

Homily for Celebration Sunday, June 27th, 2010: Norbert Capek and Flower Festival
Rev. Fran Dearman, Interim Minister, Unitarian Church of Calgary

Once upon a time, long ago and far away, in Central Europe, in Bohemia, in the sunset days of the old Hapsburg Empire, a child was born. He was born on the feast day of St. Norbert, so his parents named him –Norbert!—Norbert Fabian Capek. He was his mother’s only son and his father’s pride and joy. His father’s gift to him was an inquiring mind. His mother’s gift to him was a sense of wonder and awe and devotion. Bohemia’s gift to him was a love of nature, a heritage of free religion, and a thirst for justice and independence.

Norbert’s parents loved him dearly, but they were very poor country folk. So when their son was twelve—when he was twelve years old and old enough to start working for a living—his parents sent Norbert to live in town and work for his uncle as a tailor’s apprentice.

So Norbert went to town and learned to cut and sew and make clothes. And he learned a lot of other things, too. First, he learned that he and his uncle were not going to agree on matters of religion. In fact, one day his uncle threw him out of the house. No more tailor’s apprentice for Norbert.

But that worked out okay after all, because Norbert’s new friends in town saw that he was hard working and intelligent and enthusiastic, so they sent him to school to learn to be a minister. Norbert became a very successful minister, taking his good news far and wide.

Norbert also enjoyed working as a journalist, editing magazines, and getting involved in politics. He worked for independence from the Empire, and he preached against war.

But war came anyway, the First World War, in 1914. By this time Norbert had eight children. He was 44 years old. And he had no wish to fight in a war. So he went to New York instead.

In New York, Norbert was homesick for his own country, so he used to go to the New York Public Library, because there he could read newspapers written in his own language, which was Czech. And that’s where Norbert met his second wife, Maja, because she was homesick, too, and she too liked to go to the Public Library to read the newspapers in Czech. Maja and Norbert were married and soon there were eleven children to love and care for and learn from.

One day, some of Norbert’s children went with friends to visit a Unitarian Sunday School. When they came home, they told their parents how much they had enjoyed it. And that’s when Norbert discovered that all those years he had been a Unitarian without knowing it.

So Norbert went to Meadville-Lombard, which was the Unitarian theology school in Chicago—in fact it still is—and a very good school indeed. And that’s how, at the age of 48, Norbert Capek became a Unitarian minister.

Soon the First World War was over, and Norbert and his family were able to go home to Bohemia, which was now called Czechoslovakia, so that's what they did.

Norbert went back home, back to the great city of Prague, and there he founded a Unitarian Church. Norbert's new church in Prague soon became the biggest Unitarian Church in the whole world, with over three thousand members. The church building was so big, it covered a whole city block. The congregation called their new church "The Liberal Fellowship". They called that big building "Unitaria".

They wanted their new church to be different from other churches. But they still needed prayers and hymns. So Norbert wrote new words and new music. Some of those hymns and prayers are still with us, in English, in our grey hymnals.

But still, Norbert and the congregation felt they needed something more—some new tradition that would symbolize both unity and diversity, how every person had different gifts to offer, and how we each learn from one another.

So, in 1923, Norbert Capek and the people of the Prague Church started a new tradition—Flower Festival. On a Sunday in spring, at the last service before they broke for summer holidays, each person brought a flower to church. At the beginning of the service, each person put their flower in a big vase at the front of the church. The flowers symbolized the people. The vases symbolized the church, where folks come together and there is room for everyone. At the end of the service each person came forward and took away a different flower, symbolizing how we learn from one another.

And that is what we are doing here today, as many other Unitarian congregations do each year, all across the country and in many other countries, also—we follow the tradition of Flower Festival [known sometimes as flower communion, but flower festival is apparently the term that Capek preferred], and celebrate how we learn from one another.

Norbert Capek made many friends in his life. He was a cheerful, hopeful person. He taught people to cherish their friendships and learn from one another. Even in hard times—and he would know some very hard times—people were glad to know him because he chose to be cheerful and affectionate and welcoming. Even in hard times he was glad to be alive and be part of the universe.

And so, at Flower Festival, let us remember the teachings of Norbert Capek, let us remember how we learn from one another, let us remember to be glad, and thankful. May it be so.

[More about Norbert Capek's life, and his death at Dachau in 1942 at the age of 72, can be found at several UU websites on the web, or in the biography "Norbert Fabian Capek: A Spiritual Journey", by Richard Henry (Boston, Skinner House Books, 1999).]