

Plymouth Unitarian Church

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A Faith that Blossoms

Opening video/music

SAKURA, SAKURA (a traditional Japanese melody and lyrics) on YOUTUBE (2.58M)

Welcome + Introduction

Welcome to everyone, both here in church and joining us online.

Today's service is an entirely flower-themed one and includes a flower communion.

This is a tradition unique to the Unitarian Church, and everyone is warmly invited to take part, whether you are a regular attendee or visiting for the first time.

The service was written by Steve, and as many of you will know, he prefers to write services rather than lead them, so today's reflections will be shared by members of the congregation.

The service is presented in three parts and includes readings, hymns, music, and several short video clips.

Our opening music was the beautiful traditional Japanese melody, SAKURA.

In Japanese, this word means cherry blossom, a major cultural symbol in Japan.

The song reflects the beauty and fleeting nature of the blossom, and is closely associated with themes of transience, spring, and an appreciation of life.

It is taught to children in schools across the world, and Steve remembers learning it himself in a school music class.

The song dates back to the Edo period, from around 1603 to 1868, and remains one of the most recognisable pieces of Japanese music.

We now begin, as we always do, with the lighting of our chalice - a symbol of our free religious faith.

Chalice is lit

Opening words

We have two readings.

The first is from the Hebrew Bible or what we used to call the Old Testament.

From 1 Kings Chapter Six verse 29.

He carved all the walls of the Temple – with figures of cherubim, palm trees, and flowers.

When the Temple in Jerusalem was built under King Solomon, it was adorned with carvings of flowers, plants, and trees.

These designs reflected the beauty of nature and of God's creation, helping to create a sense of both wonder and holiness within the place of worship.

Floral imagery also appeared in objects used in the Temple, highlighting the importance of nature's symbolism in ancient religious art.

Our second Bible quote is from the New Testament.

The Gospel of Matthew Chapter Six: Verses 28 to 30.

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow.

They do not labour or spin.

Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these.

If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

Jesus refers to flowers when teaching about trust in God.

He reminds us that not even King Solomon, renowned for his wealth and splendour, was dressed as beautifully as the flowers of the field.

If God cares for flowers, which live only for a short time, then surely, he will care for people as well.

The message is to not worry about material things, but to trust that God will provide for our needs.

Flowers grow naturally and depend on God for life, and in this, Jesus invites us to do the same.

Of course, that is much easier said than done. How we interpret this teaching may depend largely on our own beliefs, and on whether we see the world as guided by divine care.

Jesus also suggests that flowers can teach us about humility, encouraging us to focus on spiritual rather than material pursuits, and to cherish what is here and now.

There is, a sense of wonder in this teaching, as flowers are seen as more beautiful than even the greatest human achievements.

In this way, Jesus reminds us of the beauty of God's creation.

Hymn One

Hymn one is from the Purple Hymn Book and is number 13 called Bring Flowers.

Part A

In the first part of the service, we will offer a brief recap on what a Flower Communion is.

As Unitarians, we do not subscribe to the Trinitarian understanding of God and therefore do not take part in the central Christian rite of Communion or Eucharist, in which bread and wine are shared as symbols of spiritual unity with Christ.

Instead, we hold an annual Flower Communion.

This is a non-sacramental, symbolic ceremony, primarily practiced within Unitarian congregations. It celebrates beauty, diversity, and the unity found among people.

The service is typically held on the last Sunday of May or in June. However, some congregations choose to celebrate it earlier in the spring, sometimes aligning it with Mother's Day or Easter.

Each person brings a flower to the service, and all the flowers are placed together in a shared vase or basket at the front.

At the end of the service, each person takes a different flower from the one they brought.

The ritual represents several ideas. Every person is unique, like each individual flower.

When brought together, the flowers create a greater beauty as a community.

Taking a different flower symbolises sharing in one another's lives and appreciating diversity.

It can perhaps be summed up in this simple thought:

We are all different kinds of flowers; together we make the world a beautiful garden.

And we now have a short video called The Story of Flower Communion for you to watch.

[The Story of Flower Communion – YOUTUBE – 3.42M.](#)

(The congregation are invited to bring up their flower to the front of the church.

Those on ZOOM are invited to wave their flowers to participate in the service).

Upon completion - we are now going to move into a moment of prayer.

Prayer introduction

This prayer includes a remembrance of Norbert Capek, founder of the Unitarian Church of Czechoslovakia.

Following the Nazi occupation of the country, he spoke out against oppression and supported democratic and humanitarian values.

Because of his resistance and leadership in a free-thinking religious movement, he was arrested by the Gestapo in 1941, deported to Dachau concentration camp, and in 1942, executed.

He is the best-known Unitarian martyr of the Nazi era.

Prayer

Spirit of Life and Love

We gather today with flowers in our hands – symbols of beauty, diversity, and the fragile gift of life.

As each bloom is different in colour, shape, and fragrance, so each person here carries a unique story, a unique hope, and a unique light.

We remember with gratitude the vision of Norbert Capek, who first invited a congregation to bring flowers together, so that no one would leave with the same one they brought.

In this simple exchange he taught that our lives are enriched by the gifts of others, and that community is born when we share what we have.

Today, we also remember his courage – that even in a time of fear and cruelty he held fast to love, freedom of conscience, and human dignity.

May the memory of his life, and the lives of all who suffered under hatred, strengthen our resolve to build a world of compassion and justice.

Bless these flowers and the hands that carry them. As we exchange them, may we receive one another's joys and sorrows, strengths and struggles.

May their beauty remind us that even in the darkest times, hope can bloom.

Let us go from this place renewed – to nurture kindness, to defend the dignity of every person, and to keep alive the spirit of love that no tyranny can destroy.

Amen

Music

And we now have a flower themed piece of music for you to listen to before moving into the second part of the service.

It is The Flower Duet which is sung in French, but this version has both French and English lyrics.

It is probably most famous as the song used in a British Airways TV commercial years ago.

[LAKME – The Flower Duet – English/French lyrics \(3.55M\) YOUTUBE](#)

Part B

Flowers are quiet teachers.

Their beauty, fragility, and deep connection to nature make them powerful symbols of the constant cycle of life and death.

They bloom and wither, reminding us of the transient nature of human existence.

A blossom that opens in the morning may begin to fade by evening.

Their beauty is undeniable - yet fleeting.

In a Unitarian context, this offers an invitation to live more fully in the present moment, to honour the gift of each day - not because it lasts forever, but precisely because it does not.

A flower blooms and withers, and returns to the earth, contributing to new life. There is a quiet wisdom in that acceptance.

Flowers also teach us about diversity. Some are bold and vibrant; others are small and easily overlooked.

Some thrive in sunlight, while others prefer the shade.

And each of us has flowers we are drawn to, and others we do not favour – perhaps not so different from how we respond to people.

Together, flowers create a tapestry – just as our bouquet today has shown.

This image resonates deeply with Unitarian values. We affirm that every person has inherent worth and dignity, and that our differences – of belief, identity, and culture – are not obstacles, but expressions of a deeper unity.

Flowers accompany many of life's most meaningful moments: the beginnings marked by births and weddings, and the endings honoured in funerals and farewells.

In each of these, they service as symbols of love, remembrance, and hope.

Across many cultures, flowers are used to celebrate birth, symbolising new life, growth, joy, and possibility.

In places such as India, they often play a role in religious and naming ceremonies for newborns.

There is also the tradition of birth flowers, where each month is associated with particular blooms – bouquets that can make thoughtful and meaningful gifts.

Flowers are of course, central to weddings, where they form an essential part of the setting.

Rich in symbolism, they are chosen to reflect love, commitment, and the couple's hopes for their future.

The tradition of the bridal bouquet has its roots in older customs, when flowers and herbs were believed to ward off bad luck and evil spirits.

In medieval Europe, strong scents were thought to protect against illness, an idea that became especially widespread during the time of the Black Death.

People carried fragrant herbs and flowers in an attempt to purify the air they breathed.

Weddings, as large public gatherings, were once especially risky places to contract disease.

As a result, brides began to carry bouquets – not simply for beauty, but as a form of protection.

Garlic was often included, believed to repel evil – perhaps the origin of the idea that it could ward off vampires.

Herbs such as rosemary and thyme symbolised protection and remembrance, while strong-smelling flowers helped mask unpleasant odours, and were thought to purify the air.

In this sense the bouquet was less a decorative feature and more a kind of lucky charm.

As scientific understanding developed, these beliefs gradually faded, and today's wedding bouquets have become softer, more aesthetic, and symbolic of love and celebration.

Flowers also play an important role in funeral services across much of the world, including here in Britain, where they are present in both religious and secular humanist ceremonies.

In Judaism, however, flowers are traditionally not part of funeral services.

The focus instead is on honouring the deceased through presence, prayer, and remembrance, rather than decoration.

One memory Steve shares from his travels in Jerusalem is a visit to the ancient Jewish cemetery on the slopes of the Mount of Olives.

This sacred site, a city of the dead in use for over three thousand years, holds an estimated 150,000 graves, and is deeply significant in Jewish tradition, where it is believed the resurrection will begin at the end of days.

Those buried here will be the first to arise for everlasting life.

What stood out was the absence of flowers. Instead, many of the graves were marked with small stones.

In Jewish custom, visitors leave a stone to signify that someone has visited the grave – a simple but enduring gesture of remembrance.

Some graves had only one or two stones, which felt quite sad.

Others had none at all, which was heartbreaking.

One grave, however, was covered in stones. It is that of Oskar Schindler, one of the most visited in Jerusalem – a testament to a life remembered by many.

He was a German factory owner and member of the Nazi Party who saved the lives of more than a thousand Jews during the Second World War.

Recognised as one of the Righteous Among the Nations, his story was brought to a wider audience through the 1993 film by Steven Spielberg, *Schindler's List*.

Although he was not Jewish, the grave of Schindler, located in the Catholic cemetery on Mount Zion, is always covered in stones – left by Jewish visitors as a sign of remembrance and gratitude.

At the end of the film, there is a powerful moment where some of those he saved, accompanied by the actors who portrayed them, visit his grave and place a small stone upon it.

Flowers, too, remind us of the resilience of nature.

Many grow in harsh conditions – through cracks in pavements, in dry and rocky soil, in places where life seems unlikely, even in landscapes marked by human suffering and destruction.

Their presence in such environments can feel almost miraculous. They become symbols of hope.

They suggest that even in the most difficult circumstances – whether personal, or global – there remains the possibility of growth and renewal.

A flower does not deny the hardness of its surroundings; it continues, quietly, to reach towards the light.

Each November, on Remembrance Sunday, we wear poppies to honour those lost in war and in conflict.

Their significance is closely tied to the battlefields of the First World War, particularly in northern Europe, where, after the devastation, bright red poppies were among the first plants to grow in the disturbed earth.

This powerful image is captured in the poem *IN FLANDERS FIELDS* by John McCrae.

The sight of these flowers blooming among the graves of fallen soldiers left a lasting impression on those who witnessed it.

Probably the greatest lesson flowers offer is that beauty and meaning can be found in a small, everyday moments.

Simply pausing to notice a single bloom can become an act of quiet reflection

There is something we might learn from that.

Flowers do not wait for perfect conditions – they bloom where they are, making use of what is available to them.

In our own lives, this might mean making the most of where we are now, while also recognising that, if the ground we stand on is truly unkind, it is sometimes necessary to move and begin again elsewhere.

Flowers turn naturally towards the light.

We might take that as a reminder to notice what gives us energy, curiosity, and meaning – and to spend more time in those places, while gently stepping back from what drains us.

They do not bloom all year. Some seasons are for growth, some for rest, and some for flourishing.

Not every phase of life needs to be productive or impressive; each of us moves at our own pace.

A flower does not try to change the whole world. It simply adds beauty, life, and presence to the small space it inhabits.

In much the same way, small acts of kindness matter.

Creating something – however modest - matters. Your presence, like that of a flower, can enrich a space more than you might realise.

And when the time comes, flowers let go. Growth often means shedding what is no longer needed.

So perhaps the invitation is simple: to keep showing up, to grow steadily, to stay true to who you are, to turn towards the light, to accept change – and to contribute, quietly but meaningfully, to the world around you.

Music

Our reading today is the Robert Burns poem My Love is Like a Red, Red, Rose.

We have a spoken version read by the Scottish actor Alan Cumming, followed by a sung version by Kenneth McKellar.

[Alan Cumming reads A Red, Red, Rose – YOUTUBE – 0.55 seconds](#)

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[My Love is Like a Red, Red, Rose – YOUTUBE – 3.49M – Kenneth McKellar.](#)

Part C

In the final part of the service, we will reflect on the theme of Flower Power and the Hippie Movement of the 1960s.

The 1960s were arguably the most radical and progressive decade of the twentieth century in terms of social change, particularly in the United States and Western Europe.

A counterculture revolution was underway - this was, after all the so-called Age of Aquarius.

During this time several major movements emerged.

The Civil Rights movement in the United States sought to end racial segregation and discrimination against Black Americans.

The Feminist movement campaigned for gender equality, including workplace rights and reproductive freedom.

The Gay Rights Movement gained momentum in the wake of the Stonewall Riots in New York City.

The Environmental movement also began to take shape, eventually leading to the first Earth Day in 1970.

Alongside this was the Black Power Movement, associated with organisations such as the Black Panther Party, which emphasised racial pride, self-determination, and community empowerment.

One of the best well-known youth movements of this period was the Hippie Movement.

It promoted ideals of peace, love, and freedom, while rejecting the conservatism, consumerism, authority, and rigid social norms of the 1950s.

A key idea associated with the hippies was Flower Power, which became a powerful symbol of non-violence and harmony.

Many young people in the 1960s were deeply dissatisfied with the strict social expectations of the time, as well as the ongoing tensions of the Cold War and the violence of the Vietnam War.

They longed for a society that valued peace and personal freedom over conflict, materialism, and conformity.

The term hippie itself comes from the word hip, meaning an awareness of new ideas – particularly in art, music, and spirituality.

Hippies rejected mainstream values such as material wealth and conventional career paths, choosing instead to embrace self-expression, community living, and alternative lifestyles.

Flower Power was popularised by the poet and activist Allen Ginsberg as a peaceful form of protest against war and violence.

Demonstrators would use flowers as symbols of love and non-violence – sometimes placing them into the barrels of soldiers' guns or offering them to police officers during protests against the Vietnam War.

These acts, carried out by students, activists, and even veterans, reflected a belief that peace and compassion could overcome violence.

Flowers thus became a powerful symbol of hope, unity, and the possibility of a more peaceful world.

Their protests were typically peaceful, often expressed through music, art, and dance – standing in contrast to the more confrontational demonstrations we often associate with protest today.

Flower Power became one of the most powerful and recognisable symbols of the Hippie Movement.

It was vividly expressed through bright floral patterns in clothing – a striking contrast to the conservative dress standards of the 1950s.

Loose fitting clothes, bell-bottoms, tie-dye shirts, beads, and flowers worn in the hair all became defining features.

Long hair worn by both men and women, further challenged traditional norms.

Flowers symbolised the movement's deep connection to nature and a desire for simpler, more harmonious ways of living.

This era was also marked by a growing interest in spiritual exploration.

Many alternative religious movements and philosophies gained attention during this time, including Scientology, the Unification Church, Hare Krishna, neo-paganism, and Wicca.

There was also a wider fascination with Eastern mysticism, including practices such as meditation and yoga, as people searched for deeper meaning and new ways of understanding the world.

In Britain, Flower Power became closely linked with peace activism – not only in opposition to the Vietnam War, but also in response to the fear of nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union.

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) emerged as one of the most prominent peace movements of the time.

Music played a central role in spreading these ideas. Bands such as The Beatles and Pink Floyd embraced psychedelic sounds and promoted messages of peace and love.

In the United States, the 1969 Woodstock Festival became an iconic gathering, where hundreds of thousands came together for three days of music and community.

In Britain, the Isle of Wight Festival reflected a similar spirit.

While San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district became the epicentre of the Hippie movement – especially during the Summer of Love – similar communities could be found around the world, from Amsterdam, to Goa in India, along the Hippie Trail through Nepal, and on the Island of Ibiza in Spain.

In London, areas such as Notting Hill, Soho, and particularly Carnaby Street became vibrant centres of fashion, music, and artistic expression.

For many young people, the 1960s represented a time of extraordinary cultural change and possibility.

The legacy of Flower Power endures in its message that peace and love can stand against violence, continuing to inspire movements for change across the world.

The simple act of offering a flower remains a powerful symbol of non-violence, hope, and unity.

Hymn 2

The Beauty of The Earth – this is in the Green Hymn Book and is number 14.

We have a YOUTUBE version to listen to and if you want either sing or hum along to.

Remain seated for this one, but during the hymn return to the front to select a different flower for you to return home with.

For the Beauty of the Earth – Peaceful Instrumental Hymn – Taryn HARBRIDGE - YOUTUBE (4.10M).

(The congregation return to the altar to take another flower back with them).

Closing words

We have two sets of closing words. The first is from the artist Vincent Van Goth.

If you truly love nature, you will find beauty everywhere.

The second is from the New Testament Book of 1 Peter Chapter One verse 24:

For all people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field, the grass withers and the flowers fall.

Thank you for listening

Closing music

Our end music is the 1960s Hippie anthem by Scott McKenzie called San Francisco.

Scott McKenzie – SAN FRANCISCO – Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair - YOUTUBE (2.57M).

Chalice is extinguished.

Notices

Tea and Coffee