

Our Circles

Sermon from Sunday 10/20/2019
by Rev. Előd Szabó

Isten áldjon! God bless you!

This is how Unitarians in Transylvania greet each other, and this is the greeting I bring to you on this Sunday on behalf of my family and my congregation from Ürmös, Romania.

I am a Unitarian minister in this village for more than 12 years now.

I came to the United States together with my family: my wife, Kata is a preschool teacher, my older son, Magor is six and a half years old, the younger, Regő is turning four in November. Our congregation has around 580 members, around 80 of them, mostly young families live in the city or somewhere further, some of them in Western European countries. The town is inhabited by three ethnic groups: Roma, Hungarians and Romanians. There is a sense of rivalry and there are tensions between ethnic and religious groups, but people in general have developed a natural way of accepting and respecting each other. Our partner church in the UU community is the first Unitarian Universalist Church of New Orleans. I came to the United States through a scholarship called after an early 20th century Transylvanian Unitarian minister and poet, Francis Balázs, who also travelled in the US to study and to American Unitarian siblings. The scholarship brings a Hungarian Unitarian minister to Berkeley every year to study at the Starr King School for the Ministry. Besides studying, the aim of this scholarship is to strengthen relationships between you, American Unitarian Universalists, and us, Unitarians in Transylvania and Hungary.

As I've already told you, we have to children. We try to educate them and we would like them to learn from us about our values, our convictions, our roots and our faith. I don't always know how well we succeed in this process. But I know we do learn a lot from them. For example from the stories we read and explore together. I would like to share a few thoughts about a book they love and they know its words by heart.

Ervin Lázár is a well-known Hungarian contemporary writer. His most famous and popular writings are in fact stories for children, but these stories are always written in two dimensions. They are

funny from the point of view of children: my children love them, because there are all kinds of funny characters, humorous dialogues and scenes in it. But these writings are speaking to adults and about adults too. One of Lázár's most famous book is a series of tales called The Square-Shaped Round Forest. It begins with an introduction, and I would like to invite you to meet a few of these characters:

Siegfried Bruckner, the old, once famous lion from the circus, who was released from his show because he got old and couldn't do his stunts anymore.

A Blue Horse, Seraphin who found shelter in the forest, because people said there are no blue horses, there shouldn't be any blue horses. So they tried to wash him and paint him, and continuously tortured him by insisting he should be of more acceptable color.

Monster Louis was ugly and not smart at all. But he was very nice to everyone, and wanted to help everyone. His gullibility was often abused by people, and he was regularly mocked too, because he always believed everything others said.

Dömdödöm who could only say Dömdödöm. He came to the forest because he was disappointed with how people misused these words: I love you! He was in a hurry to meet someone and tell that someone that he loved him or her. He couldn't understand how people could condition their love, how people could threaten loved ones with not loving them anymore, and how easily and profanely they use these words: I love you, without really meaning it. When he met whom he was looking for, he couldn't say I love you anymore, he could only say then and since then: dömdödöm.

They are very different from each other. But they still share the same fate: they are forced to leave their homes if they want to remain faithful to the way they are, if they refuse to change under the influence of the majority. They look for a place, for a life, for a community in which they are accepted, appreciated and more than everything: they are loved.

Me and my family may not be old lions from a circus or blue horses, and we believe we have a future in our homeland, but we also wanted to explore this forest, your country and your religious community. We knew before we came, and our experiences strengthened our knowledge, that many suffering people around the world think, believe that your country is one of the most square-shaped round forests of the world. One of the places where old lions and blue horses, those with many doubts and questions may keep their identity and may seek happiness without the boundaries of intolerance and hatred.

Our congregations in Ürmös, Transylvania is located in a village with 2000 inhabitants. More than 500 of these inhabitants are members of our community, the majority of them inherited their Unitarian religion and community. They are proud of this heritage and they consider being faithful to it first of all as a responsibility towards parents, grandparents and ancestors who have built the church and the community. Although they are lovely people, who care a lot about their religion and minister we also have to admit that all kinds of numbers show that our community is shrinking. Causes are multiple. Most of our Transylvanian Unitarian history is a long struggle as a minority. Living in the independent Transylvania under the ruling of not so tolerant princes of different religions, in the Austrian empire of the Roman Catholic Habsburg family and finally in an ethnically and religiously adverse governments of Romania forced our ancestors to be predominantly self-defensive, apologetic. We are still living as an ethnic and denominational minority, and while this is definitely one of the reasons of our difficulties, we also use this status to victimize ourselves too much without looking at our individual and collective responsibilities. I once heard the presentation of a scholar of Bible studies who was released by the Roman Catholic church from his job as a priest and a seminary teacher. He said that truth, justice and faith are not matters of majority, and when he was outvoted by different committees, he always told himself: me and truth are always a majority. These wise words come into my mind every time I hear others or myself complaining about being a minority.

The Unitarian Church in Transylvania celebrated 450 years of existence last year. We celebrated the proud moment of Transylvanian history, the proclamation of the law of religious freedom in 1568. The edict of Torda was proclaimed in a time of wars and persecution based on religion in many parts of Europe. As we are proudly holding on to our collective memories we also ask ourselves: are 450 years of history enough for us to hope that we as a religious community deserve to remain on the stages of history? And looking at realities and facts of our community, we have to admit that even though they are important, our past and history are not enough to grant us the right to survive.

The question for us, and for every community which feel insecure and fear extinction is not only: What are the causes of our losses. We also have to ask ourselves: what can we do, what can we change to become a growing community? The first questions on its own will only make us complain and repeat our sufferings, but the second will make us turn our eyes towards a more honest, faithful and brighter future.

I don't exactly know your situation, your life as a community. I don't know if you are a growing congregation or not. But I do believe that as everything, our circles and our communities change

constantly. People change, surroundings change, political, social, cultural, economic environment changes. And with everything changing around us and among us and in us, it would be a fatal mistake to think our religious communities should always stay the same. They just won't stay the same. The question is: will the changing surroundings force us to changes we dislike or we fear, or we will consciously look and work for a desired change that leads us to growth and a real hope of future?

We would definitely want to take our destiny in our hands. You would probably want to do the same.

When we, Unitarians from Transylvania have a difficult question like this we would always look at our Teacher, Jesus. I look to Jesus today and I find this short but really striking story from his life:

31 Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. 32 A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

33 "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.

34 Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!

35 Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

Jesus had a religious community. His disciples and followers. After an inspirational preaching or a simple and effective parable many listeners seemed to join the community, but on other occasions many seem to leave the prophet and the group of disciples. What is Jesus' answer and strategy to this process? Let's take a look at this question through this story.

He doesn't deny his family through his words. He widens the circle of his community. If I understand it correctly, he says: you may think I care a lot for my mother and siblings, you may think I love them, and you are right about that. But I want you to know that I care for you, and I love you, and I care for and I love every person who does God's will. And be careful: he doesn't say I accept others, he is not speaking about tolerance or a generous understanding of strangers. He is speaking about love and caring, and the kind of unbreakable relation to others, which people think is only possible inside family circles.

Is this a way for you, American UUs to grow? Is this a useful strategy for us, Unitarians in Transylvania to follow?

I believe it is.

The only way towards growing is opening and widening our circles. The only way of growing is to proclaim, say and prove by deeds to many people: you may think we love each other in our religious community, you may think we care, we do and we stand up for each other and you may think we, people inside this circle love each other. And you are right with these assumptions. But you also have to know that we care, we do and we stand up for you too, and you can also be part of the circle inside which love is abundant and natural.

We sometimes realize in our community, in my congregation that we line up too many criteria for being a full and respected member of our circle. Members and leaders of our congregation have smaller or greater reservations about women, about Romanian or Roma people, about people living in ethnically and religiously mixed families, about people who moved to the city, about people who support or vote for different political parties. And so on. And as we narrow the circle, it is easy to see how quickly the fantasy of unchanging community will become a reality of loneliness and isolation.

As I previously told you, in our village, we Unitarians are a majority. We practice some kind of tolerance, we try to accept others and respect different languages, cultures and religious groups. But these little generousities, small gestures shouldn't make us satisfied. This is not enough, and this is not widening our circles.

There should really be only one question when someone wants to join our circle: do you do the will of God? Congregations are not looking for perfect people. Congregations shouldn't ask people: what do you lack? What are your weak points? We should always ask: our mother and father, our sister and brother, what are you bringing to the common family table of our community from your heart, from the deepest resources of your existence?

This is one of the reasons we came here, in the US. We want to see and experience your way of being a community. We want to know if this widening circle does work in your congregations, is this dream a realistic one. We look for the square-shaped round forest which can't be found on the map, but it exists, and where good people, people who are willing to do God's will are appreciated and loved even with their weaknesses, failures and particularities that differ from the majority. We want to find hope, to

bring hope to our communities and circles at home and we want to find friends, parents, siblings who share this hope. The hope that a tolerant, open community of mothers and children, sisters and brothers can exist, and we can, and we should do about it.

I look at you now. I don't know you. I don't know many things about your community. I don't always understand your words. You grew up and live in a very different world than ours. But I want and I will seek and find mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers in you, because I believe that in my ministry and in my human life this a practically successful way and it is also God's will.

You look at me now. You don't know me. You don't know much about my community. You don't understand my Hungarian language and probably you don't always understand my English language either. But I know you want and you will seek and find a son, a brother in me, because this is your way, your faith and your principle too.

May we have clear eyes and soul to understand the holy moments when our circles open wider, and may we always have forgiveness to move over the moments when our trust wasn't understood and valued. When we celebrate our togetherness and encounter strangers or newcomers, may we always live with the hope and the will of wider and wealthier!

Isten áldjon! God bless you! Amen.