

Thanks Be Given!

A Sermon by the Rev. József Szombatfalvi,
Minister and District Dean, Székelykeresztúr, Transylvania

Delivered in Hungarian by József and in English by Rev. Gary Smith.
at First Parish in Concord, MA
On Thanksgiving Sunday, November 19, 2006

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Faith:

Standing before you in this pulpit on Thanksgiving,
it is as beautiful as it is overwhelming for me.

I am an "old" minister
with many sermons behind me,
yet my words do not flow now:
my emotions take their place.

You, whom I address at this special hour,
are not just a congregation,
but truly my Sisters and my Brothers,
and filled with expectations
after months of preparation for our visit.

I too, lived every waking hour of these months
in an intense anticipation,
for I have desired nothing more than this moment
when we can look into each other's eyes
and communicate beyond words.

Before opening another chapter of our marvelous dialogue
and collaboration of so many years with you,
allow me a moment of unmasked confession
that contains all our joy and gratitude for having each other.

Let this moment be a heartfelt thanksgiving
to our God for this gift of our friendship.

Thanks Be Given!

I would like to ask you
to leave all the ordinary part of your life behind now
and try to listen to my words with your heart,
try to filter them through your love.

I will be open, as I have never spoken before;

I wish you now to sense the sincerity
of the child of farmer parents
from a village that is now sunken
under deep water.

If the trees and the birds and the hills
of my birthplace could talk,
their sincerity would teach us a great deal.

So, receive now what I have brought to you today,
not material treasures
but things of the heart.

For these are the greatest gifts we can give each other.

I have brought you also my Faith,
which is like freshly baked bread.

I wish to share its blessings now with you.

This faith is a strong affirmation of life and its meaning;
it is our determination to continue creating a future for Unitarians
- you and us, together.

I have brought you the greatest gift,
the crown of life that rules all life
- including our walking together:

I have brought you Love,
love that fills the universe, and holds us together.

For Love ultimately is God.

Our relationship is based solely on love
and has a divine blessing on it.

I have brought you the joy
that walking on a divine path brings into anyone's life.
This enables me to rejoice with those who celebrate life,
to cry with those who mourn,
to forgive and be forgiven.

This is my joy over the miracle of life itself,
and the divine presence in nature, and in history
- and in you and in me,
as we live out our faith acting through our deeds.

Thanks Be Given!

This great divine presence is palpable
in the sunny days of our life
and in the dark night of the soul, in trying times.
And we have had many of the latter during this last year.
If my birthplace had fallen victim to the evil of totalitarianism,
well then, last August Mother Nature tried us harshly
in the flood of the century in my church district.
People lost their homes, their livestock
- everything they had been working for all their lives.
And some lost their very lives.
And yet, even in this catastrophe,
we had to recognize unexpected blessings
and an inner strength
in the manifestation of solidarity
that turned our desperation into new hope.
God acted through the love
of those who reached out in help toward the victims
- and in that we learned a new lesson of faith.

Today, on the occasion of this holiday,
we find new insight about both divine and human goodness.

And we must say:

Thank you!

Gratitude is the most beautiful human feeling, and divine feeling
- one that nourishes our faith and optimism,
our strength and our love.
When we say Thank you,
not casually, but with the full meaning
that stems from the depth of our very souls
- God is acting in us.

This is a moment when I am compelled to openly affirm
the ultimate meaning and goal of my life:
it is the discovery of the miracle,
the divine action that comes
through people who love and people who are grateful
- those who have found God,
for they know Love.
All else: all the right social actions
and all compassion for brothers and sisters
come from this divine gift.

Thanks Be Given!

Selfless love is the most miraculously powerful state of the soul.
When it rises, everything will be changed around us - and through us.

Because we will be totally changed by this inner radiance.

If sorrow had embittered us,
love comes to our comfort.

Our eyes begin to shine
and we turn toward others
to discover the world
and our neighbor
in a whole new light.

A person, who is possessed by this intense love, just shines
- radiates something that attracts people
for it is caressing and comforting for everybody.

Love is infectious,
it is hard to resist falling into its magnetic field.

A loving person is serene and peaceful.

And, we all desire these qualities.

These are the qualities of a worthy life:

giving and receiving love,
which begets then an inner harmony and much joy.

Who among us would not have experienced
the life-transforming power of love?

The magic in it is

that once we receive it,

we are compelled to pass it onto others.

It is not a mere reciprocal circle of giving and receiving,

it is a hyperbola, a spiral

that encompasses all humankind,

and people everywhere.

Passing on love from people to people to people
creating a large chain reaction that circles the globe
and is not discriminating.

This kind of circle of love is our chance for a future.

This would be the miracle of loving your neighbor as yourself,

loving our earth and all creatures on it.

This is the ultimate blessing:

love that stems from the core of my soul

and then, in some time of need,

it comes back, from others,

after having touched down

many times in many needy lives.

Thanks Be Given!

Ultimately, everything around us speaks this truth,
and it has been ever since we have found each other decades ago.

We have found sisters and brothers in each other,
and now we live in each others' prayers.

Friendship is like a prayer.

Our eyes are shining with love

and you know the transforming power of it.

All know who lived through dark times, trying times

and found themselves surrounded

by compassionate neighbors,

church members or complete strangers.

We are tempted to always expect that divine love,

that we call Providence,

arrives on a star-dusted path,

from somewhere above

- a realm that in these days hardly looks shining any more

in the modern lights of malls and metropolises.

Nevertheless, this power lights up people's hearts and faces.

The inspiration of stardust - calling -

touches down in the earthly dust of our roads,

and of our everyday lives.

It calls us to join in the circle of love

and it lights our path

to find the greatest needs,

the darkest comers.

Thanks Be Given!

Do you people know this call?
Have you experienced a life-transforming touch
that has moved you to reach out,
and to look and to see
farther than your own immediate surroundings?
We, the people of Székelykeresztúr and Csehétfalva,
people of the Nyikó valley and the Homoród valley,
people at Kolozsvár and Csíkszereda,
Unitarians in tiny, hidden Székely villages
and the great historical cities of Transylvania
- we know your transformation,
your power to transform
we attest,
we can bear witness to this miracle.
When this great flood hit us
and devastated our ancient villages,
you came to our help unsolicited.
You came to rebuild our victims' homes,
you sacrificed great amounts of money to live out your faith,
and to turn it into deeds,
into tangible accomplishment of compassion.

O yes, we know your faith
and we witness your love
- for you are encouraging our children
in old fashioned communities
to dream boldly
and believe that their dream can come true
- because you care.

And the old farmers know it;
those who still plough their farmlands with oxen,
and sow their seeds by hand,
and bake their bread in their own ovens.
These Unitarians know your faith.
And they never cease to give thanks.
They come to our churches
to celebrate the Harvest Thanksgiving with communion in September;
they come at Christmas time and Easter time;
they come Sunday after Sunday to pray in thanksgiving
- not only for the land and its blessings.
But, YOUR names are in their thanksgiving prayers.
You have brought sunshine into our lives.

Thanks Be Given!

I could recite names, hundreds of names,
just from this Concord congregation,
who have cared,
who have helped us,
who have encouraged us,
who always pay attention to our joys and sorrows
- because you love us.

The names do not matter, who I address, be it
John or János, Susan or Zsuzsanna,
Erzsébet or Elizabeth, Michael or Mihaly,
I call you my Sister; I call you my Brother.
And my people know
that you are divine messengers of love
and you are instruments of grace.

Today,
when I stand before you
with the Scripture in my hand,
reading the Hymn of Love*
on Thanksgiving Sunday,
I say to you:
Thank you!
Thank you!

And glory and gratitude
to be given to our only God.

- Amen -

* 1st Corinthians 13

The original Hungarian is by Rev. József Szombatfalvi, Minister, Székelykeresztúr, Transylvania, Romania

The English translation is by Dr. Judit (Zizi) Gellérd

Edits to the English translation are by Rev. Gary Smith, Senior Minister, First Parish in Concord, MA

Arrangement into verse form with minor edits is by Rodger Matlage,
Chair, Partner Church Committee, First Parish in Concord, MA

First Parish in Concord, MA is partnered with the church in
Székelykeresztúr, Transylvania, Romania