

First Unitarian Church

January 21, 2018

This week, people kept asking me what I was going to preach about today, and I was finding it hard to say in a way that would capture the energy of it.

Why it's the 450th anniversary of the Edict of Torda! Huzzah!

The 450 what??

January 13th was the 450th anniversary of the Edict of Torda, one of the world's first official proclamations of religious tolerance. It was issued by King John Sigismund of Transylvania.

When you live in a country with religious freedom inscribed in its constitution, it's easy to take that freedom for granted. But the idea used to be very radical. Religious freedom is still by no means the norm worldwide. And even here in the US, there are some real tensions around exactly what religious freedom means. Right now we are awaiting some important decisions by US Supreme Court on that very question.

As we practice creating communities of justice, compassion, and equality, we know it is important to hear the voices of our ancestors, to learn from their wisdom and their mistakes.

I define ancestors broadly: they are the people who walked the earth before us. We don't have to be their direct descendants. We are all interconnected, after all. From the grandparents of today's elders, to those who we only know from the most ancient stories, their lives and voices remind us that we are temporary guardians of a precious gift, the community of humankind, and they help us to ground our work in love for future generations.

So this story is important, and it is all the more remarkable for having happened in Eastern Europe, in Transylvania, right on the heels of the Reformation.

I preached about the Reformation on *its 500th* anniversary back in October. Many of you will remember the story of Martin Luther, the German monk who meant only to reform the powerful Catholic Church when he nailed his 95 theses to the church doors in Wittenburg.

He believed the Church was putting too much focus on acts, as opposed to faith. In particular, he believed that the Church had become corrupt in its emphasis on financially profitable acts. Buy an indulgence, and be forgiven for your sins, the church was saying, as it funded the building of St. Peter's Basilica, and the luxurious life of a decadent Pope. Martin Luther believed that faith, not acts, would lead to salvation. For protesting the way things were, he and his followers would be known as Protestants.

Europe was in an uproar over this. Challenging or accepting the doctrine of the Catholic church—and then even the new Protestant church— became a matter of life and death for many. I've shared the story of Miguel Serveto (known as Michael Servetus) before. He was our religious ancestor who noticed, as others would, that Jesus never spells out the trinity in the gospels. In 1553, after he told this to both the Catholic and newly established Protestant authorities, the Protestant John Calvin had him burned at the stake in Geneva. (Side note: When I told Servetus's story before, I believed he had been a teenager when he was executed. Actually, he was in his early forties.)

Not only was the Inquisition cracking down on these new Protestants, and Protestants cracking down on each other, but Christian nations were also feeling threatened by the ever more powerful Muslim Ottoman Empire, which was rapidly encroaching as it took over new territories. This would also be a significant factor in creating the circumstances that led to the edict.

So it's an interesting, and I think still relevant, story and today in honor of its 450th anniversary, I'm going to share it with you. For this message, I've gotten a lot of information from David Bumbaugh's book *Unitarian Universalism: a narrative history*.¹ You can check it out if you'd like to learn even more.

First, what exactly did the Edict of Torda say? The choir sang a portion of it this morning. Translated by Eva Kish, the English goes:

Preachers shall propagate the Gospel in all places, according to their own understanding, and if the community is willing to accept, that's all well and good; if not, no one is allowed to press them to adopt it in spite of their not being reassured in their heart; but they may keep a preacher whose teachings they like. And no one...may persecute them for this; no one is to be denounced or disparaged on account of religion... For faith is the gift of God, which comes from listening — listening to the words of God.

Right away we notice the word *Gospel*, and realize that this is not an edict of toleration for absolutely any religion. It is an edict of toleration for varieties of Christianity. Still, when we look back at it through the lens of modern religious scholarship, and especially through the lens of Unitarian Universalism, we can see that it was a starting point. And as scholarship progressed, religious tolerance would be able to expand.

Let's talk about the context in which it got this start. Transylvania was a territory within the country of Hungary until 1556. Hungary was already somewhat accustomed to diversity in those days. It had been part of a busy trading route between Europe and Asia.

Within Transylvania, multiple ethnic groups coexisted, albeit without mixing much. The region was nearly—but not quite—out of the reach of Roman influence, and because of its location, Transylvanians were regularly exposed to Greek Orthodox, Jewish, and Muslim influences.

Further contributing to an atmosphere of diverse opinions, the missionaries who had Christianized Transylvania a few hundred years earlier differed from Catholic doctrine in their theology. They were Arians, spelled with an *i* not a *y*, meaning they followed the teachings of Arius, who believed Christ was more than human, but not the same as God.

As our story begins, Transylvania is right on the frontlines of the long war between those Muslim forces from the East, and Christian forces from the West.

In 1526, there was a great battle, called the Battle of Mohacs [**moh**-hahch], that would usher in the end of the Middle Ages in Hungary. It was a battle between the Ottomans and the Hungarian army. When the Hungarians lost, their King Louis II was killed.

Two men attempted to fill the now-vacant throne. One was a Transylvanian named John Zapolya [**za**-pol-ya]. The other was an Austrian named Ferdinand. In the aftermath of that epic war, they were both appointed as king—by two different bodies.

Another battle broke out, this time between the two aspiring kings. John was chased out of Hungary and took temporary refuge in Poland. From there, he appealed directly to the Ottoman leader, the Sultan Suleiman [**su**-lay-**mon**] the Magnificent. The Sultan, who did not appreciate Ferdinand's affinity for Western Europe, got back in the fight. Ten years later, neither man had won yet. Tired, they signed a treaty. John got to keep Transylvania and a little more Hungarian land, while Ferdinand held onto the lands he already had.

According to the treaty, John would be the official king of Hungary, but if he died without an heir, everything would go to Ferdinand. That was the deal.

Now, the question was, would John Zapolya leave an heir? The answer is: yes, but just *barely*.

In 1539, he married a Polish princess: Isabella. When John Zapolya became mortally ill just one year later, Queen Isabella was already with child. On his deathbed, he learned that a son had been born. John Zapolya died two weeks later.

It looked like everything would work out fine. But wait: Ferdinand showed up again! He was trying to usurp the infant heir and take the throne for himself. Luckily, the Sultan was ready, and fended him off once more. John Zapolya's infant son, John Sigismund, was now king. Until he came of age, his mother Isabella and two counselors would serve in his stead.

Well, no, wait- here comes Ferdinand again! He has bribed one of Isabella's counselors to betray her! But... she catches on and flees to Poland with the child king. The Sultan again intervenes, and she is restored to the throne in Hungary. Back and forth! What tumult. It's a game of thrones.

Meanwhile, something else has been happening. Both John Zapolya and Ferdinand were staunch Catholics, and they had opposed the spread of Protestantism in Hungary, but their governments hadn't been strong enough to keep it truly at bay. When Isabella and the young king were out of the country, and the Sultan was holding Ferdinand back, another leader—this time one who called himself a Protestant—had temporarily taken the helm. And he had made the most of it, to say the least. (If you're still thinking about Game of Thrones, think about the character Littlefinger.)

The Catholic bishop and other Catholic officials fled the country. Priests were removed from office, Protestantism was preached instead, and by the time Isabella and her son John Sigismund returned, the movement had gathered up way too much speed to stop.

Isabella knew it was too late to turn back. She had to do something to try to bring the people of the land together. In 1557, four-hundred-and-sixty-one years ago, eleven years before this anniversary UUs are celebrating, while King John Sigismund was still a teenager, it was actually his mother, Isabella who first issued—also at Torda!—an edict of religious toleration, in these words:

Inasmuch as We and Our Most Serene Son have assented to the most instant supplication of the Peers of the Realm, that each person maintain whatever religious faith he wishes, with old or new rituals, while We at the same time leave it to their judgment to do as they please in the matter of faith, just so long, however, as they bring no harm to bear on anyone at all, lest the followers of a new religion be a source of irritation to the old profession of faith or become in some way injurious to its followers.

It's archaic language, but what she's saying is *let's stop fighting. You have your beliefs, and we will have ours*. Although it apparently did not carry as much weight as The Edict of Torda, which her son would issue after her death, and which was similar in language and spirit, Isabella was in fact the first European ruler to make a law of religious tolerance.

This is really remarkable. Further west, the Inquisition is in full force, and the Protestant authorities are also cracking down on what they see as heretical ideas. Michael Servetus has just been burned at the stake a few years earlier for denying the trinity. Those who claimed Jesus was human and that God is one, not three, were called Unitarians. Unitarianism was considered one of the worst heresies by both the Catholic and Protestant officials.

Perhaps Servetus's death is not unrelated to Isabella's edict. Isabella's close advisor and physician, Giorgio Biandrata, had been there when Servetus was executed, and he was horrified by it. He himself had begun adopting anti-trinitarian views—John Calvin had actually kicked him out of Zurich for it.

Isabella went on to call for a gathering of religious leaders for public conversation about their differences, opening the door to an officially endorsed, peaceable debate about Protestantism versus Catholicism.

As he came of age, the King kept with his mother's edict. In 1663, the deliberative body at Torda reaffirmed it.

But it was the arrival of David Ferenc [fer-**ens**], known as Francis David, as John Sigismund's court preacher, that formed a turning point for Unitarian theology.

Francis David had long harbored doubts about the doctrine of the trinity. When he became court preacher, he found himself in conversation with Biandrata, who had picked up Unitarian ideas from Michael Servetus. Francis David, who was also familiar with Servetus's teachings, found the topic fascinating. When Francis David began preaching Unitarian theology from the pulpit, it drew controversy... which of course only served to draw more public attention to the issue.

Other Protestants accused Unitarians of being a stepping-stone to Islam, with their one God.ⁱⁱ Their suspicion was not unfounded, though the Unitarians would have said they had it backward. Rather than being a stepping-stone for Christians toward Islam, some Unitarians saw their faith as a stepping-stone from Islam to Christianity.

Some, like Michael Servetus, believed that if the Christian faith had not been made to seem polytheistic through the Trinity, many Muslims would have been willing to convert. The Quran has so much to say about Jesus, even calling him a Messiah, that Servetus and Transylvanian Unitarian thinkers tended to see Islam more as another Christian heresy, rather than a different religion altogether.

Another argument against Unitarianism was that those who believed Jesus was merely human were being too *Jewish*. This is a good reminder that the religious tolerance we are talking about here was by Christians for Christians—it was not interfaith tolerance.

Soon another public debate was organized. Biandrata made the case that the only language the debaters should use was scriptural language—no doctrine, philosophy, or theology, only scripture. In a sense, this was in keeping with Martin Luther's own rule. "*Sola scriptura*", Luther had said. Only scripture had final authority as the word of God.

But Luther was a strict Trinitarian, and it happened that in this context referring only to scripture put the Trinitarians at a serious disadvantage. The trinity was not articulated until 325 C.E. It is not explicitly named in the scriptures. Luther probably never imagined that his claim would lead to Unitarianism. But especially in Transylvania, it did. Francis David became a very skillful debater, as well as widely published. He eventually preached to big crowds, converting them to Unitarianism.

On January 13, 1568, with Unitarianism coming into its own alongside Catholicism, Calvinism, and Lutheranism, John Sigismund—who himself either had become or was on the brink of becoming a Unitarian—issued his famous Edict of Torda.ⁱⁱⁱ

In it he named those four traditions as the “received” religions of the realm, providing Unitarians, who were still a minority, with official recognition for the first time, and as some protection for the years to come. It’s a good thing. Because the next day while John Sigismund was hunting, his carriage toppled over. He died from his injuries two months later.

The man who succeeded him, Stephen Bathori, promised to uphold the edict of Torda, even as he fired Francis David, confiscated the printing press, and censored Unitarian works. In 1572, he clarified that as he saw it the decree only applied to the four religions *as they existed at the time*. No new innovations would be tolerated.

Francis David, who loved nothing more than wrestling with ambiguity or uprooting error in church teachings, pressed on. At first, he did so privately. But soon, as he grew in personal conviction, he took his new understandings to the pulpit.

Eventually, he was found guilty of “innovation” and sentenced to life imprisonment. He died in a dungeon on November 15, 1579.

Transylvanian Unitarians would experience many more generations of hardship, right on up through the Second World War. Nevertheless, there are thriving Unitarian churches in Transylvania to this day.

My friends, the freedom to believe according to our consciences, and to worship freely, has been hard won. American Unitarians do not trace our history directly to Transylvania, but we share the same Protestant influences, and we claim Isabella and John Sigismund and Francis David as heroes right alongside Michael Servetus.

Our faith has continued to evolve. In the effort to take the scriptures very seriously, later ancestors discovered that the scriptures themselves betray their historicity—they are historical documents written as such and curated by historical people.

Following the early Unitarians’ conviction that Jesus wanted people to follow him, not worship him, our later ancestors noted that Jesus did not model hate and fear, but compassion and love. They became curious about other religious traditions. They began to appreciate them and to promote interfaith tolerance. Today, interfaith partnerships are one of our most treasured spiritual practices.

Here in the US, the “Universalist” part of our tradition reflects our belief that all are ultimately from one source, and will be reconciled with that source. No one has the monopoly on religious truth, and no one will be eternally damned for their spiritual beliefs.

We know that there is more than one right way.

After I preached on the Reformation last fall, some of you took the opportunity to write your own “theses” or convictions down in the social hall. What you wrote is a beautiful reflection of Unitarian Universalism today.

“If you live in generosity and gratefulness, you can more easily find joy.”

“Be the change you wish to see in the world.” That’s a quote popularly attributed to Gandhi, a Hindu.

“There is no sin so great that a loving deity would not forgive.”

“If your God hates the same people you do you can be fairly sure you created him.”

“Service to others is the rent we pay for our time on Earth.”

“Heaven and Hell are states of mind; either is yours if you wish it.”

“Not all suffering is the product of sin.”

“Find peace through forgiveness.”

And how about this one: “Compassion and ethics are not mutually exclusive.”

I especially like that last one. Compassion and ethics are not mutually exclusive.

Too often in the history of religion, people have put their moral convictions above the need for compassion.

As our Supreme Court deliberates about whether religious people should be free to discriminate against others, I pray that compassion reigns. It is not right that the religious ethic of one person should cause harm to another.

And as we navigate this time of political division and hateful rhetoric, I pray that we too will be led by compassion. To live our values, to defend, empower, and stand with those who are not yet treated as equals, and to make our case strongly, without violence of speech or action.

We honor our ancestors, and we are guided by love for future generations, when we build on what they have done right, learn from what they have done wrong, and when we live our conviction that we need not think alike to love alike.

So may love guide and protect us, and may it be so for all people.

ⁱ Bumbaugh, David. Unitarian Universalism: a narrative history. Meadville Lombard Theological School Press: Chicago, 2000.

ⁱⁱ Hughes, Peter. “In the Footsteps of Servetus: Biandrata, David, and the Quran.” The Journal of Unitarian Universalist History. V 31. 2006-2007 (57)

ⁱⁱⁱ Curiously, I could not find that date in the Bumbaugh text, but the UUA is clear about it: <https://www.uua.org/international/torda450>