

The intersecting circles of love between partner churches.

Sermon delivered on November 5, 2023 at First Unitarian Church of St Louis.

When I hear the experiences from visitors to Transylvania, I'm seeing the evidence of circles of love grown by members of our partner congregation in Csokfalva. Are you curious as why do they grow circles of love? For Transylvanian Unitarians a Biblical quote explains that. In the Book of Mark 12:29-31 where Jesus describes the two greatest commandments:

"The first of all the commandments *is*: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This *is* the first commandment. And the second, like *it*, *is* this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Beginning with David Ferenc, the first Bishop of the Transylvanian Unitarian Church, all subsequent Unitarian bishops, including the current one, Kovacs Istvan, restated the commitment of the church to that dual commandment.

When I see the time, talent and treasure of this congregation invested in the partner church relationship, I'm seeing evidence of circles of love growing in the direction of Transylvania. When you picture a circle of love growing from the USA to the direction of Transylvania, it is natural to ask, just why did Unitarianism appear in Transylvania of all places? And just who are those people over there?

Three factors contributed to the appearance of the first Unitarian church in Transylvania. The first factor was geography. In the 1500s the Turkish Empire conquered large part of the Hungarian Kingdom and cut off Transylvania from the Western part of the Kingdom. Catholic religious influences became weak in the Transylvanian area, and that allowed a flow of religious ideas such as Lutheranism, Calvinism, and even ideas that questioned the tradition of Trinity.

The second factor was the relocation of the Italian physician Giorgio Biandrata to the court of the new Transylvanian King, John Sigismund, II. Giorgio Biandrata was well versed in the antitrinitarian writings of Michael Servet, and those antitrinitarian thoughts could now openly influence religious thinkers in Transylvania.

The third factor was the court priest, David Ferenc, who was considered a theological genius of his age. After hearing about antitrinitarianism from Biandrata, David Ferenc began scrutinizing established Catholic and Protestant theology, and by 1568 he developed a theological system that was antitrinitarian, or Arian as they called

it back then, in modern words, Unitarian. He was very effective in convincing the King and also the assembly of nobles. In 1568 the Diet of Torda accepted Arianism as the fourth recognized religion in Transylvania. All the way until his martyr death he remained the leader of the group of those Transylvanian Unitarians.

The 1568 Edict of Torda includes the statement about the freedom of faith: “in every place the 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.”

The Edict also proclaimed the freedom of conscience when it said: “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 the gift of God, this comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God.”

Naturally, the last few words in the Edict are based on the word of God. Namely the Bible quotes from Ephesians 2:8 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God”; and from Romans 10:17 “faith comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God”. Therefore, as long as you have a Christian, Bible based Unitarian Church, the concepts of the freedom of faith and conscience have unshakable foundations.

The Transylvanian Unitarians whom we partner with are not only the inheritors of that magnificent theological development and the societal expressions of freedoms. They are also the descendants of countless generations of Transylvanian Unitarians who lived under tremendous oppression and persecution.

After the death of the Unitarian King John Sigismund, II in 1571 the subsequent Catholic and Calvinist Transylvanian rulers eroded the effectiveness of the Edict. Initially, the oppression was mild, such as taking away printing privileges from the Unitarians, and prohibiting the development of any new religious point of view. That was followed with intimidations by executions, forced conversions, confiscation of Unitarian church buildings, church property, school buildings, printing press, and with denying royal court offices to Unitarians.

During the hundreds of years of persecution, the ideals of freedom of faith and conscience continued to live on in the hearts and minds of the Transylvanian Unitarians, almost as a “promised land” they once saw. Once the persecution ceased, they gave voice to those feelings. Let’s listen to the words of Ferenc Jozsef from the 1868 sermon celebrating the 300th anniversary of the Transylvanian Unitarian Church: “The freedom of faith and conscience, my dear brethren, is one of the moral concepts

of great importance that first gained expression in the Christian religion through the teachings of our Lord Jesus. He respected the inner world of others - the personal thoughts, the religious feelings, and the free will of the individual to choose a particular avenue of faith. He didn't use force or coercion, rather, his peaceful tools were persuasion and demonstration when he wished to give more emphasis to his words. My Christian brethren, let us raise our clasped hands to the sky; let us give thanks to the Lord in whose name we gathered for the synod; let us give thanks to Him who granted us life to live to celebrate this three hundredth anniversary of the establishment of our holy religion in our homeland; let us shout joyfully: Blessed be the indivisible single God."

At the time of that 1868 sermon no one suspected that the freedom of faith and conscience of Transylvanian Unitarians will yet again be restricted in 1919 when the territory of Transylvania was removed from the Kingdom of Hungary and attached to the Kingdom of Romania. And then again, in 1947 when Romania came under the rule of the communist party and became the Peoples Republic of Romania. The Unitarians of Transylvania lived through many decades of persecution under the Communist regime before a semblance of democracy returned to Romania in 1989.

The Transylvanian Unitarian Church and the Unitarian believers survived hundreds of years of severe persecution, because they accepted small theological compromises, made efforts to retain as many rural churches as possible, and avoided direct confrontations with Catholic or Communist authorities. It is worthwhile noting that in the midst of European wars of Counterreformation, there have been no sectarian wars started by Unitarians in Transylvania. They practiced what they preached: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself. In the 21st century that practice have continued.

It is not surprising that a special relationship may develop when a circle of love from one side of the Atlantic Ocean meets, intersects, joins another circle of love grown from the opposite side of the Atlantic. I'm proud to be a part of this precious opportunity to grow the circle of love towards Csokfalva, our partner church, where Transylvanian Unitarians maintained their faith in the face of such tumultuous history.