

Sermon by Rev. Dr. William Schulz
delivered Saturday July 24, 2010
Celebration of Twenty Years of Partnership
Kolozsvar Transylvania

May the words of my lips find favor in Thy sight, O Lord.

When I was President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, I tried to visit Transylvania every year or two. Kovacs Lajos was your Bishop then and Erdo Janos was your Deputy Bishop. I learned many important things from both of them about Transylvania and our shared religious faith but I also learned something very important from Bishop Kovacs about food and something very important from Bishop Erdo about drink.

The English word for “mice” sounds very similar to the English word for “maize.” One day Bishop Kovacs told me that Transylvanians love to eat mice. I was dumbfounded. “No, Lajos,” I said. “You must be joking. No one likes to eat mice if they don’t have to.” “Oh, yes,” he said, “We eat mice almost every day.” Since I had just finished visiting five or six congregations and eaten a meal at every stop, I began to get very worried. “Have I been eating mice?” I asked him. “Oh, yes,” he said. “You’ve eaten mice three or four times today alone.” I began to feel queasy. “Do I have to eat any more?” I asked. “Of course,” he said. “We have lots of mice here in Transylvania.” And then, pointing at a field of maize, he said, “You see: look how tall it grows!” Suddenly I felt much better.

And from Bishop Erdo I learned how to drink polinka without getting drunk. Bishop Erdo was not a heavy drinker. I once asked him, “Janos, every time we go to a village, I am offered polinka. From breakfast until late at night, I am offered polinka. I don’t want to be impolite but, if I drink it all day long, I will not be able to function.” “This is what you must do, Bill,” he said. “Raise the glass to your lips as if you are about to drink. But before you take a sip, think of something very wise to say. Obviously no one can talk and drink at the same time so you must put your glass down to make your wise statement. By the end of the day you will still be sober and everybody will admire you for your wisdom!”

Bishop Kovacs and Bishop Erdo were both men of great courage and large heart and I loved them and I miss them, even today.

The last time I was in Kolosvar was in January of 1990—more than twenty years ago. This was a very different trip from the ones I had made in previous years. Among those who accompanied me on that last trip were a member of the United States Congress and a member of the Canadian Parliament. They had accepted my invitation in the fall of 1989 to travel with me to Bucharest to confront the Romanian government about its diabolical plan to destroy thousands of villages and then to journey on to Transylvania to reassure you, our Unitarian brothers and sisters, that we stood with you in your resistance to tyranny.

We did not imagine that our small voices could convince the Dictator to abandon his scheme. But we also knew that if we failed to do what little we could to stop this outrage and offer our support to you, we could never have forgiven ourselves. And we remembered the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. written as he sat in a prison in Birmingham, Alabama: “Injustice anywhere,” he said, “is a threat to justice everywhere. Whatever affects one [person] directly affects all [people] indirectly.” Little could we have predicted, of course, that just two weeks before our visit, the Dictator would have been overthrown and executed. It was at the end of that visit in 1990 that Natalie Gulbrandsen and I conceived of what was to become the Partner Church Movement.

The Transylvania we found in January of 1990 was a very different place than the Transylvania I had visited several times before and it is a very different place today than it was in January of 1990. But one thing remains the same: the strength of our Unitarian faith.

That faith teaches us that though our skins may be different colors and our tongues may make different sounds, every single one of us on earth bleeds when we are cut and all our blood flows red. It teaches us that we are more likely to know the truth when no one’s voice is cut off arbitrarily; when everyone’s opinions are given a hearing. And it teaches us that though justice can be denied for a long, long time, eventually, like water dripping perpetually on rock, eventually justice will break through; eventually justice will crack the rock of repression; eventually justice will triumph over terror.

I have always loved the story of the prodigal son and I suspect that some of you in Transylvania feel as if we, your American offspring, have acted like prodigal sons and daughters, taking the heritage you gave us and spending it unwisely, diluting it, making it hard for you to recognize. In a way the Partner Church Movement has been a means for us to return to our homeland, to our parentage, not to ask your forgiveness, but to learn from you, to be inspired by you and to share our religious journey with you.

But what is most interesting to me about the parable of the prodigal son is what the gospel of Luke *doesn't* tell us. What is most interesting is what happened to the family--the father and the two brothers--*after* the gospel story ends. The older son is angry, jealous, and the father reassures him and tells him that he should be happy that his brother, who was lost, is now found once again. The gospel story implies that the older brother just accepted his father's words and everybody lived happily ever after.

But I'm willing to bet that it was not that easy. I'm willing to bet that the family experienced turmoil, perhaps even tragedy, that they didn't always see the world through the same eyes. Families can come apart at the seams, as you know only too well from the recent tragedy in Medias.

We in the Partner Church Movement have not always seen eye to eye. Some Transylvanian Unitarians who visit us in the United States wonder why we laugh in church so frequently and why our ministers sometimes do not wear robes to conduct worship services. Does it mean we do not take our religion seriously? And some

American Unitarians Universalists who visit Transylvania wonder why your services are so formal, why your ministers *always* wear robes and why there are not more women ministers. We are family; we are partners; we share a great religious heritage but sometimes we see the world from very different perspectives.

But far more frequently what we have discovered in the Partner Church Movement is that, different though we may be, what we share as human beings, what we share as people of faith, and what we share as children of God is far more important than what divides us.

It is easy to hate a stranger. I come from a country with a long history of fear and division along lines of race and color. Still today, even with an African American President, the United States is deeply divided between those who would welcome newcomers to our country, welcome immigrants, minorities, strangers, and those who would shut them out, deny them even the most basic fair treatment, trample their dignity to dust.

What can we Unitarians say to those who would belittle and revile the stranger? We say what Shakespeare has Shylock say in *The Merchant of Venice*:

I am a Jew. And hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, senses, passions? Fed with same food, hurt with the same weapons, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?

If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh?

And if you poison us, do we not die?

We say, “If you are Mexican, your blood flows red. If you are American, your blood flows red. If you are Romanian, your blood flows red. If you are Hungarian, your blood flows red.” We say that each of us is warmed by the same sun, prey to the same threats, kissed by the same joy, emboldened by the same promise and embraced by the same God—a God who teaches us that life is too short for pettiness and too sad for cruelty.

What we in the Partner Church Movement have learned over twenty years is that if we can get beyond appearances and initial impressions, if we can look not just into each other’s faces but into each other’s hearts, if we can burrow down to the very centers of each other’s souls, we will find a common humanity that transcends language and ritual and clothing and that encourages us to mourn together our losses and cherish together all that is radiant and noble and gracious and kind.

I have always loved the story of the little five year old boy who came home to his mother one day and told her that he had just seen another little boy who was crying because his bicycle was broken and that he had stopped to help him. “But sweetheart,” she said, “I thought you didn’t like that little boy. And besides, you’re five years old. What do you know about fixing bicycles?” “You’re right, Mommy,” the five year old said. “I don’t like him very much. But, Mommy, his bicycle was broken and he was so sad about it. I didn’t stop to help him fix it. I stopped to help him cry.” One can only

hope that the older brother of the prodigal son had a similar revelation that in the end it is our common frailty that binds us to one another.

Kathe Kollwitz was a great German artist of the early twentieth century but her life was filled with tragedy. She was an ardent pacifist but her son had chosen to fight for Germany in the First World War and he had been killed for his troubles. She hated the Nazis with all her might but her grandson had enlisted in the German army in the Second World War and he too had been killed. The Nazis then declared Kollwitz a “non-person;” and destroyed her art and banished her. She had every reason to be bitter and on her death bed in 1945 she offered these dying words: “Greetings to my friends.” she said. But then, struggling for breath, she corrected herself. “No, no,” she said, “Not just to my friends. Greetings--*greetings to all.*” One can only hope that the older brother of the prodigal son had a similar reversal of sentiment, understanding that in the end it is only a generous heart that saves us from the corruption of our souls.

So, dear friends, today we celebrate twenty years of partnership. May it be but the beginning of our journey. May we treat kindly those who travel that journey with us. And may God bless our paths that we might walk gently, welcome the strangers whom we meet along the way, be steadfast for justice and feast in God’s glory. Do this and we can say not only that we are good Unitarians. Do this and we can truly say that we are recipients of God’s grace. May it be so. Amen.