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The Joy of Religious Freedom

Letter to Thessalonians 3,5

In 1868, 300 years after the Edict of Torda, our then bishop Kriza Janos wrote these enthusiastic lines:

"Our God, The souls of our joyful people set ablaze as we walk through the memories

Some memories nice and well: the shining letters of your spirit;

Some memories sad and instructive: the wise moves of your hand."

It took 300 years after the Edict of Torda for our denomination to be allowed to publicly commemorate the religious freedom declared in 1568. It was only after those 300 years that we could share our souls being set ablaze, our joy of religious freedom.

Today, 425 years after the Edict of Torda we came together yet again, we the people for whom the edict was so paramount. Not surprising the we, just like our predecessors, feel that overwhelming joy, that tremendous gratefulness toward God. On this day of celebration our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs make us similar to the joy Apostle Paul felt when he wrote his first letter to Thessalonians:

"For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before God".

My celebrating brothers and sisters! Apostle Paul's joyful message arose from very special circumstances. Paul and his disciples worked very hard to bring the teaching of Jesus to Thessalonica. Their work was successful at first, as Paul stated: "For you are our glory and joy".. But then came a time of distress for the young congregation. Paul recognized the trying times for Thessalonica, and sent his favorite disciple, Timotheus to strengthen the congregation. Upon his return Timotheus brings good news about the faith of the congregation, and reports that they are standing firm in their belief in the Lord. Upon hearing that the Thessalonians are holding onto their faith with love, and zeal, Paul is overcome with gratitude, and that's when he utters the words: "For what thanks can we render to God again for you".

Could the Unitarians be in a similar position 425 years after the Edict of Torda? Could we feel the same joy and obligation as Paul, to express our gratitude to God, our father? Let us examine the similarities in the light of getting our congregations started, in the light of standing firm in trying times, and in the light of our renewed faithfulness.

We are grateful for the start of our denomination. While our faith origins reach all the way to that manger in Bethlehem, more pointedly we are grateful for the Edict of Torda, as that secured for us unitarians the legal framework, so we could preach and teach the theology of “God is One”; the theology that was forbidden before the Edict. It was only after the Edict that Ferenc David could publicly state: “In the entire fine Scripture there is no more self-evident pronouncement than the pronouncement of “God is One”. After the Edict we could state that we consider Jesus Christ the Son of God not because his conception, not because of his resurrection, but because of his teachings, his actions, and his ability to attune his living flesh to the will of the Divine. This is why we, unitarians, believe that it is more important to understand, to identify, and to fulfill the will of the Divine, rather than just express belief in dogmas, religious instructions.

After the Edict we could state the most significant message of Unitarianism is to act in our every day lives the love of Jesus. The Edict also meant that for the formation of the Unitarian belief system we could now freely examine the truthfulness of statements from other religions, and we could freely state the results of those examinations in public, without any compromises without limits or restraints. We could also put into action our own relationship with God. No one could break that relationship, and no one could force that relationship on anyone.

Our spiritual convictions triumphed over any title and rank. In other words, we now had the choice to accept a religious argument based on our personal conviction anchored in our intellect and in current thoughts, and not because the argument was dictated or widely popularized.

It was that Edict that directed us not only to be tolerant, but to be accepting of other faiths and world views. We could act on the call of Jesus for universal kindness in John 13, 35: “ By this shall all know that ye are my disciples if ye have love one to other”.

The Edict of Torda was the result of tireless work of Ferenc David, and the wisdom of John Sigismund. Today the Edict is considered a masterpiece of Transylvanian, Hungarian, and even European civic culture.

We are giving thanks for the steadfastness of prior Unitarian generations. Transylvanian unitarians have stood by the ideals of the Edict. In addition, we have been making efforts to apply our worldview internationally. However, it is indisputable that we have gone through ordeals, persecutions, and restrictions. Very much like the Thessalonians we stood shivering in the cold, ransacked, defenseless in the storms of history. Yet, there were many who resisted giving up while suffering, and never faltered. Those resisters, those most ardent believers, bequeathed a message for us that the blazing souls of unitarians could not be extinguished, our sacred convictions could not be annihilated, and that our deep seated religious faith could not be erased. Those resisters guarded their faith as they guarded the memory of the caressing hand of their father, and the memory of their loving mother slicing bread for a meal. In the light of such past is it any wonder that we wish to express our highest gratitude for the sacrifice of those resisters? “For what thanks can we render to God for you?”.

We also give thanks to God that we could be present here to witness this gathering of our people around the flag of religious freedom, and freedom of conscience. What makes this even more of a special occasion is that our celebration is going on in the midst of a fast moving new world where we

are bombarded with distractions. We derive courage from this celebration to face our current challenges of being restricted, humiliated and shamed. From this celebration we gain the power to hold onto our religious and national identity, hold on to our plans for a better future. It is my strong conviction that we should have no fear that we as people, or our faith would be lost; we shall remain. As stated in Paul's letter to Timothy 1, 7: "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of sound mind."

My Dear Brothers and Sisters! During the jumbled, quick-sand filled, ever shifting past few years we have referenced religious freedom, and asked for what was taken from us, but very little was given. We have knocked on many doors, but very few opened to us. Regardless, we have no reason to be gloomy. It is us who are the guarding the religious freedom; that is our destiny. We must continue to be hopeful, and steadfast, as Matthew 7, 7-8 states: " Ask and it shall be given you, seek, and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you, For everyone that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocked it shall be opened."

The introductory words of Kriza Janos is flowing through our minds, feelings, and actions: Our God, the souls of our joyful people set ablaze" My hope is that we all take to heart it's message, and that we all feel that our soul is set ablaze for our future as well as for our past. Paul stated in his first letter to Thessalonians : "And the Lord make you increase and abound in love one toward another and toward all men, even as we do toward you.

Amen.