

Draft

NO HIDING OUR CHALICE FLAME
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson
January 9, 2011

Good morning everyone, and thank you for being here today. A special thanks as always for our music and everyone who prepares for Sundays. Please remember that there will be refreshments in the social hall for the first 50 or so lucky people who get there after the service. And also I'd remind us that we'll have a time for conversation after my remarks.

Imagine for a moment that you are coming to a Unitarian Universalist church or fellowship for the first time. You might have done research online about Unitarians. You might have taken a Belief-net quiz that suggests you might be Unitarian, Liberal Quaker, Buddhist, Pagan or all the above.

You've been to churches before and they have generally the same appearance. There's a large open space with seating and a front area for speakers and singers. There's a piano or organ and in megachurches lots of space for the rock band. And if you're in a Christian church, there's at least one cross in the front on the wall or elsewhere.

So you walk in here but aside from the chairs, piano, and pulpit, there's nothing really to indicate what religious faith call ourselves.

You watch in some measure of bafflement as shortly after announcements a chalice is lit with a flame and then a unison affirmation.

What on earth have you gotten yourself into here?

This morning I'd like to see if I can help answer that question in three ways: the origin of the flaming chalice, the Protestant and Christian symbolism that continues in the chalice shape, and lastly the flame itself. The first two represent the past and the flame suggests the future.

What's the meaning of the chalice itself? Jan Hus, a priest of Prague who was at the center of a controversy with Rome in the year 1415. Hus had been won over to the idea of "the priesthood of all believers" - a phrase you often hear repeated in Unitarian Universalist circles. Simply put, the idea is that all people - clergy and laity, priests, Popes and common folk - have equal access to the divine, equal access to religious experience, to the possibility of spiritual growth.

Hus spoke out against the common practice of allowing only priests to partake of the communion wine, while the bread was shared openly with all believers. Hus did more than speak out. He began to serve both the bread and the wine to his congregation during communion - a practice that quickly

drew the attention of Catholic higher-ups. When he refused to admit this "doctrinal error" - and instead and continue offering what was considered "the sacrificial blood of Christ" to his flock - Hus was brought before the Council of Constance, and tried for heresy.

He was, as we might expect, found guilty and - still steadfast in his belief in the universal availability of salvation, as symbolized in Jesus' own act of sharing the communion chalice at the Last Supper - Hus was sentenced to be burned at the stake. His followers, known as Hussites, continued in secret the practice of fully shared communion, and, significantly, adopted as their symbol a chalice with a flame. Over time, this symbol even became the unofficial emblem of the Czech people, and particularly of Czech nationalism - to the point that when, in 1968, Soviet Army tanks rolled into Prague, graffiti featuring chalices with flames spread throughout the town in symbolic resistance.

Would Jan Hus have called himself a Unitarian Universalist? Probably not. He would also have raised his eyebrows at our eclectic theology. The symbol of the chalice, though, makes us indebted to him for many reasons.

The symbolism of the chalice goes even deeper into our history.

When we think of Jesus, what symbol is most closely associated with him? The cross is almost a universal answer. Many Christian churches have crosses outside or on their roof. More traditional churches – especially Catholic ones – will have the figure of Jesus on the cross in what is always a sad and sobering reminder of his crucifixion by Romans.

What many people don't realize is that the figure of Jesus on the cross is nearly unknown prior to the 11th century. The cross was a common symbol in Christianity, of course, but it was a symbol of paradise. Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, the president of one of our theological seminaries and UU feminist theologian wrote these words about the cross in the first thousand years of Christianity. **“During its first millennium, Christianity focused its sights on paradise, resurrection and the living presence of Christ. The cross was a [ever-present] image in Christian art during those years, but it was always depicted as a resurrection cross – a sign of the promise of life. The cross appears blossoming into a spiraling green tree, issuing forth cascades of water flowing from the Garden of Eden, bursting into a sun at dawn...but virtually nowhere during the first thousand years of Christianity do we find the cross depicted with a man nailed to it, dying an anguished death.”** Rev. Parker says that this transformed the symbol of Christian faith into violence and away from the teachings of Jesus that spoke of non-violent resistance to authority. She later

writes that the image of the cross – so present in the Western world – has come to be associated with conditional redemption and Christ taking on the burden of all our sins.

We might well argue that we have avoided that particular symbolism by not having a cross here. But let's return to the symbol of the chalice. In fact, the chalice does symbolically look like a cross and if you look at it on our order of service or other documents, the similarity is unmistakable.

So the chalice represents a host of symbols. It represents the communion cup that represented the wine shared with common people and not just the priesthood. It represents the authentic cross of Jesus that affirms life and not death. The chalice can also symbolize a bowl that is filled with food for the spirit.

Finally, there's the image of the flame. The Christian cross will have the crossbars of wood – vertical and horizontal. It is simple but rigid. The chalice with its flame has an ever-changing life to it. The flame is always moving, always taking new shape and always creating light to shine outward into the darkness.

When I got here last summer, I remember a Morning Reflection conducted by someone that had a talk about the chalice you see here today. Apparently there'd been some discussion about what type of oil or candle substance to use for the source of the flame. I guess there was worry that the aroma of the oil or candles would cause allergies for those who have extreme sensitivity to odors.

Fair enough, I thought, but I was concerned about the really small flame that was produced by a single candle. I could hardly see it from the back row that Sunday and as the new interim minister, I was concerned with that symbolism.

Was it possible that there'd been not enough time for creative minds to think of ways to make the flame larger and more robust? After all, Clemson is crawling with engineers, scientists, and other creative people who could accomplish such a task. Maybe someone could put a laser on the chalice and have it go through the roof. That would truly be a chalice to behold.

“Wait a minute” I thought to myself, that's why I am here. This is a job for an interim minister.

A few weeks later I was in Harrisburg Pennsylvania to do a lecture and Sunday service there on addiction ministry. The minister lit the chalice and it was impressive. No light under a bushel basket there. This flame challenged the room and lit the morning.

I asked the minister if he could share the secret chalice flame formula. Sure, he said – it was 91% rubbing alcohol, 3 tablespoons rock salt and put both into an empty sterno container.

I am afraid I didn't take the chalice flame renewal project through the proper channels here when I returned. I showed Julie and Elaine and then decided to surprise you with it last fall.

There was a second concern I had about such a small flame last August. Did it say that UUFC wanted to be small and invisible in a largely conservative part of the United States? I've heard variations of this concern in other places, too. Springfield, Illinois, Roseburg, Oregon and Yakima, Washington all come to mind.

This has been my response each time that issue has come up when I am being interviewed for a ministry: **“Great - that means that there's little competition?”** And usually someone will say “well, people will laugh at us because we're those liberals.” My answer is **“they know you're liberal already so there's no use hiding it under a bushel basket, is there?”**

So here you have it. Here's a chalice flame worthy of the name and I bet this liberal religious community is also worthy of its name.

Given the events of yesterday in Arizona, the importance of this flame and this liberal religious community is all the more essential.

There are many variations of the 22 year old gunman who killed at least 5 people and wounded many others including a Democratic Congresswoman. They live all over this world, country, and region and in the larger Clemson community. They are of no particular race, religion or ethnic identity. They are angry and frightened people and their greatest hope is that we religious liberals would go away.

Their greatest hope is that we would be silent and invisible and hope others pay no attention to us.

Their fondest wish would be that no new visitors would come to our doors seeking our journey to wholeness.

Their anger, fear, loathing and frustration would demand our chalice flame be a tiny candle flame and not one that is robust and courageous.

What is your choice?

How visible do you want your flame of truth, compassion and insight to really be?