

The Flaming Chalice

a short homily by Rev. J. Mark Worth, March 26, 2017

for the Service of the Living Tradition, Harvard Unitarian Universalist Church, Harvard MA

The Service of the Living Tradition, celebrated annually in many of our congregations, is a wonderful occasion. As we dedicate children, welcome new members, honor long-time members, and remember those who have died, we observe and celebrate the entire life cycle. And we are doing it in community, for as John Donne said, “No man is an island entire of itself” – or as we would say today, no *person* is an island. We exist in communities, including religious communities, communities of caring, communities of hope, communities of peace, communities of justice, like this one.

Rev. Mark Morrison Reed says, “The central task of religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice. It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength is limited to do all that must be done. Together our vision widens and our strength is renewed.”

This is our task as a religious community, and this is what we celebrate today, the connectedness and relationship “amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others.”

And it’s especially appropriate that we unveil this beautiful new Flaming Chalice today, designed by sculptor Linda Hoffman. Linda has written about the process of designing this flaming chalice, which we commissioned, and how she chose this particular design. She wanted to know something about us, so she went to the Unitarian Universalist web site which describes our national association of congregations as “a house without walls, a congregation without spiritual boundaries.”

The Flaming Chalice is the symbol of Unitarian Universalism. It combines a chalice and a flame – the chalice, I would say, symbolizes our Christian roots. Both the Unitarians and the Universalists began as Christian denominations. But the Unitarians, dating back to 1565 in Poland and 1568 in Transylvania, were told that because they viewed God as One and not a Trinity of three-gods-in-one, and because they saw Jesus as a great human teacher rather than a magically divine being, they were not Christians.

And the Universalists, dating to the time of the American Revolution in the United States, were told by their opponents that, because they were the “no hell church,” saying that a loving God would not create a hell for torture, and then create us so flawed that many of us had to be sent there, that they were not Christian, either. Neither group was ever allowed to join the National Council of Churches. The Unitarians were told that they were not Christ-centered enough, and the Universalists were told that they were too much like the Unitarians!

As time passed, many Unitarians said, “Well, maybe we’re not Christians. Maybe using the word ‘Christian’ isn’t the most important thing. Maybe how you live your life is more important than the label you put on, or that others put on you.” And so today we have no creedal statement that requires us to agree about theology. Rather, we gather around covenants that say how we will treat one another, not creeds that require theological agreement.

And while there are still many Unitarian Universalists who consider themselves to be Christians, although of an *unorthodox* variety, there are also Unitarian Universalist atheists, agnostics, humanists, theists, pantheists, Buddhists, neo-Pagans, and UUs who treasure and continue to draw from their Jewish or Hindu or Muslim heritages – and still other Unitarian Universalists who defy any categorization. Ultimate realities about the universe and our place in it can’t be captured in a narrow creed or dogma. And so we don’t all have to agree. How we live our lives is more important than what we say we believe.

In the early 19th century a Universalist preacher, Hosea Ballou, put it this way. He said, “If we agree in brotherly love there is no disagreement that can do us any harm. But if we do not agree in brotherly love, there is no agreement that can do us any good.”

And so we have one foot in the Christian tradition, and another foot outside. And some time in the 20th century the weight shifted to the foot outside. Therefore, we do not find the Christian cross to be a unifying symbol. Rather, we use the flaming chalice. It is true that there is no official explanation of the Flaming Chalice, but I offer this unofficial explanation.

In 1415 a Czech priest, Jan Hus, was burned at the stake. His crimes were these: 1) He preached in the Czech language rather than Latin. This made his sermons popular, and thus suspect. 2) He said that individuals should be allowed to read the Bible for themselves. 3) He criticized the wealth of the Catholic Church, especially the extravagant wealth of bishops, archbishops, cardinals and popes. And 4) during the Mass, he shared the communion chalice with the people, rather than reserving it for the clergy. Hus said that sharing the chalice meant that clergy and laity were equal. That did not go over well with the Catholic hierarchy, and Hus was burned at the stake.

After he was killed, his followers combined the chalice he shared and the flame of his execution, creating the symbol of the Flaming Chalice. It is, therefore, a symbol of religious freedom. Although Jan Hus was neither a Unitarian nor a Universalist, we have adopted this symbol of religious freedom from his followers (the Hussites, a religious movement that includes the Moravian Brethren, the Bohemian Brethren, and the Czechoslovak Hussite Church).

The UU Flaming Chalice has been represented in various ways, and one of the most popular is a chalice inside two circles, which represent the Unitarians and Universalists. This echoes an earlier Universalist symbol, the off-center cross. The Universalists placed a small cross inside a large circle. The circle represented the universe. The cross represented the Christian roots of the Universalist Church, but was small and off center to leave room for other ideas and symbols. When the Universalists and Unitarians combined nationally in 1961 the Unitarian Flaming Chalice was blended with the Universalist off-center cross inside a circle. And the one circle became two.

Linda Hoffman, creator of our new Flaming Chalice, says, “Light, flames, candles, and sacred fires cross religious boundaries. In my childhood synagogue there was an ornate lamp hanging in front of the ark where the Torah was stored. It hung by three golden chains from the high domed ceiling. I often wondered if it was really an eternal flame, and considered, while I sat through a long service, the logistics of filling it with oil and lighting it.”

Linda was not designing a flame, however, but the chalice to support it. And then she thought of the story of the Buddha, who gained enlightenment sitting beneath the Bodhi Tree. And she related the story of the Buddha’s enlightenment to the apple trees and orchards here in Harvard, and the peace of such places. She says, “Our fruit trees offer us sustenance and beauty. Trees also offer us refuge. I think we can all remember sitting against the trunk of a tree; it’s so simple, and universal. Inspired by my love for trees and the Buddha’s story, I decided to use the image of a tree for Harvard Unitarian Church’s chalice. I made the trunk to support the chalice bowl and sculpted two seated figures leaning against its trunk of the tree, enjoying the peacefulness, exemplifying a calm abiding, an equanimity. Above the figures, for the two circles, I used tree branches. The branches encircle the light and unify the world.”

I think Linda has captured the essence of our “house without walls, congregation without boundaries” with this beautiful symbol. We have been here, on this spot in Harvard, for nearly 300 years. With deep roots in the past, our branches reach toward the future, and we hope and expect that this flame of religious freedom will shine for many years, decades, perhaps centuries to come.

Amen.