

# *The Covenant of Spiritual Freedom*

**Rev. Dr. George Kimmich Beach**

**The Unitarian Church in Summit**

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Last Sunday I was in Prague, then ancient and magnificent capital of the Czech Republic, along with several others from our church, for the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Prague Unitaria -- and not incidentally, the first Sunday after they had reclaimed, by court decree, their precious church building from a man who can only be described as an aspiring cult leader.

The founder of Czech Unitarianism was the Rev. Norbert Capek. He had started as a Baptist minister in his native land, and had grown increasingly liberal in his theological and his social views over the years. When he came to America with his family during the First World War -- to northern New Jersey -- he became a member of the Unitarian Church of Essex County, in Orange. Small world that it is! A fascinating biography of Dr. Capek, by Richard Henry, a colleague in our ministry, now retired, was published last year [see footnote].

After many false starts, Dr. Capek convinced our denominational officialdom, in Boston, that the new, post-war republic of Czechoslovakia was ripe for a liberal religious movement, and that he should be supported in the labor of founding it. In fact, the wife of the first president of the new republic was Charlotte Garrigue Masarek, a Unitarian from Brooklyn, N.Y.! So the church was formally founded in 1930, and grew in the space of a decade to be reputedly the largest Unitarian church in the world. With the help of the British and American Unitarian associations, it purchased a large, multi-use property at 8 Karlova St., in the midst of historic Prague. When you go there, you will have no trouble finding it -- just beyond the end of the ancient *Karlsmost*, the Emperor Charles IV Bridge.

The proof that this was a typical Unitarian congregation must be that, despite their numbers, they seem always to have been in financial crisis and almost lost the building several times. There are two things for which Norbert Capek is most remembered. First, he created the Flower Communion, as we celebrated here one month ago, and as Barbara and I celebrated in Prague once again last week, giving flowers as tokens of the beauty that each person bears, and receiving them. Second, he is one of two martyrs of our liberal faith in this century. Norbert Fabian Capek was murdered by the Nazis at Dachau in 1942 for subversion to the occupying German regime.

This is what I said to our Czech sisters and brothers in my sermon -- translated paragraph by paragraph -- last Sunday:

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Friends, this is a historic day. We celebrate, in this 70th anniversary year of the Unitarian Church in Prague, "the great reclamation." Hallelujah!

But what is it we propose to reclaim and to create anew? The difficulty we have in stating what is the heart and soul of our faith is directly related to the recent struggle for control of Palac Unitaria, No. 8 Karlova. Ours is "the sin of vagueness" and this has made us highly vulnerable to the undemocratic manipulations that we have endured for several years. Can I, an American Unitarian Universalist, say "we" here? If nothing else, dear Barbara's passion for your cause permits me to take that liberty.

It is not difficult to see the flaw -- our common flaw -- that has made us such an easy mark in this attempt at a "hostile take-over." We have grown increasingly vague about the central principle of our Unitarian faith, and we have not restated it in a way that speaks powerfully to the issues and concerns of today.

Some of us will ask: "But who is to say what is our 'central principle'? Is not our central principle freedom itself? We all define it for ourselves, don't we?"

No, we do not. Principles are not matters of individual preference. Principles belong to the community of faith -- a body of people with a shared historical memory and a shared institutional commitment and hope. When we are members of a democratic community, then we are in covenant with one another. Through discussion and decision we define our central principle. And then, as the times require, we redefine it. The birth of freedom is a continuous process of self-determination -- by the community.

I know. Some will stamp their feet and raise their voices at this point: "You can't say that! Being a Unitarian means being free to believe whatever you please!"

Again I say no. Such half-truths that masquerade as the whole truth are appealing falsehoods. They acknowledge no debt to the community that gave them birth. They echo a time when we sought only to be free of oppressive dogmas -- perhaps Catholic, perhaps Communist. But history moves on. Now we face disillusionment and suspicion toward every faith. Millions feel a spiritual void, a void that cannot be filled with negations.

I say freedom is rooted in the human spirit, and is our share in the Spirit of God. It flourishes in the soil of this earth and in bonds of our communities. And it must serve ends beyond itself, ends that speak directly to the history of our time. We (may I still presume to say "we"?) say: 'We covenant. We covenant in spiritual freedom. We covenant in spiritual freedom for a new humanity.'

Freedom is not the right of individuals to think and do as they please. No one will take us seriously if we seem to preach a limitless freedom, freedom as the "right" to "do your own thing." Such a liberalism will not be taken seriously because it fails to deal with the fact that some people will deliberately use freedom as a license to do evil. It does not confront the insinuating power of evil, nor look squarely at the meaning of the century

from which we have escaped "by the skin of our teeth." Millions of others, Norbert Capek among them, did not escape.

Think of Norbert Capek, writing his hymns to affirm the Mother/Father Spirit, even as he was imprisoned at the Dachau concentration camp. In spite of desperation, hunger and mortal danger, he lifted up the spirits of others by his great spirit. So survivors have testified. That, friends, is spiritual freedom.

"What kind of religion is this Unitarianism?" Dr. Capek asked, and he answered: "It is humanity lightened by divinity. It is humanism and theism combined. It is not humanism without God and without a soul, but the humanism of those great figures who from time to time called our nation to new life." He believed that the enduring challenge of religion was to liberate and develop the human spirit; and in his moment in history, he wanted himself to call his nation to "a new life." The liberal church would be a means to this imperative hope and historical goal.

I am saying: The religious task comes alive in the face of a historical challenge. This is as true today, in our time, as it was in Norbert Capek's time.

With the breakup of the Hapsburg Empire following the First World War, Dr. Capek saw the opportunity for the Czech people to reclaim their creative role in history. A new democratic republic must emerge, he said, with full separation of church and state. But the nation's revival must be more than political. Dr. Capek saw widespread disillusionment with the established Roman church, and he believed that the time was ripe for a life-affirming free church to emerge. Yet this new church would not be wholly new. It would trace its roots to two great figures in Czech history: to Jan Hus, for his appeal "to reason and conscience against the authority of the Pope," and to Johannes Comenius, who wanted the schools, at all ages, to be "workshops of humanity." Carried to its conclusion, he said, Comenius' program meant seeking God in and through the human spirit. But the historical roots of a free faith in this land go even deeper than Comenius and Hus.

Consider this locale, No. 8 Karlova. Dr. Capek reported that, prior to the palace built here in 1720, another religious group, a remarkable group, occupied this site. From the year 1404, he reported, this site "was occupied by a liberal Christian body called Brothers and Sisters of the Free Spirit. They were accused of laying more stress on a Christian life than on the articles of orthodox religion. They believed more in the 'inner light' than in the letter of the Bible. Further, they did not believe in the Trinity and were accused of pantheistic tendencies. I regard these people as the first Czech Unitarians."

Astonishing! We too are interested in the history of 8 Karlova St., and even now we are helping write a new chapter in its history. The 20th century became infinitely more tragic than he had imagined when he began his ministry. First, it took his own life - in his martyrdom at Dachau. Then it brought to the Czechs and the Slovaks the crippling weight of Soviet domination for more than 40 years. And yet today we propose to reclaim Dr. Capek's vision and to create it anew.

What was Dr. Capek's vision? He said, "Every one of us has our own power and intelligence which are a legacy of the power and wisdom of God." This inward principle of human freedom shines brightest in our capacity to surpass ourselves and to transcend every circumstance. Dr. Capek said it in these words: "Our most important spiritual activity is the conscious and willing creation, changing, or even discarding of our mood and introducing a new and better mood." He saw this capacity for self-transcendence in the great religious leaders. "The life of every spiritual leader," he said, "is marked by one or more dramatic turning points, and we can follow their example..."

In short, it is for spiritual freedom that our humanity is made. But we must also go beyond Dr. Capek's words, if we are to speak to the coming generation. Just as he spoke powerfully to people in the early 20th century, we just speak to people in the 21st century. To the principle of spiritual freedom, we must add the principle of covenant. A covenant -- a solemn commitment to "walk together" -- gives shape and substance to an historical community. This, I believe, is the key to unlock the power of a liberal faith for our time. A covenant of spiritual freedom is embodied in a particular people who gather in a particular time and place. Now is such a time, and No. 8 Karlova is such a place.

"I call that church free," said James Luther Adams, "which in covenant with the divine community-forming power brings the individual, even the unacceptable [individual], into a caring, trusting fellowship that protects and nourishes integrity and spiritual freedom. Its goal is the prophethood and the priesthood of all believers -- the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other the ministry of healing."

Adams wrote these words in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the founding of the American Unitarian Association. His words on "the church that is free" deliberately echoed William Ellery Channing, the American Unitarian founder. "I call that mind free," Channing intoned, over and over. The title of Channing's sermon was "Spiritual Freedom." For Adams, a new religious liberalism must rise on the foundations laid by Channing. Thus the heroic individualism of Channing's vision of "the mind that is free" must be supplemented by the shared commitments of "the church that is free." Between Channing and Adams, here is both a continuity and a change. Both speak of spiritual freedom, but with Adams, no longer the individual but the dedicated community is its birthplace and vessel. The dedicated community of the church is itself the reality that liberates us, and our task in the church is to teach and to model that ideal for our society and world.

Dr. Capek knew Channing's sermon on "spiritual freedom." He quoted it when he exhorted his people, even in the dark days of the German occupation, to affirm the freedom of their minds and spirits. We know this because, in Capek's trial by the Gestapo for subversive activity, the prosecutors cited his appeal to Channing's "Ode to the Free Mind" in a sermon.

The principle of covenant was embedded in Norbert Capek's own thought. Thus he spoke of the Flower Communion as a giving and a receiving, a transaction in which we give, so that we may receive, and we receive, so that we may give.

Dr. Capek also called attention to the symbolic value of the vase. He likened the vessel that contains the flowers to the organized religious community, for it is the vase that makes the transaction of giving and receiving possible. In the Flower Communion, he said, "each of us is choosing a different flower, and that one speaks for us. The vase too is a symbol for us. In our Unitarian Brotherhood it is a symbol of our church organization. We need the vessel to help us share the beauties and the responsibilities of communal life. In the community, by giving the best that is in us for the common good, we grow, and we are able to do what no person is able to do alone. Each of us needs to receive in order to grow, but for the same reason, each of us needs to give."

The vase -- this vessel -- represents the religious community. It represents the matrix through which relationships are knit together and miraculous transactions happen. The principle of covenant is such a vase, a vessel that is beautiful with many flowers. The profusion of flowers in the Flower Communion is like the diversity of our humanity within the unity of our community.

Friends, I ask this final question: What shall we say, when they ask us who we are and what we stand for? I say: We covenant in spiritual freedom for a new humanity.

Consider the three terms in this one sentence.

*We covenant:* We freely commit ourselves to high and holy aims, aims that transcend us, aims of the Spirit. Not in freedom from obligations to others, but in freedom to enter into common endeavors for the common good. Not in freedom from the nourishing roots of our historic faith, but in freedom to give fresh interpretation to ancient symbols and stories. Not in freedom from being called to aims that surpass us, but in the freedom that springs from knowing that, together, we're on our way!

*We covenant in spiritual freedom:* We find at the center of our faith an energizing mainspring, a drive for meaning and dignity implanted in every soul in every land -- the wonder of being alive and awakened to life, the grace of beginning anew. Not in the self-enclosing isolation of the self, but in the quest for a more inclusive covenant. Not in narrow-mindedness or mean-spirited debunking of things cherished by others, but in listening for the Spirit of life and truth wherever it calls to us. Not in fearfulness that life runs out and nothing can be done, but in the courage to turn every crisis into an opportunity for growth and spiritual depth.

*We covenant in spiritual freedom for a new humanity:* We seek a better world where all peoples can flourish, sharing in the resources of Planet Earth and sustaining nature's vital balance. We seek a new social contract within the encompassing covenant of being. Not closing our eyes to the awesome tasks that stand before us, but committing ourselves to labor tirelessly for the physical, moral and spiritual well-being of all. Not despairing for the human prospect, but affirming hope and affirming the creative freedom of the human spirit. Never fearful when we must make a new beginning, nor withholding anything of ourselves, but affirming the hope already planted in our hearts, let us covenant in spiritual freedom for a new humanity.

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**Note:** The sermon extends the theme of my essay that appears, under the same title, in *Redeeming Time: Endowing Your Church With the Power of Covenant*, edited by Walter P. Herz (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999), pp.99-106. For the quotations from Dr. Capek, I am indebted to Richard Henry's biographical study, *Norbert Fabian Capek: A Spiritual Journey* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999).