

Shalom from Transylvania

Many of you might have checked on your phone to verify that the word shalom was from the Jewish language, and you might be asking why would it be in the title of a service from the Partner Church Committee. Shouldn't we use the Hungarian word for everyday greeting? Let us put your mind at ease, shalom is not a typo. A long time ago, when Moses spoke to his people, as we can read in the book of Exodus, the word Shalom was used with the translated meaning of restitution. Word study of shalom also finds that in addition to the common, contemporary meaning of peace, shalom can mean to restore, to make whole. In that sense we can say that Shel Silverstein's incomplete circle was looking for shalom, to be made whole. We also saw in that story that a figurative restoration by that wedge did not bring restitution. Talking to a worm or a butterfly represented a spiritual restoration, spiritual repair, being made whole.

The partner church movement, in general, and the partner church activities supported by you, our congregation, have been providing means for Transylvanian Unitarians in the village of Csokfalva to be restored, repaired, made whole. Those hundreds of years of oppression of the Transylvanian Unitarian Church had several negative consequences, so they have many missing pieces. Their financial stability decreased; they haven't been appreciated, acknowledged, given words of affirmation.

Expressions of our love streaming to Csokfalva represent agents of repair and restoration for the people of our partner church. When we send financial gifts of love to our partner church, we see students encouraged and enabled to continue and complete their education in search of better life. When we send financial gifts to support the minister Tamasi Noemi, we see life made more bearable for the minister who needs to give a Sunday sermon at three churches located many miles apart, and serve those three geographically distinct communities every day. When we carry out a conversation with people of Csokfalva about the needs of our partner church we express our appreciation and affirmation. When we assist our partner church in community building, we carry out acts of service.

I was in Transylvania for two weeks this summer, and the question came to me: is it a selfish thought to ask if we, Unitarians in America, more specifically Unitarians at First Unitarian Church of St Louis, are getting anything from Csokfalva, so then we can find our missing piece, so we can be repaired, we can be restored and we can be made whole? My instant answer was: it's not selfish at all. In a mutually beneficial relationship between groups, giving and receiving streams of love, giving and receiving that agent of restoration, giving and receiving shalom ought to happen on both sides.

After that initial answer, perhaps, because I'm an introvert, my answer continued: I'm fine as is, I don't need a thing; I don't have a missing piece. Then, after a few seconds of introspection, I said to myself: I could use a little bit of unconditional love. Some of you might feel similarly, and have been a seeker of one or another kind of a missing piece. Some of us at First Unitarian, might be searching for ways to restore our inner peace. Some of us are seeking answers about the true meaning in our lives. Some of us might call it seeking answers to the big questions of life. Where do we come from? Where are we going? What are we supposed to be doing here? What is our vision for our church?

We are blessed in a special way that every time we come to church that we find a surrounding of love that encourages our search for that missing piece. The love in our church is a facilitator of shalom, restoration. Surely, personally, I'm drawn to this church by that environment. If you think about it, in our church we actually have a church covenant to encourage receiving and giving love.

But what about receiving some form of love, restoration from people with whom we don't have a covenant? Are we receiving anything from Transylvanian Unitarians? Maybe something has been coming to us unnoticed? Have the Unitarians of Csokfalva been using some invisible means to show their love toward us?

Receiving, accepting, even comprehending acts of love from others differ greatly from person to person. As Gary Chapman explained in his book "The 5 love languages", for romantic relationships there are 5 love languages, 5 ways individuals understand that they are valued and appreciated. These are receiving small gifts, spending quality time together, acts of service, words of affirmation, and physical touch. Individuals, in turn, use their own preferred love language to communicate their love towards others. Those ways of understanding and expressing love have been shown to exist in a work setting, within teams, and in between groups, where appreciation, valuing other groups of people are expressed through those 5 means. We have used some of those love languages to restore people of Csokfalva.

So, then, where are those streams of love flowing to our congregation from our partners in Csokfalva? Can we find our spiritual missing piece in the love given to us by unitarians of our partner church? Can their love, that facilitator of shalom restore us?

Is your missing piece the love expressed through quality time spent together? When I listen to testimony of visitors to Csokfalva, or when I think about my own personal experiences, I have to say that the together time given to us American Guests at our reception, during our stay with a host family, during the visits to local attractions

are all evidence of the love given to us as spending quality time together. We also receive quality time together when the minister of our partner church, Noemi, send us a video of a prayer.

Is your missing piece the love expressed through gifts received? During the planning phase of a trip to Transylvania they organize our schedule, and accommodate any needed changes. It's like having a travel agent and local tourist guides for free. Once we are there, we are provided free of charge with transportation throughout the area, meals at our host family, goulash at a picnic, a comfortable place to stay, all tailored to our needs.

Is your missing piece the love expressed through touch? Transylvanian culture has a very similar concept of personal space when compared to the average American personal space. So, very naturally, hugs and handshakes are given to the American visitors.

Is your missing piece the love expressed through acts of service? Hmmmm . . . what could this be? During a visit to Csokfalva many of the actions of our hosts amount to a service to us, visitors. They help us in any way they can to assist us, to make our stay as enjoyable as possible. In addition, there is historical perspective to this love language if we consider speaking truth to power as an act of service. The search for truth by Unitarian theologians such as David Ferenc, Enyedi Gyorgy, Szentabrahami Lombard Mihaly happened in the face of life-threatening actions by trinitarian rulers. Most Unitarian bishops had to make difficult decisions to sustain the Unitarian denomination in the face of hundreds of years of oppression. Transylvanian Unitarian ministers suffered for their views when the communist regime of Ceausescu imprisoned many of them in hard labor camps. Those historical examples of speaking truth to power can strengthen us if we are in a difficult situation. Their acts of service can strengthen our resolve in our own time, when we have to decide to speak truth to power. We have Transylvanian Unitarian role models to look up to.

All those persecuted people I mentioned practiced forgiveness toward their tormentors, and they role model for us the practicing of forgiveness, humbleness, meekness, and gratefulness to God. We have those acts of service as a resource to restore our spiritual wholeness.

As you heard from our reading, contact with a persecuted minority can teach us how to approach similarly mistreated minorities in our country, in our neighborhood as we build our beloved community, as we build the kingdom of God.

Is your missing piece the love expressed through words of affirmation? Historic and contemporary Transylvanian Unitarian writings including sermons, theology, ethics, moral guidance, they all align with our UU value of plurality, and the 4th and 5th

principles, and how we, American Unitarians, decided to covenant. The words in those Transylvanian Unitarian writings can make us consciously aware that the idea of our free and responsible search for truth and meaning is shared and affirmed by Transylvanian Unitarians. We receive encouragement from them. We are not alone.

Those were the examples of channels of love bringing the streams of shalom, restoration towards us. To complete those streams, Transylvanian Unitarians implore the Almighty to look upon us favorably. You see this in the commonly used Hungarian Unitarian greeting: Isten aldja. Which means: May God bless you. And through the blessings of God our restoration will surely succeed. Amen