

**HOMILY: 450 Years of Religious Tolerance,  
and 28 Years of Partnership**

Delivered January 7, 2018 at First Parish Church in Weston  
By Dirk Coburn and Larry Coburn

(DIRK) Good morning! You may have heard the expression “preaching to the choir”; today we are turning that phrase around. This morning we will celebrate communion with Bodor Emese, this year’s Balazs Ferenc scholar from Transylvania at the Starr King School of the Ministry in Berkeley, California. We also welcome this week a new exhibit to the Rines Gallery here at First Parish about the city of Torda in Transylvania, home of a Unitarian congregation with which our congregation has a partner relationship. I want to talk about two ways in which that relationship is important.

The first is based on the place that Torda occupies in the history of religion. For centuries, Transylvania has been on a frontier, a place between empires. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the empires were the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg-ruled extension of the Holy Roman Empire and affiliated lands. For generations, armies had gone back and forth, borders had moved back and forth, and feudal allegiances and dominances had changed and evolved. The advent of the Protestant Reformation added a layer of complexity. Zsigmond Janos, King of Hungary and later Prince of Transylvania, was responsible for keeping his people from being overrun or massacred by either empire. He also faced a potentially fractious multiplicity of denominational creeds and affiliations among his people, many of whom were educated, independent-minded, and drawn to new sects that cut through centuries of ritual and rote to relate more directly to believers. It was customary for a kingdom or principality in Europe at the time to have an official state religion. Yet those from whom King Janos needed unified support included adherents to diverse denominations. He could only alienate some of the people he needed if he declared any one religion to be the state religion. What should he do? King Janos convened at Torda a meeting, or Diet, of clergy and government officials. After weeks of meetings and debates, including an impassioned plea for freedom of religion by David Ferenc, the founder of Hungarian Unitarianism, the Diet of Torda concluded when King Janos issued the Edict of Torda. That document in its entirety said:

*“According to agreements reached at previous sittings of the Diet between His Majesty and the people of his realm concerning matters of religion, it is once again confirmed by this present sitting that pastors shall be free to preach and teach the Gospel wherever they may be and according to their own interpretation. If a parish chooses to accept this interpretation, well and good; if not, the parish shall not be forced to accept it against its will and shall be free to insist upon the maintenance of a preacher whose teachings suit its requirements. Following former constitutions, none of the superintendents, nor any other person shall have the right to offend a pastor or abuse anybody on*

*the basis of his religion, nor shall anyone be threatened with imprisonment or removal from office for his teaching. Faith is the gift of God received through hearing the vehicle of God's word."*

There would be no state religion for the subjects of King Janos, who realized that his people were more united if they were free religiously to follow their conscience. The historical importance of Torda is that it is where the first documentary law of religious toleration in Europe was enacted – the Edict of Torda. On Saturday, January 13 Larry, his wife Gabriella, and I will be present in Torda at a convocation to mark the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this remarkable document.

There had been some earlier written laws of toleration in parts of Asia, and there is some belief that word of those places had reached parts of Europe via traders traveling routes pioneered by Marco Polo and others. But until the Edict of Torda was issued, those stories were exotic tales. The Edict established that a European state could refrain from establishing an official religion and could support the right of conscience in religious matters. This landmark event became known, through scholars and clergy in Poland and in Great Britain, to the authors of such documents as the colonial charter of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, the statutory laws of the new state of Virginia, the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, and numerous acts of disestablishment in several countries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The ripple effects of King Janos's edict loom large in western civilization and in world history.

What an important event in religious history! What an honor it was when we learned 28 years ago that our congregation would be partnered with the Unitarian congregation where that event occurred! Larry will speak about that partnership.

(LARRY) *"Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and innocent as doves."* (Matthew 10:16)

The wooden plaque that I am holding before you was a gift almost a quarter century ago from our partner church in Torda in Transylvania. It is normally positioned on the wall to my left just in front of the first pew, and you pass it any time you leave this sanctuary by the front door. On it is carved the symbol of what is now officially called the Hungarian Unitarian Church, and if you inspect it closely you will see depicted the serpent, and the dove, mentioned in this scriptural passage.

Given the travails encountered by Unitarianism over the past four and half centuries in the land of its birth, this symbolism is extremely poignant. It is even more poignant when one realizes that our partnership with the Torda Unitarian Church began just as Central Europe was beginning to emerge from over four decades of cruel tyranny, four decades when religion was suppressed on the one hand, or compromised on the other.

My assignment today is to capsule in a few minutes the nearly 28 years of partnership between the Unitarian Church in the city where the seeds of Unitarianism first germinated, the city of Torda in Transylvania, and the First Parish Church in Weston. Actually, as one who tries to be realistic in such matters, I am not going to even attempt such an extensive undertaking. Rather, I would like to examine briefly what I call the essence of partnership; I would like to encourage you to explore the new exhibit in the Rines Art Gallery that portrays our special relationship with the Unitarian Church in the birthplace of our theological heritage; and I would hope to instill in you a little curiosity, a curiosity to experience for yourself the spiritual transformation uniquely offered by our Unitarian brothers and sisters whose life experiences have been, and in many ways continue to be, quite different from our own.

Perhaps, from these introductory remarks, you can already get a hint of what I consider to be the essence of partnership. Perhaps, when you peruse the panels in the exhibit beyond the coat-rack area, you will notice that the photographs show few buildings and little scenery, and that the text includes very little history. This is deliberate, for the heart of our partnership consists of the personal relationships established between Weston folk and Torda folk interacting in each others' homes, in our respective churches and in our unique geographic surroundings. Partnership is the sum total of the stories, vignettes and anecdotes that arise from these relationships as told by the individuals involved in them on a face-to-face basis.

In sum, I would be pretentious if I tried to summarize the Weston-Torda partnership, or if I thought Dirk and I together could do the job. We are but two of three dozen First Parishioners who have ventured to Transylvania, and but two of a much larger group that has participated in the visits to Weston by the three Torda ministers who have served that church since 1990. If you really want to know what our partnership is all about, I suggest that you talk to one or more of the following:

Mary Menino  
Pam Banks  
Tracy Carlson  
Bill and Kathy Rousseau  
Tod and Georgia Foote  
Jim Lidington  
Dick and Jean Masland  
Alice Moylan  
Bill Sano  
Kathy Spier

As the saying goes, they have been there, done that.

Or check in with Mary and Larry Shaw, or Corky and Andrea Hoffman, who have hosted ministers from Torda when they visited Weston.

What all these people can share with you is priceless. Of course, Dirk and I will also be available to talk about one of our favorite subjects.

(DIRK) I noted earlier that I would address two ways in which our partnership is important. One is the historical significance of Torda. The other is not so cosmic in scope, but greater in the opportunity that it presents for our congregation.

When Larry and I first met our partners face-to-face, they were emerging from a long period of challenge to their culture, their safety, and their humanity from the totalitarian empire of Soviet-dominated communism. We did not know quite what to expect, but would not have been surprised to discover a grim picture of dispirited souls. We hoped we would know how to be helpful.

The material conditions that we encountered were challenging, as expected. What we encountered spiritually was a shocking and delightful surprise. Through centuries of war, Counter Reformation, dislocation, confiscations, injustice, friends who disappeared and returned broken or did not return, economic collapse, and more, our partners have kept their faith with God in a way that is hard to comprehend from our world of prosperity, freedom, and democratic institutions and traditions. The faith that Larry and I experienced was constantly evident in our partners' hospitality, generosity, gratitude, solemn and earnest piety, and tear-inducing joy. Centuries of worldly challenge have neither broken our partners' spirit nor extinguished their faith; rather, the travails that Transylvanians have faced have distilled their faith and fortified their spirit. Larry and I came home knowing without doubt that God exists, because we saw God in the eyes of our hosts.

Connecting with the deep faith of our partners offers great opportunity for our congregation -- if we make a continuous and enduring commitment to a strong future for our partnership with Torda. A new generation has grown up after the end of the communist regime. Our partners face opportunities and needs that have evolved considerably from what Larry and I found in 1992. First Parish can look forward to a future partnership that may in some ways differ from the past, but that rests on a foundation of faith that endures through changes and challenges. We have much to give, much to learn, and much for which to be grateful.