

FLAMING CHALICE: UU SYMBOL
Homily by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Intergenerational Service
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Reading

Light the first light of the evening, as in a room
In which we rest and, for small reason, think
The world imagined is the ultimate good.

This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous.
It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,
Out of all the indifferences, into one thing;

Within a single thing, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,
A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.
We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous.

Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
We say God and the imagination are one...
How high that highest candle lights the dark.

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.
Wallace Stevens

Story

A very long time ago, in the early 1400s, there was a Czechoslovakian Catholic priest named Jan Hus. It was a time when the Catholic Church had some serious problems. The pope and some priests were very, very rich while the people were very, very poor; some priests made people pay money in order to have God forgive their sins. (As if God cared about money!) In some countries, like Czechoslovakia, the church was trying to take over the governments.

In their church services, Catholics always serve bread and wine—called communion—as symbols of Jesus. *But* at that time the priests got wine in a chalice, and the ordinary people, like you and me, only got bread.

Jan Hus disagreed with all of this, and said so, over and over. The Church conducted a trial of him, found him guilty, and burned him at the stake. But the people who believed in his ideas of freedom and equality did not stop believing, and they

adopted the flaming chalice as a symbol: the chalice symbolizing communion for all, the flame meaning the fire that killed him.

Six centuries later, during World War II, the Unitarian Service Committee—part of our religion, later the Unitarian Universalist Committee—was helping people who had had to escape from Germany, where Hitler was killing millions of Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, and others considered “different.”

One of these men was an Austrian artist named Hans Deutsch, who had escaped to Portugal and was helped by the Service Committee there. They needed a symbol to put on their buildings, trucks and crates of supplies, so that people of all languages would recognize them. Hans Deutsch created the flaming chalice, and the Service Committee adopted it as their symbol. Later, the Unitarian Universalist Association adopted it, too. We put the chalice a little off center, to show that no one symbol is the right one to be in the center of everybody’s lives. We surround it with two circles, meaning Unitarianism and Universalism.

Every Sunday, an adult and a child light our chalice, showing that we respect people of all ages. The chalice symbolizes everybody sharing with everybody else; it looks a little bit like a cross, to show that we came from Christian roots; the flame means the fire of love, the light of reason, and the warmth of life and community.

Homily

A swastika. A stained-glass window. “Amazing Grace.” The American flag. All symbols, things in our life that stand for something else, that remind us of actions, or people, or feelings, or ideas—or a combination of all those.

The other day, I was at Fort Boise Mid High, and the between-class bell rang as I came out of the office. Before I was a minister, I was a high school drama and English teacher for many years, the last eight or nine in Lynnwood (WA) High School. As it turns out, the between-class bell at Fort Boise Mid High has a much lower sound than the between-class bell I spent so many years of my life listening to—in fact, the Fort Boise bell sounds almost exactly like the beginning of the fire-drill bell at Lynnwood. The minute I heard it, I went into automatic pilot for a few seconds: where is my grade book? which exit is the right one? are the students doing what they are supposed to be doing, that is, walking peacefully out the doors to a certain distance from the building? I caught myself before I started chasing students down the hall and yelling at them for not going outside—but that bell was a powerful symbol to my ears, and it took me back almost twenty years, as though it were yesterday.

Every one of us in this room has symbols in our lives, many of which are much more important than a remembered school bell. Think for a minute of something that personally belongs to you, something that reminds you of actions, or people, or feelings, or ideas. Maybe you love it. Maybe you don’t love it. Maybe it makes you think. A stuffed animal. A piece of art. A picture of a loved one. An old toy. A certain shirt, or coat, or pair of shoes or slippers. Jewelry.

I look at my left hand, at the engagement and wedding rings I have worn for thirteen years. The engagement ring is an especially important symbol to me, because Bob bought it without consulting me, in the time-honored manner of suitors about to propose. It has a faceted, dark, oval sapphire in the middle (sapphire is my birthstone), with six modest diamonds around the blue gem. I probably would have picked out

something different, something a little “earthier”—but I loved it from the start, and still love it. A friend who knows me well looked at it with surprise and pleasure when I first got it and said, “It looks like something Princess Di would wear.”

To me, this ring I wear every day of my life symbolizes several really good and important things. Of course, it means my love for the man who felt that my lifelong marriage symbol should be sapphires and diamonds—not, say, malachite and silver (although those are fine from time). It is made of white gold, telling me that my husband values me as gold—and also knows that white gold matches the silver I usually wear. Most importantly, it symbolizes what people are always bringing to one another when they love each other and live together: new insights (into one’s self and into other matters), different ways of looking at the world, challenge to old ideas, reminders that people express their love in many ways. This ring means a great deal to me.

Religious symbols can have meaning even deeper than the deep meaning of my ring to me. Some of us here this morning have lived our lives without any particular religion, so we can look at symbols and just think they are kind of interesting. The majority of us, though, had some sort of Christian upbringing, and we often have strong responses to Christian symbolism. Take a Protestant cross, for instance, or a Catholic crucifix (a cross with Jesus on it). Some people, who remember their early Christian days happily—who have simply moved gradually out of the old ways and into Unitarian Universalism—will look at the cross or crucifix and smile at what it means. To them, the symbol may mean the love that Jesus taught, or his respect for all people as children of God—it may remind them to be nicer to others, and to help people who need help.

Other people—and there are lots and lots of us in the UU faith—will look at the cross or crucifix and feel terrible: upset, or sad, or really mad. These ones of us have had bad experiences in their early days of church—maybe a minister terrified them with threats of hellfire if they didn’t do what he said; maybe, because of gender or sexuality or whatever, they could not participate fully in the church; maybe they saw church members telling others to act in a certain way, then acting in the opposite way, themselves. Whatever the reason, these people almost hate the symbols of their old churches, and often do not want any symbols at all in their Unitarian Universalist churches and fellowships.

This is not hard to understand.

The problem is, all human beings need symbols in their religious lives, good ones that remind us of the best in our faith, that call us to be our best selves, with each other and in the larger world. And so, in what was for many years a symbol-less denomination, the flaming chalice has arisen as our proud symbol.

Symbols are often accompanied by rituals, like our chalice lighting. Because the chalice is so deeply important to us—as one of the very few symbols we UUs cherish—we will be celebrating and creating an official new ritual, right after offertory. We will lift up and honor all who have lit the flaming chalice.

We do this because our chalice lighters are the people who re-create, every week, the beacon of our faith. They remind us of what we are all about: coming together in love and respect and the embracing of difference; cherishing the ever-changing flame of truth; sharing equally among all persons; kindling our passion for justice; celebrating the oneness of all creation.

May it be so.