95 years ago next month, Norbert Fabian Capek introduced the flower ceremony to his congregation in Prague, Czechoslovakia, a congregation that became the largest Unitarian church in the world at the time. To understand the ceremony, it is important to understand the time in which Capek lived and died.

1923 was the year that Germany has been defaulting on its reparation payments in coal to France. Britain favored limiting the reparation payments but France forced coal deliveries by occupying the center of Germany’s coal and steel production. The orator Adolf Hitler fed off the outrage among Germans. His movement grew rapidly. The party rose from approximately 6,000 people to 35,000 people in Munich alone, and to approximately 50,000 in all of Bavaria.

This movement, as you know, espoused a racist and Nationalist ideology that scapegoated others – people who are Jewish, queer, trans, black, Polish, Ukranian, Roman Catholic, freemason, disabled - basically everyone who did not fit their very narrow definition of the Aryan race. They blamed these “others” for the problems of the world and somehow believed that if they could get rid of the others, the world be a better place. They wanted to create a world in which everyone in it was the same, of the same race, of the same religion, of the same beliefs.

Hopefully, everyone in this room knows that this belief system is quite the opposite of what the Unitarian faith has always tried to stand for. As a Unitarian minister, Capek was seeking a way to celebrate the variety of people that we are, and honor our lives as we are. This was a not so subtle way to defy the emerging Nazi philosophy that was endangering the world. And so he used the flower as the symbol of a human being. It’s easy to see how beautiful this bouquet of flowers is – and how the variety – the pansies and flox and tulips and roses combine to make a more beautiful bouquet than a collection of flowers that are identical. The same is true for humans. Sure, there may be less conflict when we’re more alike, but we sure don’t get any wiser if we all hold the same beliefs, have the same backgrounds, speak the same languages, and see the world in the same way. We need the mermaids of the world to speak up, without giving up dignity or identity.

To some of you, this may seem like the same old sermon, the same old message about how we value diversity and deal with the differences among us... but let me tell you why I talk about this so much.

It is because we have not figured it out yet and we are not good at it. We. I include myself it the we. It is difficult work.

It’s easy to say that we value diversity. It’s harder to live through those moments of disagreement and hold onto our dignity and identity.

Why is it so hard? Because we are relational beings. We live in relationship with others and crave relationships with others. We are born into families we love or want to love. We seek approval from others and want to be loved by others. Sometimes the differences feel like they threaten our identity or dignity or both, and so we have to talk about it again and again and again, so we can eventually stop repeating the tragic story from Capek’s time, which has become all too familiar in our own time and place.
Of course, talking is not the only thing we need to do. We need to listen. We need to interrupt our everyday interactions and try again, and try again. We need to experiment with other ways of doing things, and look at the world from someone else’s perspective, as much as possible. In short, we need to change, while holding onto our dignity and identity.

We brought Dr. David Campt here to teach the White Ally Toolkit – ways for white people to talk to other white people about racism. His conviction that it is white people who need to address racism in our country, not the people of color who are targets of the abuse. He asked about the identities of the people in the room for the workshop – using these devices that shared numbers publicly with the projector. One of the pieces of identity markers he asked about was gender identity – cis or trans, and as we saw the number of trans identified people in the room climb, several of us on break immediately noticed the signs on our bathroom doors: male or female. One or the other. No in between. By the second time the workshop came to Vancouver, after some discussion among us and in consultation folks who are trans, we put up a sign that says “Gender diversity is welcome here. All are welcome to use the restroom that best fits their identity. Single Occupancy Restrooms are available in the RE Center.” We’re about to make that sign less temporary and look as nice as the other signs. It’s not enough – not where we need to be, but it’s a start. I invite you to take another step, as you’re willing. It has become common practice among our youth at youth gatherings and at Unitarian Universalist assemblies such as the Regional Assembly of the UUA that was just held recently in Portland – it has become common practice to identify one’s preferred pronoun on nametags. That way, we can address people with their preferred marker of gender identity. I invite those of you here today, who would like to do this, to take out your name tag and write on it – they/Them, she/her, or he/him, as a way to let us know how to address you respectfully. I’ll give you a moment to take off your nametag, borrow a pen and do it. Carl will play a few bars of music for us for this minute.

This kind of respect is what the Flower Communion is all about. The holy communion that Bonnie shared with her mother. They didn’t have to all agree what it was about in order to treat one another with respect. When we address people as they wish to be addressed, we are offering our deepest respect. That’s why our language changes so often – the right word in one era changes over time.

Unitarian used to be an insult that nobody would own, and that changed. Sure, some people still consider it an insult, but not those of us in this room – and not most of the world out there. Scapegoating of Unitarians still happens out there, as does the scapegoating of other groups by individuals who identify as UU...

I appreciate the message your previous settled minister, Mark Gallagher, preached each Flower Communion on Scapegoating, the tendency to blame someone else for one’s problems, a process that often results in feelings of prejudice toward the person or group that one is blaming. Scapegoating serves as an opportunity to explain failure or misdeeds, evil or wrongdoing, while maintaining one’s positive self-image. The practice of using a goat burdened with the sins of the community and casting it into the desert comes from the Hebrew Scripture – first appearing in Leviticus. The goat is the “sender away of sins.” But scapegoating continues, with or without the use of a goat.

Immigrants, here with legal papers or without, are currently being blamed by the current administration for all sorts of ills in this nation. Just as the Nazi’s scapegoated Jews and immigrants.

But of course, it would be easy for me to blame the current administration for all the ills of the world. And they should be held accountable for their actions, but scapegoating is not accountability. It is blaming others while maintaining one’s positive self-image. Not recognizing the fact of our interdependence and relationship. “They did it over there. I am blameless.” I just imagine that the reason Rev. Mark explored scapegoating during
the Flower Communion was not to point out the sin of others, but rather to invite us into our own culpability in piling the blame on others to eject it from ourselves to maintain that fragile positive personal identity we each seek to maintain.

I hear an increased interest among us in continuing to build the beloved community and grow our ability to practice and embody our espoused acceptance and celebration of diversity. I hear a desire to stop the scapegoating and conflict-raising habits that have long lived among us.

That’s the simple beauty of this ceremony. In a few moments, you will be invited to approach the flowers with a sense of how important it is for each of us to address our world and one another with gentleness, justice, and love. And you are asked to select a flower – different from the one you brought. Notice its color and shape, smell and beauty – handle it carefully. For it is a gift that someone else has brought to you. It represents that person’s unique humanity and therefore deserves your kindest touch.

This ceremony reminds us that we accept, cherish and yes, celebrate our differences. (music begins) The next time you encounter someone whose differences make you uncomfortable, remember your flower and its beauty, and may your actions and words be ones of gentleness, justice, and love.

**Benediction**

Capek’s own light was extinguished in 1942. He was arrested by the Gestapo for listening to foreign broadcasts and died of poison gas. May his incredible spirit and unyielding courage and creativity live on in all of us.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.