

January 27, 2007
Rev. Clare Petersberger
The 1568 Edict of Toleration

WELCOME

Four hundred fifty years ago, tomorrow, in the ancient city of Torda, Prince John Sigismund of Transylvania, for the purpose of forging a lasting peace among warring Christian factions issued the final Edict of Tolerance. He, himself, had been persuaded of the truth of a new faith, Unitarianism.

As my colleague, The Reverend Rob Eller-Isaacs writes: "It would be a faith sprung from the tap root of the Christian tradition, but it would be different. In place of fractious doctrinal disputes would be a stern defense of the freedom to think for oneself. In place of fear and superstition would be a gracious, open-hearted pledge to the use of reason in human affairs. In place of bloody internecine war would be a generous toleration of the many ways to pray.

Freedom, Reason, and Tolerance, these three grafted to the root, find their blossoming in us. In how we pray. In what we do. In who we are."

OPENING WORDS

In his sermon, *Roots Reaching Deep* Rob Eller-Isaacs went on to say:

We here gathered remember our names. We know just who we are.
We are those who claim the heritage of freedom, though freedom's cost claim be our lives.

We our those who are committed to the utility of reason as the single most effective instrument of love.

And we are those who celebrate and endeavor to practice the kind of tolerance which calls us to set aside our fears and welcome every stranger.

Freedom, Reason and Tolerance, these three grafted to the root, now we find their blossoming in us; in how we pray, in what we do, in who we are.

CHALICE LIGHTING

We light our chalice to celebrate our religious heritage of freedom, reason, and tolerance. And we join in a unison affirmation dating back over 400 years shared in worship by the first Unitarians in Transylvania.

Where there is faith, there is love.
Where there is love, there is peace.
Where there is peace, there is blessing.
Where there is blessing, there is God.
Where God is, there is all we need.

READING

Our first reading is from a sermon by my colleague, The Reverend Michael McGee, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, Virginia. This sermon was based on the premise that Francis David, the 16th century Transylvanian Court Preacher, had returned to address the congregation. So while not a literal “credo,” it sounds like the “This is what I give my heart to” reflections that members have been periodically sharing in worship.

Susan Seim will be sharing her credo with us, next month. But for today, Michael imagined Francis David saying: Greetings, my friends. I am Francis David. I am a Unitarian minister from the 16th century. I realize that with the passage of so much time, many of you may not know my name much less my role as the father of Unitarianism.

I was born in the year 1510 in the town of Kolosvar which is now the capital city in Transylvania, known by the Romanians as Cluj. I came from a meager upbringing. My father, David Hertel, was a Saxon shoemaker, and my mother was a Hungarian homemaker.

Being a deeply religious spirit, I entered the Catholic priesthood as a young man and was sent to Wittenberg for my education. Upon my return home, I was given the position as director of a school in Kolosvar. I soon became disenchanted with the blatant corruption of the roman Church and enthralled by the dynamic spirit of Reformation that was sweeping across Europe.

I saw in the Reformation a direction for those looking for a new heaven and a new earth. The Lutheran Church at the time was at the heart of the Reformation, and so I became a Lutheran minister and soon rose to the position of superintendent.

But I soon became dissatisfied with the limitations of Lutheranism and joined the Calvinist Church where I became their superintendent. But the reforms of Luther and Calvin had been confined to a few minor changes in theology and organization, and they set bounds to the freedom of humanity’s individual experience and religious development.

To my disappointment they refused to carry the work of renovation any further. The motive and deciding force of my reforming activity was the deep experience of God which emerged from my study of the Bible, maintaining only those tenets which had a foundation in the gospel and commended themselves to reason. I believed that the Sermon on the Mount to be at the heart of Christianity and I urged my followers to live the ethical life Jesus had proclaimed.

A Visit From Fancis David as imagined by The Reverend Michael McGee.

RESPONSIVE READING

To appreciate the deep experience of God which emerged from Francis David’s study of the Bible and what this experience led him to preach in the 1500’s, let us join in a responsive reading of number 566 in the back of the hymnal.

In this world there have always been many opinions about faith and salvation.

YOU NEED NOT THINK ALIKE TO LOVE ALIKE.

There must be knowledge in faith also.

SANCTIFIED REASON IS THE LANTERN OF FAITH.

Religious reform can never be all at once, but gradually, step by step.

IF THEY OFFER SOMETHING BETTER, I WILL GLADLY LEARN.

The most important spiritual function is conscience, the source of all spiritual joy and happiness.

CONSCIENCE WILL NOT BE QUIETED BY ANYTHING LESS HAN TRUTH AND JUSTICE.

We must accept God's truth in this lifetime. Salvation must be accomplished here on earth.

GOD IS INDIVISIBLE.

Edge Oz Eeshten!

GOD IS ONE.

PRAYER/MEDITATION

Let us continue in the spirit of prayer with a spoken meditation by The Reverend Elek Rezi, the deputy bishop of the Unitarian Church of Romania which will be followed by moments of silence.

O God, who is not far from any one of us, but nearer and more present to our souls than are our own bodies, grant us the spirit of prayer, which is the key that can unlock the Kingdom of Heaven within us, and admit us to all that is good, beautiful, joyful, and worthy.

Teach us, when we are tired, "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy, and I will give you rest."

Teach us, when we suffer loss, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Teach us, when we feel tempted, "But resist, firm in your faith."

Teach us day by day to love You with all our hearts, with all our soul, with all our mind and all our strength.

Teach us day by day to love our neighbors as ourselves and to serve one another in Love.

Let love be the strong link between person and person, between nation and nation, between religion and religion. May we believe in the glory of Love on the earth, which is our home.

In moments of silence, may we not forget the kindness that surrounds us in the present, nor be careless of treasures we have inherited from the past as we commit ourselves to care for those who are ill in body, mind or spirit and to work for justice for all in the days ahead. May the silence that we've shared give us strength for the week to come.

READING

Our second reading is adapted from sermons by two Unitarian Universalist ministers, The Reverend Dr. Max D. Gaebler and The Reverend Bruce Clear.

I invite you to go back in your thinking to the sixteenth century. It was a time of religious turmoil, when the full flood of reformist zeal merged with nationalist ambitions to divide Christendom into warring sects. Rulers, concerned for the peace and stability of their realms, were eager to settle the issue with firmness so as to avoid continuing disruptive conflict.

Transylvania at that time was enjoying a brief period of independence as a buffer state between the Kingdom of Hungary to the west and the Ottoman Turkish Empire on its eastern border. The Transylvanian king, King John Sigismund, was as worried as any other ruler by the dangers of sectarian division and rivalry.

So in January of 1568, he summoned a meeting of representatives of various religions to a debate in the city of Torda, some thirty-five or forty miles south of Kolozvar. The Catholics, the Lutherans, the Calvinists, and the Unitarians all showed up. Such debates were not unusual in Reformation Europe. The pattern was, of course, that the winners would receive special favors and privilege, and the losers would lose favor, perhaps be outlawed or banished from the kingdom.

The formal debate began at 5 a.m. Bishop Melius, speaking for the Calvinists, turned, in his opening statement, to Francis David and said, "If I win this debate, you will be executed." Francis David, speaking for the Unitarians, turned, in HIS opening statement, to Bishop Melius, and countered, "If I win this debate you will be given the freedom due to every son of God."

OFFERTORY

Suffice it to say early Unitarians knew the importance of freedom, reason, and tolerance in religion. For them, it was a matter of life or death. Four hundred and fifty years later, Freedom, Reason, and Tolerance, these three grafted to the root, find their blossoming in us. In how we pray. In who we are. In what we do. And, more specifically, in how we support this beloved community.

While arguments over religious differences continue to break out in families and violence over religious differences continues to erupt in the human family around the globe, we, thanks to Francis David, offer a different way: "We need not think alike, in religious matters to love alike."

SERMON

The 1568 Edict of Toleration

In mid-December, planning worship services a month in advance, I looked at the church calendar and saw the Congregational meeting was scheduled for tonight. What could I speak about, this morning, that would frame the Congregational Meeting in such a way that you would WANT to attend...that you would MAKE it a top priority? We all know that Bylaw changes, while significant to the governance of an institution, are not something most individuals cite on their top ten list of "What gives my life meaning and purpose."

What IS exciting is sharing dreams for how our congregation, will promote our spiritual and intellectual growth in the future and bring us into contact with our highest ideals, what some call the transcendent. But some may think that is for "lay leaders" to brainstorm; for only "longer time members" to share; for "others" to discuss. Of course, in our congregation, where the voice and vote of every member is counted, everyone's participation is needed and valued. So how to inspire you....each of you...to brave the cold January night and come back to church this evening?

I flipped open my colleague Frank Schulman's treasury of anniversaries and milestones from 600 years of Unitarian Universalist history and realized that tomorrow was the 450th anniversary of King John Sigismund of Transylvania issuing his final Edict of Tolerance. Thank you.....King John. And thank you, Francis David.

For the roots of King John's edict were in the courage of Francis David to not only attend, but to speak at, a public meeting to pursue the free and responsible search for truth and to discuss how to live together, peacefully, with different understandings of truth, in the future. Arguments about theological doctrine may strike us as archaic, today. After all, the debates we read most about in the paper are about what various Presidential candidates are saying about each other both within and outside of formal debates.

But in 16th century Transylvania, according to the chronicle of Nagy Szabo Ferenc, "One heard all over, in the villages and in cities, even among the ordinary people, the great disputes during meals, during drinking, in the evening and the morning, at night and daytime, in the common talk and from pulpits, even accusations and fights between representatives of religions.

One Unitarian historian, Edward Darling, described the Diet of Torda, in this way: "The king and the whole court were present. The debate, if one can believe the record, lasted ten days, beginning each morning at five o'clock. It was conducted entirely in Latin." Darling concludes, "In our day, Unitarians have no hesitation in arguing all night; but one wonders how big a crowd could be collected before cock-crow for a week and a half without interruption. It is no wonder that this is considered the greatest debate in the entire history of Unitarianism."

I want to assure all planning to attend tonight's Congregational meeting that it will not be framed as a debate, but as an opportunity to hear and share ideas; that it will be conducted in English, not Latin; and that it will not run late into the night, much less for ten days.

But back to the Diet of Torda. Why was religion constantly on the minds, hearts, and lips of people? Last Tuesday evening, participants in the Unitarian history class talked about the lack of religious freedom, reason, and tolerance in 16th century Europe.

We shared the story of Michael Servetus arguing against the Trinity and being hunted by the Spanish Inquisition before being burned at the stake by John Calvin in Geneva. We shared the story of Faustus Socinus, seeking to unify the Reformed Minor Church in Poland shortly after 30,000 Protestants had been killed in the massacre of St. Bartholomew in France. In those days, right religious belief was a matter of life and death.

So the personal journey of Francis David from Catholicism to Lutheranism to Calvinism to Unitarianism in tiny Transylvania was truly extraordinary. His openness to new revelation while heeding the dictates of conscience was, in and of itself, a new revelation. He was deemed dangerous not only by Catholics but by Protestant reformers, as we heard in Bishop Melius's wish that Francis David be executed if he lost the debate at the Diet of Torda.

A painting of the Diet of Torda shows the 19-year-old King John Sigismund seated on a dais on the right, his chin resting on one hand as he listens in attention. Around him are gathered nobles. In the center of the painting, illuminated by a shaft of light, stands Francis David, a Bible in one hand, and the other outstretched, making a point. What point is Francis David making in the painting? Perhaps it is the value of the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, or, in his own words, "It is

God's will that we should move step by step, and come gradually to the fullness of the truth, just as at first we feed infants with milk and only later give them more solid food."

Or, in the painting of the Diet of Torda, perhaps Francis David is arguing, before religious and political leaders, for the first time since the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, that the theology of the Trinity does not make sense and that early Christianity was founded on the belief that "God Is One." What relevance does this debate over the unity of God have to 21st century Unitarian Universalists... some of whom no longer use the word "God" in building their theology?

My colleague, Rob Eller-Isaacs offers this insight into how Francis David's words must have resonated with HIS listeners: "What we believe matters. What we believe matters to the degree that our beliefs help us to shape our values. And our values matter to the degree that they help us decide how best to act. There is nothing which is not God. There is nothing, even nothingness itself, which is beyond, outside of, disconnected from the All-in All. The instant one divides God at all, one sows the seeds of violence."

And certainly, the seeds of violence were being planted right and left among Christians as well as between Christians and Jews and Muslims in 16th century Europe. As we have seen in the eruption of violence in the middle east and Africa this week, our world, sadly, has not come far in sowing seeds of tolerance between people of different religious backgrounds and beliefs.

So perhaps TOLERANCE is what Francis David is addressing in the painting of the Diet of Torda. Francis David took the doctrine of predestination, the idea that God, knows from the beginning, the fate of each of us, and therefore wills it, and argued that if this were true, then God must give each of us the particular faith we have. And if it's God's will that you believe the way you do in religious matters, then no human should try to change your faith.

Thus, the only rational approach to theological differences is mutual toleration. This argument is as valid in the 21st century as it was in the 16th. However, a word of caution, if you use it with someone who believes that they know the truth and you don't, you may expect as angry a response as Francis David received from Bishop Melius. Bishop Melius charged Francis David with blasphemy on several occasions during the ten days of debate. And King John Sigismund had to intervene and remind Bishop Melius of the rules of the debate "That there shall be no compulsion in matters of religion," saying, "If one cannot comply with these conditions, let him go beyond the Tiza," in other words, "Go back to Hungary."

But there were also moments of humor during the Diet of Torda. One morning, Bishop Melius announced, "May your Serene Highness hear me... For in the night the Lord revealed to me anew who is and how he is his true and proper Son." King John Sigismund replied, "Pastor Peter, if last night you were instructed as to who is the Son of God, what, I ask, have you been preaching before? Certainly up to this moment you have been misleading the people!"

It will probably never be known exactly what Francis David was saying in the painting of the Diet of Torda. What is known is that this painting is as well known in Transylvania as the painting of Washington crossing the Delaware, here. And this is probably because of the outcome of the debate. King John Sigismund became Unitarian. And according to legend, when Francis David returned to his parish in Kolozsvár, he mounted a large boulder at the street corner and proclaimed: "Edge Oz Eeshten! GOD IS ONE."

Following this proclamation, the people hoisted him on their shoulders, carried him to the great church in the square to continue preaching, and the whole city accepted the Unitarian faith then and there.

But unlike other monarchs, King John Sigismund did not use his political power to make his own religion the state religion. The church historian Dr. Earl Morse Wilbur observed, "It is worthy of note that at the only time in history when there has been a Unitarian king on the throne, and a Unitarian government in power, they used their power not to oppress other forms of religion, nor to secure exceptional privileges for their own, but to insist upon equal rights and privileges for all."

And how did King John Sigismund do this? He issued the 1568 Edict of Toleration which read: "In every place preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well; if not, no one shall compel them, for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone...And it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching. For faith is a gift of God."

When this part of our religious history was taught in seminary, twenty years ago, it was stressed upon students that they would not be able to compel their congregations to do anything... and by the same token, that congregations should not abuse the minister. No compelling. No abusing. No force. The power that transforms lives, is not something that we "will" as individuals, but something that comes to us as a gift when we walk together in the ways of truth known or to be made known to us.

What I did not learn in seminary, twenty years ago, was that during the Diet of Torda, a Muslim missionary stood a block away chanting, "God is...God is...God is...God is..." Nor did I learn that the phrase, "There shall be no compulsion in matters of religion," which King John Sigismund proclaimed to Bishop Melius are straight from the Quran. Nor did I learn of the close parallels between the language in the Transylvanian Edit of Toleration and the words of a Pasha's edict in the city of Pest, then under Ottoman rule.

Our Unitarian voice for religious tolerance between Christians was shaped by dialogue with Islam. This living side-by-side of Christians, Muslims, and Jews had been forgotten for over four hundred years. Why was that?

Part of the answer is that support for religious freedom, reason and tolerance, even among Christians, did not last long in Transylvania. Within three years, King John Sigismund had died of injuries sustained during a riding accident. Unitarians were expelled from the court by the new King and anyone found guilty of "innovations" in religion could be banished or imprisoned. This was the fate of Francis David who refused to stop preaching new revelations. He was arrested, imprisoned, refused visitors or medical care, and died, alone, in 1579.

1579 was also the year the next Transylvanian king invited the Jesuits into Transylvania and a reign of terror began. Transylvania means, "Land beyond the forest." And there's an old saying from Transylvania, "In storm, even the trees lean on each other." This is what Unitarians in that country did for the next four hundred plus years, even when they were forced to publicly affirm the trinity,

or to worship in secret, or watched their buildings bull-dozed under the Communist regime. Nourished by stories of Francis David and King John Sigismund, of their heritage of freedom as a foundation for faith, the use of reason as the best expression of hope, and the practice of tolerance as the way to love one's neighbor as oneself, they kept Unitarianism alive in Eastern Europe. And because they did, we have the opportunity to gather, tonight, for a Unitarian Universalist congregational meeting. We have the opportunity to affirm that revelation is not sealed as we share our dreams for the future of our congregation.

How will we embody freedom, reason, and tolerance in religion in five years, ten years, fifteen years for the children below us and those outside these walls who do not know that 450 years ago tomorrow, the only Unitarian King in history issued the Western world's first edict of religious toleration?

Might part of our vision include forming a partnership with a church in Transylvania that we might learn more about how, in storms, even the trees lean on each other? Freedom, Reason and tolerance, these three grafted to the root, now find their blossoming in us; in who we are, in our hidden thoughts that enshrine that which for us is Divine, in our participation in congregational meetings, in how we dream about our future.

So may it be.

CLOSING WORDS

If, here, you have found freedom, take it with you into the world.
If you have found comfort, go and share it with others.
If you have dreamed dreams, help one another, that they may come true!
If you have known love, give some back to a bruised and hurting world.

Go now in peace.