment.

This flower is part of creation – like you. It has grown, it has blossomed and it will also die. It's unique and, like you, it has beauty to offer and things to teach to those open to learn. Take a moment to observe your flower's colour, its shape, its fragrance, its form. And you might like to look more closely at its details – the tiny hairs on its leaves, perhaps, or the variation of colour on its petals, the shape of its stamens, and so on.

What are the characteristics of your flower? Is it tall, strong, bold? Is it pale, delicate, shy? Does it grow alone or in company with others? Does this flower remind you of anyone – yourself maybe, or someone you love?

And now, having spent some time, with your flower, I'm going to invite you to give it away. But let's first sing our second hymn...

2nd HYMN 13 (P) Bring flowers to our altar

Bring flowers to our altar to show nature's beauty
The harvest of goodness in earth, sky and sea.
Bring light to our altar to guide every nation
From hatred to love and to humanity.
Bring a dove to our altar its wings ever flying
In permanent quest for the peace all may share.
Bring bread to our altar the hungry supplying
And feeding the poor who depend on our care.

Bring hope to our altar in your gentle dreaming
Of all the good things that will make your heart glad.
Bring love to our altar, a bright witness beaming
To all who are burdened, or lonely or sad.
Bring work to our altar to help every nation
And celebrate all that's already achieved.
Come yourself to our altar in true dedication

To all the ideals we in common believe.

Welsh Traditional Melody, words © Lena Cockroft

RITUAL - giving

The first part of the communion ritual is the giving. When you are ready, please come forward and place your flower in the vase on the table at the front of the church. If you are on Zoom I invite you to hold up your flower so others can see it, and you might like to write its name in the chat. After a little while we'll also have to music to accompany the giving of the flowers.

MUSIC – Evening of roses – played twice

https://youtu.be/TxHm_Qm4e4k

People bring flowers forward

BLESSING of the flowers, Norbert Capek

I would like to bless our flowers using a translation of the blessing Norbert Capek used in his first Flower Communion...

“In the beauty and fragrance of flowers we draw close to life’s ecstasy and joy.

‘In the bringing of them here we draw close to our own uniqueness, expressed in our choosing for ourselves and the many ways by which we have come to be part of this congregation today.

And in the sharing of them we draw close to each other, a community of loving concern and mutual respect—as beautiful and as varied as a bowl of many flowers – and we draw close to those who came before us, whose faith and courage in the past allows us to bloom today-though they themselves were cut and burned by those who feared their flowering.

'Ground of all being, in whom we live and grow, may we never forget our common rootedness in you.'

Blessed be

STORY – many versions, this one based on Anthony de Mello

A man seeded his lawn, watered it well and waited for a fine green carpet of grass. But when it grew, a fine sprinkling of dandelions grew up with it. The grass was green and lovely but the dandelions were not welcome and he used every weed killer he could find to get rid of them.

Nothing worked. Oh, they died alright, but soon they were back, and more than before. Again, he applied the weed killer, and again and again. He grew very angry and went to the maharishi to ask his advice. "I have a lovely lawn," he said, "but these awful dandelions are spoiling it. I try to get rid of them but I can't. What should I do?"

The maharishi thought awhile and then asked the man, "Do you not like dandelions?" The man answered, "Well, I suppose they're flowers, but they're also weeds. I don't like weeds." The maharishi thought some more; finally he said softly, "Learn to love your dandelions."

3rd HYMN: 43 (G) Universal Spirit

Mother Spirit, Father Spirit, where are you?
In the skysong, in the forest, sounds your cry.
What to give you, what to call you, what am I?

Many drops are in the ocean, deep and wide.
Sunlight bounces off the ripples to the sky.
What to give you, what to call you, who am I?

I am empty, time flies from me; what is time?
Dreams eternal, fears infernal haunt my heart.
What to give you, what to call you, O, my God.

Mother Spirit, Father Spirit, take our hearts.
Take our breath and let our voices sing our parts.
Take our hands and let us work to shape our art.

Words and music by Norbert Capek, translated from the Czech by Rev Richard Boeke and arranged by David Dawson.

ADDRESS

Rev Dr Norbert Capek was a preacher and a thinker, and someone who truly stood up for what he believed in. He lived in a time when believing in – and practising – freedom of thought and religion was considered dangerous by others, which it still is in some places, and in some situations. He was born in what was then Bohemia in 1870. He and his wife Maia fled to the USA in 1914 with their eight children as a result of their non-conformist views. But they returned to the recently independent Czechoslovakia in 1921 where they founded a Unitarian congregation in Prague. It grew and grew – at one time there were reportedly as many as 8000 Unitarians around the country, all linked in one way or another to Capek's congregation. Capek was a prolific hymn writer, and wrote more than 90 hymns, often composing the music as well as the words, as in the one we've just sung.

His congregation came from different backgrounds and Capek felt there was a need for some sort of symbolic ritual that would help bind people more closely together. He was aware it had to be something that wouldn't alienate anyone who had broken away from other religious traditions – as many in his congregation had done. And so he came up with a Flower Communion. Perhaps we were inspired by the countryside, or just recognised what powerful and universal symbols of beauty and diversity - life and death - flowers could be.

By 1939, when it was clear that the Nazis were about to invade Czechoslovakia, Capek's friends urged him to leave the country. By now he had a wide reputation as a religious liberal, a hymn-writer, newspaper editor and lecturer, all of which put him in a very dangerous position. His wife, Maia, who was also ordained as a Unitarian minister, left to embark on a lecture tour to the United States to raise funds for refugees in Europe. She took the flower service with her, where it has continued to flourish. Capek himself, however, refused to go and stayed to continue his work, which became increasingly risky.

Rev Eric Shirvell Price wrote that: 'Because of the monotheistic beliefs of the Unitarians, Capek was able to accept into membership a number of Jews, who would otherwise have been rounded up by the Gestapo. This gave them precious time in which to plan their escape from the country. But when after two years this merciful plan was discovered Capek was arrested along with his daughter Zora for the so-called "crime" of listening to the BBC on the radio. He was also accused of "high treason", with several of his sermons being cited as evidence of this. Eventually he was sent to Dachau concentration camp, and Zora to a labour camp.'

But even in Dachau Capek reportedly worked hard to lift the spirits of everyone around him. A friend wrote of him that he was like a flower himself 'blooming among the ashes of hopelessness and despair.' And though almost a year after his arrest, Capek's name appears among prisoners sent on October 12, 1942 to Hartheim Castle, near Linz in Austria, where he died of poison gas, those who knew him said his spirit was never crushed. Before he died he wrote: "It is worthwhile to live and fight courageously for sacred ideals. Even though disappointed 1000 times or fallen in the fight and when everything would seem worthless, I have lived amidst eternity. Be grateful my soul, my life was worth living.'

Each year, when we return to this Flower Communion service, we have the chance to remind ourselves – again - that each one of us is uniquely precious, each with a story to tell, and a contribution to make. That each of us has a life that is precious and worth living. Can we truly believe that, of ourselves and of each other? We may find it easier to value each flower in a bouquet that we do each of our own attributes, and each person in our community or family. There is always work to be done, in

practising opening our hearts and minds to the beauty in ourselves and in each other, and in accepting our difference and foibles. It takes effort and attention. But we know that whenever we commit to this work, we are placing ourselves firmly on a path of love and light.

Norbert Capek made his contribution and lived his life true to his values, keeping a light shining even in the most difficult of circumstances. Today, with gratitude and in his honour, may we affirm our intention to do the same.

RITUAL - RECEIVING A FLOWER

It is time now for us to share in final part of the Flower Communion – the receiving. This year I'm going to do this a little differently. In the past I've always invited you to come forward and choose a flower. But at GA in April I was in conversation with my colleague Jo James who said 'I've only recently realised that the point of the ritual is not to choose a flower you like, but to be given one and to find the good and beauty in it. It's about practising acceptance.' So, now I've realised that too!

In a moment I will ask you each in the room to approach the communion vase in order to receive a flower – much as you would receive bread and wine in a traditional communion. And then to sit down with the flower you've been given and contemplate it in much the same way as you did the flower you brought. It is not only a gift that someone else has brought you, it is a gift from the universe itself.

Those of you on Zoom, I appreciate it's not as easy to be given a flower, but while the receiving is happening here in the church I invite you to unmute yourselves and verbally offer a flower to each other if you would like to.

4th HYMN 208 (P) When our heart is in a holy place

When our heart is in a holy place, when our heart is in a holy place,
we are blessed with love and amazing grace, when our heart is in a holy place.
When we trust the wisdom in each of us, every colour every creed and kind,
and when we see our faces in each others' eyes, then our heart is in a holy place.

When our heart is in a holy place, when our heart is in a holy place,
we are blessed with love and amazing grace, when our heart is in a holy place.
When we tell our story from deep inside, and we listen with a loving mind,
and we hear our voices in each other's words, then our heart is in a holy place.

When our heart is in a holy place, when our heart is in a holy place,
we are blessed with love and amazing grace, when our heart is in a holy place.
When we share the silence of sacred space, and the God of our hearts stirs within,
and we feel the power of each other's faith, then our heart is in a holy place.

When our heart is in a holy place, when our heart is in a holy place,
we are blessed with love and amazing grace, when our heart is in a holy place.

Words and music, Joyce Poley, arranged by Lorne Kellett © Songstyle Music (SOCAN)

CLOSING WORDS by Richard S. Gilbert

May the blessing of the flowers be upon you.
May their beauty beckon to you each morning
And their loveliness lure you each day,
And their tenderness caress you each night.
May their delicate petals make you gentle,
And their eyes make you aware.
May their stems make you sturdy,
And their reaching make you care.
May it be so

And may you go well into the beautiful week ahead.

Extinguish chalice

CLOSING MUSIC 'Blooming Heather', Kate Rusby

<https://youtu.be/9bKAUAyXckE?feature=shared>