

Opening Music: 'Blossoms'**Welcome**

Good morning and Welcome to our service this morning, whether you are here in the church, joining us on Zoom, or watching the recording at a later time. Welcome whoever you are, and however you are feeling, whatever you carry in your heart, and bring with you: hopes, cares and concerns or celebrations, sadness or joys, you are welcome, especially if you are joining us for the first time.

However we join in, each one of us is part of our community, contributing by being connected in spirit, and all are equally valued.

Today's service is a FLOWER COMMUNION, originally designed by Rev Dr Norbert Capek for his Unitarian congregation in Prague in 1923. It has become a popular service in Unitarian churches all over the world. Norbert's wife, Maja, also a Unitarian Minister, took it to USA in 1940, and it was brought to this country from USA by Rev Eric Shrivell Price in 1965 - 60 years ago. Our own dear Richard Lovis introduced it to this congregation some 30 or so years ago. It's a celebration of diversity and acceptance, of giving and receiving. We will use some of Norbert Capek's own words today, and be hearing a little about his life and legacy.

But first, we begin, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith. If you are at home, and have a candle, you may like to light it now.

Chalice Lighting

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.

Opening Words: including some from Isaiah 35: 1

"The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad and the desert shall blossom like a rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with singing.

Altar flowers are of many species, but all worship is one; systems of faith are different, but God is one."

Lets sing our first hymn, on this beautiful summer morning:

280 in the green book: 'Morning has broken'

Morning has broken
Like the first morning,
Blackbird has spoken
Like the first bird,
Praise for the singing!
Praise for the morning!
Praise for them, springing
Fresh from the Word!

Sweet the rain's new fall
Sunlit from heaven,
Like the first dewfall

On the first grass.
Praise for the sweetness
Of the wet garden,
Sprung in completeness
Where his feet pass.

Mine is the sunlight!
Mine is the morning
Born of the one light
Eden saw play!
Praise with elation,
Praise every morning,
God's re-creation
Of the new day!

Tune: 'Bunessan' Old Gaelic Melody arr. Martin Fallas Shaw 1875 – 1958

Words: Eleanor Farjeon, 1881 – 1965 From the Children's Bells published by Oxford University Press by permission of David Higham Associates, Ltd

Story – 'The Magical Flower Of Resilience' – A Tale Of Inner Strength For Kids

Once upon a time, there was a young boy named Tim who loved spending time in his father's beautiful garden. One day, as Tim sat quietly, tears rolled down his cheeks. Concerned, his father approached him and asked, "What's the matter, son?"

Tim hesitated for a moment before sharing his sorrow. "Some of my rich classmates made fun of me and called me the son of a gardener. They said my father only waters and feeds plants for others to earn money."

His father listened attentively and thought for a moment. Then he smiled and said, "Come with me, son. Let's plant some flowers. It might cheer you up."

They walked hand in hand to a special spot in the garden, where the father pulled out some flower seeds. "Let's conduct an experiment," he suggested. "I will care for one flower, and you will care for the other. I will water mine with clean water from the lake, and you will water yours with the dirty water from the pond. Let's see what happens in the weeks to come."

Excited about the experiment, Tim joined his father in planting the flowers. They watered them diligently and watched with anticipation as the seeds began to grow.

After a few weeks, the flowers bloomed beautifully. The father brought Tim back to the garden and asked, "Look at the two flowers and tell me your observation."

With wonder in his eyes, Tim replied, "My flower looks better and healthier than yours. How is that possible when your water is cleaner?"

His father smiled warmly and explained, "You see, my dear, just like these flowers, life can sometimes be challenging. There may be people who try to put you down, mock your dreams, and say hurtful things. But just like the flower you watered with the dirty water, you can still grow and flourish even in the face of negativity."

He continued, "The harsh words from others do not define you. It is their ego and insecurities they are trying to satisfy. Remember, you are a strong and resilient person, capable of overcoming any obstacles that come your way."

Tim's eyes sparkled with understanding as he embraced his father's wise words. From that day on, he vowed to let the negativity around him serve as organic fertilizer for his growth. He would rise above the harsh words and use them as motivation to become an even better person.

And so, the little flower in the garden became a symbol of resilience and strength for Tim. It reminded him that he had the power to bloom beautifully, no matter what challenges life threw at him. With love and support from his father, Tim learned an important lesson – that he was capable of flourishing even in the midst of negativity.

And just like the flower, Tim's spirit soared, standing tall and strong, ready to face whatever came his way with courage and grace.

Lets turn to a time of prayer and reflection:

Prayers: Rev. Dr. Čapek's Prayer at the First Flower Communion Service

"In the name of Providence, which implants in the seed the future of the tree and in the hearts of men the longing for people living in brotherly love;

in the name of the highest, in whom we move and who makes the mother, the brother and sister what they are;

in the name of sages and great religious leaders, who sacrificed their lives to hasten the coming of the kingdom of brotherhood--let us renew our resolution--sincerely to be real brothers and sisters regardless of any kind of bar which estranges man from man.

In this holy resolution may we be strengthened knowing that we are God's family; that one spirit, the spirit of love, unites us; and endeavour for a more perfect and more joyful life leads us on. AMEN."

The Flower Communion is a ritual in two parts. Giving away your flower and later, receiving a different one.

Meditation on your Flower

Firstly, consider the flower you have brought: Each of you has been invited to bring a flower Maybe it is one that you have grown yourself or one that is a particular favourite or a flower that has special associations a memory of a loved one perhaps, or some special event....

Or maybe it is one you chose from the vaseful inside our front door.

You may regard this flower as in some way representing yourself

Look at it for a moment.....

Consider its form , its colour, its fragrance and its beauty,

Think for a moment of what it means to you of whom or of what it reminds you

Maybe it reflects your character in some way? Does it grow alone or in company with others?

For our friends on Zoom, hold up your flower, so your fellow Zoomers can see it, if you wish, share your thoughts in the chat

.....For those in church, I invite you now to give your flower away. When you are ready, please come up and place your flower in the vase on the table at the front as part of a collective offering of our united worship.

Give your flower away, knowing that our worship consists of both giving and receiving.

After a little while we'll also have to music to accompany the giving of the flowers.

People bring flowers forward

Music: 'Wildflower Meadow' <https://youtu.be/5ivyA-wOkUY> 3 mins 53 sec

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*

Readings:

(1) 'This is the garden: colors come and go ' by e.e. cummings

This is the garden: colors come and go,
Frail azures fluttering from night's outer wing,
Strong silent greens serenely lingering,
Absolute lights like baths of golden snow.
This is the garden: pursed lips do blow
Upon cool flutes within wide glooms, and sing
Of harps celestial to the quivering string,
Invisible faces hauntingly and slow.

This is the garden. Time shall surely reap
And on Death's blade lie many a flower curled,
In other lands where other songs be sung;
Yet stand They here enraptured, as among
The slow deep trees perpetual of sleep
Some silver-fingered fountain steals the world.

(2) 'Song of The Flower' By Khalil Gibran

I am a kind word uttered and repeated
By the voice of Nature;
I am a star fallen from the
Blue tent upon the green carpet.
I am the daughter of the elements
With whom Winter conceived;
To whom Spring gave birth; I was
Reared in the lap of Summer and I
Slept in the bed of Autumn.

At dawn I unite with the breeze
To announce the coming of light;
At eventide I join the birds
In bidding the light farewell.

The plains are decorated with
My beautiful colors, and the air
Is scented with my fragrance.

As I embrace Slumber the eyes of
Night watch over me, and as I
Awaken I stare at the sun, which is
The only eye of the day.

I drink dew for wine, and hearken to
The voices of the birds, and dance
To the rhythmic swaying of the grass.

I am the lover's gift; I am the wedding wreath;
I am the memory of a moment of happiness;
I am the last gift of the living to the dead;
I am a part of joy and a part of sorrow.

But I look up high to see only the light,
And never look down to see my shadow.
This is wisdom which man must learn.

2nd HYMN (43) 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 and the history of the Flower Communion

The Flower Communion Service in which we join today, was created by Rev Dr Norbert Capek, a Unitarian Minister in Prague, over a century ago.

Norbert Capek was born in 1870, in what was then Bohemia. His mother was a Roman Catholic, his father an agnostic. The family was poor, and he trained as a tailor. But his great love was religion, religious ideas and church communities. As a young man, Norbert became a Baptist, then a successful Baptist minister, and set up several churches. Soon, however, he was influenced by various teachers including the great preacher of the Social Gospel, Walter Rauschenbusch. Norbert became convinced that Christianity should have a distinctly social message, and that our task was to create a new and better society for everyone. As his religious ideas became increasingly liberal, he joined and became active in an international religious organization later known as the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), founded in 1900 by Unitarians. He attended congresses in several countries. At the 1910 Berlin IARF congress, he met some American Unitarians.

Norbert experienced difficult times because of his increasingly liberal ideas. He, his wife, Marie and their 8 children fled to the USA in 1914 because of their non-conformist views. He became editor of a Czech-language newspaper and served as pastor of the First Slovak Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey. Sadly, Marie died, leaving him to raise the children on his own, as well as working.

In 1917, he met and married another Czech expatriate, Mája Oktavec, a qualified Librarian 18 years his junior. He resigned as a Baptist minister in 1919 after being accused of heresy by Slovak Baptists. He and Maja found a welcoming Unitarian congregation which accepted them and their beliefs. They returned to the recently independent Czechoslovakia in 1921 and founded a Unitarian congregation in Prague. They called it the Liberal Religious Fellowship. It flourished, with large congregations and an active children's programme. It grew so rapidly that they purchased a large building, dubbed "Unitaria". There were reportedly as many as 8,000 Unitarians around the country, all linked to the Prague congregation. Although a physically small man, Norbert seemed to have unlimited energy. He preached, taught, ran a newspaper, and wrote more than 90 hymns, often composing the music as well as the words, as in the one we sang earlier. Our closing video is of another one.

In the early days, the minister wore no vestments, there were no elaborate rituals, hymns, or prescribed prayers. It is said some members felt a lack of spiritual dimension. In response, in June 1923, Norbert Čapek created the Flower Celebration (now called the Flower Communion). Because the congregation came from different backgrounds he felt there was a need for some sort of symbolic ritual to help bind people more closely together, without alienating many who had broken away from other religious traditions. Some were originally Catholics, others Protestants, some were Jews. And so he came up with the Flower Communion. Maybe he was inspired by the countryside, or recognised that the beauty and diversity of flowers is symbolic of the beauty and diversity of life, and how each individual is a unique whole unto themselves.

Each person was invited to bring a flower of their choice to the church, and place it in a large central vase. At the end of the service, each took home a different flower. This symbolized the equality and uniqueness of each individual and their coming together in communion to share these qualities in a spirit of acceptance.

The Czech Unitarian Iva Fišerová wrote "The flower is the most beloved symbol for Czech Unitarians... The symbol of various unique beings – flowers, people -- uniting to create a unique bouquet... Parting and being given a flower as a symbol of anybody in attendance whom I am expected to accept as my brother or sister."

So the congregation flourished for several years. The Capeks worked tirelessly, and Maja became a Unitarian Minister in 1926. Norbert Čapek celebrated the 'hidden cry for harmony with the Infinite' in every soul. He wrote that 'Every person is an embodiment of God and in every one of us God struggles for higher expression.

Religion,' can never die because human beings. . . cannot but be religious regardless of the form of [their] religion. Religion should, before all else, provide that 'inner harmony which is the precondition of strong character, good health, joyful moods and victorious, creative life.' 'It is my ideal,' he wrote, 'that unitarian religion in our country should mean a higher culture. . the next advanced cultural level of a certain people.' The church's task, he felt, 'must be to place truth above any tradition, spirit above any scripture, freedom above authority, and progress above all reaction.'

For his 70th Birthday, the congregation bought Norbert a radio. Unfortunately, this was to be his downfall.

Storm clouds were gathering, with the rise of the Nazi's. When it became clear that the Nazis would invade Czechoslovakia, Norbert's friends urged him to leave the country. His wide reputation as a religious liberal, newspaper editor, preacher, teacher and lecturer put him in a dangerous position. In 1940, Maja was preparing to go on a lecture tour to the United States to raise funds for refugees in Europe. She tried to persuade Norbert to go with her, but he refused to go, and stayed to continue his work, which became increasingly risky. Maja only left at the last moment with some of the children . She couldn't return. She stayed in USA and become a Unitarian Minister in Cambridge, Mass, and introduced the Flower Service which became very popular.

Rev Eric Shirvell Price Eric who brought the Flower Communion to this country from USA 60 years ago takes up Norbert Capek's story. He writes, "Because of the monotheistic beliefs of the Unitarians, he 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. When after two years this was discovered, Dr. Capek' along with his daughter Zora was arrested, she for the "crime" of listening to the BBC on the radio, and he for the same "offence" and for "high treason". Several of his sermons were cited as evidence of the latter charge. Listening to foreign broadcasts was a capital offence under the Nazi "protectorate".

Eventually Norbert was sent to Dachau concentration camp, Zora to a labour camp. Even in Dachau he reportedly worked hard to lift the spirits of everyone around him. Those who knew him said his spirit was never crushed. A friend wrote of him that he was like a flower himself 'blooming among the ashes of hopelessness and despair.' Almost a year after his arrest, Norbert Capek's name appears among prisoners sent, on October 12, 1942 to Hartheim Castle, near

Linz, Austria, where he died. The official cause of death was "heart failure." In fact he died in the gas chambers.

Before he died Norbert Capek 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.'

What a wonderful human being!

Think back to the story of "The Flower of Resilience" which Gill read earlier with its valuable lesson of resilience and inner strength. Just like the flower that flourished despite being watered with dirty water, we, too, have the power to overcome challenges and negativity in our lives. When faced with harsh words or discouragement from others, it is essential to remember that our worth and potential are not defined by their opinions. Instead, we should use such experiences as motivation to grow stronger and strive to be the best version of ourselves. By nurturing our resilience and inner strength, we can bloom beautifully, radiating positivity and grace, no matter the circumstances we encounter.

One could draw a parallel with the way in which Norbert Capek lived. He had to face infinitely worse than 'harsh words' or 'discouragement' from others. He did indeed grow stronger and became the very best version of himself.

Norbert Capek truly stood up for what he believed in. He lived at a time when believing in, and practising, freedom of thought and religion was considered dangerous and a threat by others. It still is in some places, and in some situations. We must all be vigilant in protecting these hard won freedoms for ourselves and future generations.

When news of Norbert Capek's death reached the United States, the American Unitarian Association president, Fredrick May Eliot, wrote, "Another name is added to the list of heroic Unitarian martyrs, by whose death our freedom has been bought. Ours is now the responsibility to see to it that we stand fast in the liberty so gloriously won."

In 1965 Rev. Eric Price brought a version of the Flower Communion Service and the story of Norbert Capek to Britain. Since then, many of our congregations, including ours here in Plymouth hold this service annually.

We do so partly for its own intrinsic beauty, partly as a symbolic expression of giving and receiving in our worship together as a congregation, and as a fitting memorial to Norbert Capek, who created this service in happier times. So, on the day on which we celebrate the beauty of our world in flowers, let us rejoice in all we give and receive from our freedom to worship together as our hearts and minds prompt us.

The Flower Communion service reminds us that each one of us is uniquely precious, with our own contribution to make, like the flower each of us brings to add to the whole vaseful. Just as the loss of one flower diminishes the vaseful, so the absence of one person diminishes the whole congregation. As Rev Kate said in a previous Flower Communion, "We must value every life as precious and worth living. If we can value each flower in a bouquet, how much more should we value each person in our community or family. Let us work hard to open our hearts and minds to the beauty in ourselves and in each other, and accept our differences 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, people come to take a flower

It is time now for us to share in second part of the Flower Communion ritual – the Receiving.

Come up to the front to take a different flower from the one you brought and then to sit down with the flower 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.

Let this be a symbolic reminder to us that much of our worship consists of what we bring, share and take away.

For our friends on Zoom, it's not as easy to take a flower, but while this is happening here in the church I invite you to unmute yourselves and verbally offer a flower to each other if you wish.

3rd HYMN: 268 (G) Moods of Summer

When the summer sun is shining
Over golden land and sea,
And the flowers in the hedgerow
Welcome butterfly and bee;
Then my open heart is glowing,
Full of warmth for everyone,
And I feel an inner beauty
Which reflects the summer sun.

When the light of summer sunshine
Streams in through the open door,
Casting shadows of tree-branches,
Living patterns on the floor;
Then my heart is light and gay,
And my life is overflowing
Like the happy summer day.

When the summer clouds of thunder
Bring the long awaited rain,
And the thirsty soil is moistened,
And the grass is green again;
Then I long for summer sunshine,
But I know that clouds and tears
Are a part of life's refreshment,
Like the rainbow's hopes and fears.

When, beneath the trees of summer,
Under leafy shade I lie,

Breathing in the scent of flowers,
Sheltered from the sun-hot sky;
Then my heart is all contentment,
And my soul is quiet and still,
Soothed by whispering, lazy breezes,
Like the grasses on the hill.

In the cool of summer evening,
When the dancing insects play,
And in garden, street and meadow
Linger echoes of the day;
Then my heart is full of yearning,
Hopes and memories flood the whole
Of my being, reaching inwards
To the corners of my soul.

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 VIDEO 'Colour and Fragrance'

Words and Music, Rev Dr Norbert Capek

<https://youtu.be/5ivyA-wOkUY>