

THE CHURCH THAT TELLS US WHO WE ARE

Delivered in King's Chapel by Denton Crews on Sunday, June 5, 2022

You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world... So let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-15, New International Version).

Isten áldja. Greetings and blessings. As an octogenarian in a world that worships youth, I take great pleasure today in praising something old – and doing so in a worship service. Praise be to the century-long partnership between the oldest Unitarian church in America, King's Chapel, and the oldest Unitarian church in the world located in Transylvania's Kolozsvár. Did I say a century? What about four centuries? Or twenty centuries? All are true. In the next few minutes, I hope you will feel a connection to the roots and branches of a distinctive Unitarian faith still alive.

In a pictorial narrative of Transylvania's beauty and mystery entitled "Europe's Fairy Garden," Lázsló Tökés, whose voice of protest in Timosoara toppled the communist dictatorship in 1989, speaks of what most defines Transylvania: first, its ethnic and multi-linguistic people; and secondly, its religious richness. He singles out Christian roots and cites the Edict of Torda as "the foundation of Transylvanian tolerance which manifests itself in a unique multi-faith coexistence."ⁱ

I, like some of you, have experienced the religious richness in Transylvania as tangible and deep-rooted. It has caused many to call themselves pilgrims and created for some a defining if not transformational moment. It has most unexpectedly awakened in me a religious kinship.

Christian Unitarian Origins

Transylvania is 4,300 miles from Boston. Fly due east over the Atlantic Ocean and the breadth of Europe, cross Hungary and land in neighboring Romania. There lies Transylvania, meaning "land beyond the forest." In the middle of the Carpathian Basin is the city of Cluj-Napoca, or Kolozsvár in Hungarian. But travel a thousand miles farther southeast, and you find the ancient origins of our shared religious roots.

Imagine entering the gates of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. It's a weekend and crowds of people are gathered for the Jewish Feast of Pentecost. As described in the scripture reading,ⁱⁱ there was a great sound from heaven and a mighty rushing wind. Peter, one of the apostles, began to speak. Then the other apostles spoke, communicating in the languages of the people the good news of Christ. They were "filled with the Holy Spirit," which Jesus once called "the Spirit of Life." Three thousand people were converted. And from Jerusalem, that spirit would spread to other nations. Fifteen hundred years later Christianity had dominated Europe.

Now, let's return to Transylvania. Kolozsvár is where a defining moment occurred in the sixteenth century. There a prophet arose, [whom you have already met and now know]. Ferenc Dávid was a prominent Catholic who convinced King John Sigismund to issue the Edict of Torda proclaiming the right of any individual or community to practice religious beliefs in their own way. His legacy was the founding of the Hungarian Unitarian Church, whose lamp of religious faith could not be extinguished even by years of persecution and genocide.ⁱⁱⁱ For the next three hundred years, the churches of

Transylvania and their devoted ministers would sustain the people. When they were persecuted and their churches closed because Unitarianism was illegal, they would keep faith alive.

Unitarians Discover Transylvania

If we fast-forward to the nineteenth century, we discover another defining moment. Unitarian churches had been established in England, and King's Chapel had become the first Unitarian church in America. These churches began to realize in a personal way the depth of their religious roots in Transylvania. In the first half of the century, two books awakened connections between English and Hungarian Unitarians.^{iv} In the second half of the century, two visits spawned further connections. Here, I would like to mention the travel accounts of an Englishman and an American because they give us a glimpse of what was happening three hundred years after Ferenc Dávid.

The **first account** reveals how the faith of Transylvanian Unitarians, despite all else, held fast as the standard for religious conviction and freedom. A prominent English Unitarian minister, John James Tayler, visited Transylvania in 1868 for the 300th Anniversary of the Edict of Torda.^v He wrote that when the day of the tercentenary came, the town of Torda was filled and the church overflowed. After a hymn and prayer, the sermon was delivered by Ferenc József, the minister of the church in Kolozsvár. That eloquent discourse was well received and reveals how freedom of religion was still prominent and the mission to protect it was imperative:

Far be it from me to limit freedom of faith and conscience to Unitarianism exclusively. I only wish to show, by the example of Unitarianism, that religious liberty is really in a better condition than it was; that it has now struck so deep a root in the hearts of millions, that no power on earth can any more eradicate it; and that he who at the present day should attempt to employ a difference of religious belief as a weapon against his fellow-men, would deservedly draw down on himself the condemnation of the world. Indeed, it is high time that the last spark of intolerance should be put out; that men should be united to each other by the Christian feeling of brotherly love.^{vi}

The **second account** reveals how pastoral practices in the villages also held fast and the bonds of religion grew even stronger. A prominent American Unitarian minister, James Thompson Bixby, visited Transylvania in 1883. He described the authenticity and hospitality of the Szekler villages and how the ministers and their families lived in parsonages with just enough land to raise animals and grow food (about 60 acres) but limited salaries (rarely exceeding \$125 per year). Their livelihood depended on hard labor in addition to pastoral and pulpit duties. None but the most devoted could have taken the oath for ordination, which included these words: "I will neglect none of those things that contribute to our holy religion. I will shun no service, however hard, though it be at peril of my health, my worldly goods, or even life itself, provided it promotes the growth of heavenly love and righteousness." This is how Bixby explained the enduring relationship of pastors and congregations:^{vii}

Their superior education, enthusiasm in their work, and the traditional veneration of the office, which here has not yet lost its hold upon the people, give them high and general respect and efficient influence in the community. Their hearers' hearts are not benumbed with the chill of the critical spirit, nor their flocks divided into unsympathizing theological wings or social factions. An earnest preacher, therefore, finds a warm

response to his appeals, ready disciples and co-laborers in his efforts for the intellectual and social improvement of the community, and soon becomes the trusted friend of young and old.

What this accelerated travelog into the 19th century tells us is that Unitarian relationships grew steadily, and the religious roots deepened – Christian faith standing on the solid foundation of religious freedom and tolerance as well as the fidelity of shepherds and flocks in village churches.^{viii}

Transylvanian Appeals for Relief

The tumultuous 20th century produced an even more defining moment. At the end of World War I in 1918, the Treaty of Trianon would award Transylvania to Romania, and as Hungarians they would become an ethnic minority subjected to discrimination, intolerance, and violence. Tragically, church properties were confiscated, and cemeteries and cultural monuments were vandalized, even before the treaty was signed.

An appeal was made in early 1919 by József Ferencz, Bishop of the Unitarian churches in Hungary. Entitled “Help Us!” the letter was a cry to American Unitarians and other liberal Christians for relief and protection. Soon after, the bishop was arrested and imprisoned. Hundreds and perhaps thousands were ordered to leave their homes taking scant possessions with them. Even more shocking to Transylvanians, the monument in Deva, erected in memory of Ferenc Dávid, was destroyed by Romanian soldiers. There followed pillaging and executions.

In 1920, a collection of funds was launched for the immediate relief of the Hungarian churches. Associate Minister of King’s Chapel, Sydney Bruce Snow, travelled to Transylvania with \$50,000 given by American Unitarians (\$1,200 from King’s Chapel). This was said to have saved the churches from collapse.

In the following year, 1921, the minister of the Unitarian Church in Kolozsvár, Gabriel Csiki, travelled to the United States with a dire message of calamity in Transylvania and the Unitarian churches being near extinction. During his visit, he proposed and led an adoption plan whereby American and Transylvanian churches would become sister churches for three years, providing material help and moral encouragement (Eventually, there would be 112 sister-churches). Csiki spoke in King’s Chapel describing the closing of schools and churches under the Romanian government, ministers beaten in public, church people starving and dying, adding that before coming to America he had been conducting two and three funerals a day. Csiki then cited the voice of Ferenc Dávid:^{ix}

In 1568, Francis David pleaded for liberty in religion. We may be undergoing persecution, we may be deprived of our property, we may be beaten and killed, but the persecutors cannot take away our religious faith. Francis David taught us how to suffer and die in a heroic way for truth. Will you not help us preserve our common religious heritage?

Formation of Sister Churches

In the summer of 1922, Louis Cornish, president of the American Unitarian Association, led a delegation to Transylvania, the Commission for Hungarian Relief. In response to the destruction and poverty, “sister church” pairings were created between Transylvanian and U.S. churches. King’s Chapel

established a relationship with the church in Kolozsvár, contributing \$500 annually for five years. The church in Kolozsvár presented to King's Chapel an ancient and beautiful embroidered silk altar cloth.

The partnership with our sister church was robust for ten years and then suffered a long disruption – the world-wide depression (ten years), WWII (four years), and Soviet occupation (forty-two years). The light was finally rekindled after Carl Scovel's visit to Transylvania in 1978 in the midst of the communist era; the groundbreaking work of Judit Gellérd (Zizi) in the 1980s, bringing the plight of Transylvania to the attention of the North American Unitarians and leading to the revival of the sister-churches movement; the leadership of William Schulz, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, who travelled to Transylvania in 1990, and investigated conditions after the fall of Ceausescu in Romania, prompting the founding of the UU Partner Church Council; and the subsequent exchanges of ministers and visits to Transylvania by King's Chapel parishioners, such as the five trips by Peter and Vicky Cocoluto and the Habitat Builds led by Peter Sexton, not to mention countless visits by UU churches.^x

Our Sister Church and Us

As we conclude this travelog through the arc of time on the anniversary of our partnership with the Downtown Unitarian Church of Kolozsvár, I see our sister church and the churches of Transylvania as authentic custodians of religious faith in the worst of times and the best of times. I see them holding fast to progressive Christian teachings and good deeds, preserving those religious roots for themselves and for the rest of us. They demonstrate what Rabbi Hillel once said, "If we are not for ourselves, who are we? If we are not for others, what are we?"

In our digital, materialistic, and divided world, these roots can fill a void. As individuals, churches, denominations, or nations, roots can make a difference. They tell us who we are and what we are. James Agee, the southern poet, captured the universal longing to know who we are in *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*.^{xi} He described an evening when his father and mother, his uncle and aunt, spread quilts on the grass in the back yard and lay there quietly talking as a family:

After a little
I am taken in
And put to bed.
Sleep, soft smiling,
Draws me unto her;
And those receive me,
Who quietly treat me,
As one familiar and well-beloved in that home:
But will not, oh, will not,
Not now, not ever,
But will not ever tell me who I am.

Today we share the candlelight of two sister churches as our "guiding example of Unitarian spirituality and the hope of the future." That light has not flickered. It is a torch that shines for all to see. It is the essence of Christ and the Spirit of Life: "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." *Isten áldja*.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Europe's Fairy Garden, forward by Lázsló Tökés; The Bálványos Insitutue, Kolozsvár, 2013.

ⁱⁱ Acts 2:1-13

ⁱⁱⁱ It might be of interest to note that during the synod at Torda Ferenc Dávid reminded the King that in the years following Pentecost when the apostles were persecuted and brought to judgment, the leading Jewish authority, Gamaliel, appealed to the Sanhedrin to leave the apostles alone because "if it is from God, you will not be able to overthrow them and you might even be found fighting against God!" (Acts 5:39)

^{iv} In 1821, the Unitarians in England published a book, *Unitariorum in Anglia*, describing the evolution of English Unitarian affairs and their appreciation for the leadership of Transylvania's Bishop, Körmöczy Janos. It was translated from Latin into Hungarian, and it awakened keen interest in English affairs. Ten years later, in 1831, a Hungarian Unitarian writer, Bölöni Farkas Sándor, traveled to the U.S. He met with Unitarian leaders in Boston and wrote, *Journey in North America*, a book praising American democracy (much like Tocqueville in the same year). He was thought to be the first Hungarian Unitarian to visit America and was followed by the visit of former governor-president of Hungary, Kossuth Lajos.

^v John James Tayler, "Narrative of a Visit to the Unitarian Churches of Transylvania, *The Theological Review*, No. XXIV, January 1869 (p 1-48).

^{vi} Ferenc József also offered a prediction of the future of Unitarianism: *If I am asked what may be the ultimate fate of our own form of Christianity, the answer will depend on our definition of the essence of Unitarianism. If we adhere obstinately to the articles of faith laid down by our forefathers centuries ago, regarding them as the ne plus ultra of perfection which must not be touched and from which we must shut out the freshening air of science and free inquiry, then, no doubt, Unitarianism, like every other religion which thinks itself complete and finished, will have to take its place among a collection of antiquities; for the essence of the biblical truths must not be confounded with the forms which they have successively assumed in the minds of different men in different ages. But if we regard Unitarianism as a strong and vigorous organism, full of life and capable of development, ever ready to admit new truths and constantly regenerating itself by their influence, and securing the spirit and welfare of its adherents by keeping abreast with the onward march of the ages, then I am bold to say, the future of Unitarianism is secured forever, because it will take its stand on those eternal principles of reason, by which the cultivated portion of mankind must always and increasingly abide.*

^{vii} James Thompson Bixby, "A Visit to Our Hungarian Brethren," *The Unitarian Review*, Volume XXIV, May-July 1885.

^{viii} Almost 150 years later, in 2016, the current minister of the Unitarian Church of Kolozsvár, Norbert Zolt Rác, described how Unitarianism in Transylvania had evolved liturgically and theologically over the centuries. In the conclusion of his lecture, he called for Unitarian communities to build upon the past and address a "progressive spirituality" that could influence the world: *I have brought to the table of discussion some of the core tenets of the Transylvanian Unitarian tradition: our liberal Christianity, ideas about the Bible, Jesus and God, and also some specific concepts that seem extremely important: flexibility, tolerance, humility, equity and thirst for knowledge, personified with the help of a couple of important people from our tradition... I have a vision of a table of discussion, where the best minds of our communities meet, in order to discuss the tenets of faith, to address the difficulties and to work on a progressive spirituality that has influence for our home groups, and hopefully on the world.*

^{ix} "New Martyrs of an Old Faith," *The Christian Register*, February 17, 1921 (p 163).

^x A more detailed account of partner church developments in the 21st century is the subject of a monograph to be published at a later date, *The Tale of Two Churches*.

^{xi} James Agee, "Knoxville: Summer of 1915," *Parisian Review*, 1938; also set to music for soloist and orchestra by Samuel Barber, 1947.