



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

Rev. clay Nelson © 5th November 2017

## Introduction to the Flower Communion Service

In 1870, in the last days that Czechoslovakia was ruled by the Austrians, a poor village tailor and his wife lived with their only son. They named him for the saint's day he was born on, Norbert. The couple having little money for proper food or schooling, sent him to live with his Uncle Victor in Vienna.

Uncle Victor was also a tailor, like Norbert's parents. He was also Catholic, as were almost everyone else in Bohemia. The agreement was that Norbert would work his way through school by helping his uncle in his tailor's shop. But Norbert soon began to realise that being a tailor wasn't for him. And he didn't like the Catholic Church his uncle insisted that he go to. He enjoyed the Baptist Church where he could sing, talk about his ideas of God and where the service was spoken in his own language. Uncle Victor was not pleased. He immediately dismissed Norbert and asked him to leave.

Norbert felt he was being abandoned for believing differently. It was a hard time. But the Baptists saw that he had courage, kindness and a yearning for justice. They sent him through seminary where he became the Rev. Norbert Čapek. He earned money by selling Bibles, starting his own magazine about science and psychology, and preaching.

During this time, Catholicism was still the state religion. Being a Baptist, while not illegal, was regarded by the government as suspicious. The police raided Norbert's gatherings more than once. It would have been tough enough to endure by himself, but by this time Norbert was married and with children of his own. The threats and violence against his family was more than he could tolerate.

The Čapeks went abroad and wound up in the United States. His wife died leaving him with eight children. Norbert visited the New York library often so he could read newspapers from his own country and he continued to publish writings about the Czech movement. It was at the library where he met Maya, whom he later married. It was also there that he met with a man named Masaryk, the leader of the Czech movement abroad. Through Masaryk he found Unitarianism. Norbert was overjoyed to find the faith he felt he'd been moving toward all his life. He enrolled into Meadville Lombard, the Unitarian Seminary and graduated as a Unitarian minister, just as the first world war ended.

The end of the war brought about large numbers of Czechs abandoning the Catholic Church. Norbert's friend, Marasyk, went back to lead the Czech people and became their first president. Soon after Norbert went back to create a church which helped give people hope instead of hardship. It was difficult work, and often dangerous because the Catholic Church was still very powerful. But Norbert felt like he had to go despite the troubles.

These words were written by Maya Čapek, Norbert's wife. Listen to how she describes returning to Czechoslovakia after the war:

We did not know anyone there nor did the Czech people know anything about Unitarianism. We rented a concert hall for our meeting and it was jammed. Finally, we built our own place, which we called Unitaria. The services were starkly simple: people came from many religious backgrounds and none wanted to be reminded of their old churches. No gown was to be worn by the minister... no singing of hymns nor any prayers; instead of passing collection plates, people paid as they entered.

To avoid the appearance of organized religion, they called the movement The Liberal Fellowship. The stated goal was to provide spiritual and ethical education and create a loving community based on individual freedom and universal brotherhood."

The Čapek's church flourished in the years between world wars. It quickly became the largest Unitarian Church in the world. But with the occupation of the country by the Nazis, the church was threatened with extinction.

Norbert knew that the people were frightened. Many among his congregation were threatened, or beaten or put in prison. Some had their houses or businesses robbed, shut down or burned by the Nazi soldiers. Others worried that they would be next. There seemed to be little to hope for.

For some time he had felt the need for some symbolic ritual that would bring people more closely together. The ritual had to be one, which would not alienate any who had left other religious traditions. The traditional Christian communion service with bread and wine was unacceptable to the members of his congregation because of their strong reaction against the Catholic Church, which they saw as having aided and abetted in their suffering.

So Dr Čapek turned to the native beauty of their countryside for elements of a communion, which would be genuine to them. This simple service was the result. It was such a success that it was repeated every year.

The flower communion became a reminder that despite how hard life became, people had something beautiful to contribute and that it was offered of their own free will to the common good. Also, that despite the

troubles around them, each person could find something beautiful to take with them from the common good.

Never one to shrink from crises, Norbert continued to preach against the Nazi occupation. The Gestapo who demanded that he not speak against the Reich regularly questioned him. Although Norbert didn't speak out against them on Sunday mornings, he continued in his work against the occupiers by forming a resistance committee, which met in the church and helped Czechs escape from the Gestapo.

Finally, in the spring of 1941 Norbert declared, "I can bear it no longer! I must speak the truth and not be a coward!" He issued his forthright challenge to the Nazis by using his Sunday morning sermon to contradict a speech of Hitler's. This is what he had to say: "We are today the only nation in the whole of Europe that is ready to resist oppression.... Confronting our descendants, we will never have to feel ashamed of the fact that as a small nation in the middle of Europe we were ready to defend human dignity, freedom and justice from violence, lies and lawlessness."

Five days later the Gestapo came to his home, charged him with listening to a foreign broadcast and sent him to prison. At the same time a high-ranking Nazi official was assassinated which ignited a fury of violence. Many Czechs were killed. Norbert was sent to Dachau in retaliation.

In prison, Norbert kept his fellow inmates spirits up with humour, caring and cheerfulness. But, as he was now over 70 years old, he was quickly transported with other older prisoners to that part of the camp where torturous experiments were being conducted. Norbert Čapek, after four months in Dachau, died in October 1942.