

Author: Kovács Sándor. Hungarian original was published in Keresztény Magvető, 2018, 111, 449-453, with the title: "Féluton". All copyrights remain with the publisher.

UnitarianTorch contact: [kokenyesi@unitariantorch.com](mailto:kokenyesi@unitariantorch.com)

### On the way there

"For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God."

Ezekiel 36, 24-28

My Dear Brothers and Sisters. My usual day begins with readings of a few bible verses from the Old Testament or the New testament, and then I sit down in front of my computer and answer emails. Once I'm done with that, I surf the internet. The other day I typed in the search term "religious freedom" into Google. In about 0.3 seconds I had 96,700 hits. The top hit was from Wikipedia, and then, I was proud and surprised to see, the following hits lining up under each other:

Unitarians commemorated the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the edict on religious freedom.

The Parliament declared January 13 the Day of Religious Freedom.

Transylvania gave birth to the ideal of religious freedom.

Brussels remembered the Transylvanian religious freedom.

Iohannis and the religious liberty.

I was satisfied with my finding that the cyberspace is full of news items on unitarians and on religious freedom. I could've spent my entire day with reading each search result on religious freedom, but I had to stop reading as my religious education duties called me away. I had to drive to Kolozsvar, but for some reason the road near Torda was closed, and I had to detour through the middle of town. Near the Catholic church there was a traffic jam at the roundabout, and yet another detour. I was about to use words incompatible with my black robe, when, near the Unitarian church I caught a glimpse of the monument to religious freedom. I'm not sure how Illyes Gyula felt when he saw the Geneva monument of reformation, but I can tell you that right there, on the car seat, I felt moved. As the sunshine shimmered on the monument, my thoughts were

stepping upwards, and then took on the wings of the doves of the monument. From then on my trip to Kolozsvár was all about blessed thoughts; no more traffic worries.

First, I remembered my reading that morning of Ezekiel 36; 24-28. "For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God." I tried to picture in my mind how the prophet might have felt as he, together with Judea's political leaders, was exiled to Babylon. He was personally experiencing the miserable existence of people moved away from their compatriots, and forced to become a minority. In the minds of the exiled the thought of returning home stayed alive for a while, but then, years later, they can only cry on the banks of the river Kebar, as they lamented the fate of Jerusalem (as we can read in Psalms 137).

On the way between Torda and Kolozsvár I began to enumerate just how many times Hungarians and our Unitarian church have lived the story of the Babylonian exile. When I was still in Torda I was so excited about the deeds of our ancestors 450 years ago. Then the prophet reminded me that we were scattered into the four corners of the world, and how we are currently experiencing life as a minority, an unprotected minority at that. How unfortunate we are, I sighed, that we are a minority by our nationality, and also by our religion, and that we are so scattered. What a bitter turn of fate is ours that we now have to abide by the decisions of the majority. We have to endure the dispersion of our compatriots, and we have to exist as prisoners of the majority culture. I was ready to continue grieving over all that, as we, Hungarians, are given to grieving so easily. By the time I was driving near Felek, I was about to lament the fate of Torda, our Jerusalem. However, my thought took flight further upward, and I suddenly realized that we don't have to lament our own Jerusalem, because that is the site that marks our sacrifices, the site that marks our triumphs, the site that represents God's loving and caring relation to us. I felt it deep in my bones that God has cared for us in the past, and his caring continues through the present.

As the road started to descend towards Kolozsvár, I saw the entire city from above. I didn't cry, because I knew that in that image of the city God is speaking hopeful, encouraging words. Well, here it is. The first evidence of God's presence among us: he gathered us here, today. God's promise to Ezekiel included the gathering his children, and giving them their own country. It's been at least eleven hundred years since God gave us our own country, and it's been 450 years since our church was established in this corner of the world, and we've been living our daily lives here ever since.

God is our witness just how many times our churches have been taken from us, how many times our people have been decimated. It's a miracle we still exist. Not only we exist, but we gathered to celebrate under the banner of religious freedom and Christian unity. I love to see every members of my extended family gather around the dinner table at bigger celebrations. When I'm with you here, I feel that I'm sitting down to a huge, richly set table with my faith brothers.

We wash hands before sitting down to the dinner table, and our benevolent God cleanses us once we are gathered. "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean" said the prophet Ezekiel. Let's leave it to the scholars of Old Testament whether this passage is a prophetic vision of Christianity, or a reference to a Jewish ritual (I happen to believe it's the latter). As God has gathered us and cleansed our thoughts, he washed away prejudices and toppled false idols. One such false idol, especially for us, ministers, is the visible parts of our church, and our establishments. So many times we commit the mistake of worshipping our institution, when worship is due only for whom is behind and above those institutions. And I don't mean the church deans or our bishop, but our God. I'm truly proud that 450 years ago at Torda the noble ideal of religious freedom was decreed and was made into law the first time ever, thanks to the chaperoning by our church founder. However, too much pride in individuals may lead to undue bias. So, it's time to ask myself, and you all, my brothers and sisters, just where do you think we were 450 years ago? We were there in God's plan of eternal love and mercy. So, it makes sense that the fact that Torda still stands, and Hungarians are still exist even after a series of unfortunate and adverse events, are not our glorious achievement, but it is God's.

It is the sign of God's providence that he rather considers our deeds, than the number of our church buildings or the statistics on our parishioners. The sign of God's mercy is that he dispenses salvation rather out of his endless love, than based on our national identity, or on our denomination.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, I believe that our Lord who gave us life, now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century wants to change all of us Christians. Not to change all of us into a single denomination under a single bishop, not even to form a single political party. Rather to change us into people who commit to the ideal of religious freedom and Christian unity; commit in our hearts not only with our mouths.

We hear about self-improvement all the time. We hear promises from miracle healers and quacks on how to improve ourselves. We try to navigate between Eastern mysticism and Western technology, when all we need to do is to recognize that our determination must be paired with the power of God to bring about that improvement. Because God has a plan for us, he intends to carry out a painful operation. He is giving us a new heart. Our heart of stone is replaced by a perceptive heart of flesh.

Let's not deceive ourselves about our heart of stone. Just because a heart is made of stone it can still display temper and feelings. Here are a few typical features of a heart

of stone: disinterest, laziness, unassuredness, indifference, hotheadedness, being greedy, narrow mindedness. What kind of heart is beating inside of us? Is that the heart of Baradlay Kazmer? Will we hear at our memorial service the words that were spoken at Baradlay Kazmer's service? Baradlay was the central figure in the novel titled "The Sons of the Stone Hearted Man" by Jokai Mor, a famous Hungarian writer. Baradlay had this read at his funeral:

"Did you help the destitute? No, you didn't.

Did you lift up the downtrodden? No, you didn't.

Did you offer shelter to the persecuted? No, you didn't.

Did you listen to the pleas of the desperate? No, you didn't.

Did you forgive the defeated? No, you didn't.

Did you offer kindness when you received kindness? No, you didn't.

The answers are always no.

The cast iron door of the crypt was shut with a bang."

One can live quietly, comfortably with a heart of stone; such heart is not moved into action, and it is no source of aspiration to act. With a heart of stone one can easily be a Sunday Christian. The owner of a heart of stone believes that he has already rendered everything into God, and expects that God renders everything into him. The heart of flesh, on the other hand, is a heart that feels. Here are a few characteristics of a person with a heart of flesh: openness, willingness to do good, calmness, trust, patience, generosity. The heart of flesh aspires to act, and is compelled to be sympathetic and forgiving.

Dear my friends! With that heart of flesh God gives a piece of himself to us: his features onto our faces, his soul into our soul. And something else will change: for the person with the heart of flesh it will be no burden to follow God's laws and commands. It will be natural for us to respect differences in language, religion and sexual orientation. People who are rejuvenated in their heart and their soul are patient, forgiving; they wouldn't force their political convictions, religion, or traditions onto others.

Nadudvari Peter, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Protestant preacher who clashed frequently with Unitarian ideals writes: "No one should think that this concept of mutual tolerance belongs to the ages of apostles, because it also pertains to modern day Christians.

Apor Peter (1676-1752), a Catholic Transylvanian writer reflected on his youth: "We used to respect each other's private religious convictions, be it Catholic, Calvinist or Unitarian. We were all Hungarian people, we liked each other, we drank together. Even within our marriages we weren't concerned about religion. Bethlen Gergely had a

Catholic wife; Apor Istvan had a Calvinist wife; the Catholic Gyulafi Laszlo had a Unitarian wife; the Catholic Thorockai Istvan had a Calvinist wife. The married couples didn't stop their religious practices; when one went to a mass, the other was reciting prayers. But today people of different religions look at each other like enemies. While I call on the Holy Spirit to bring the Spirit of God to those with other religions, but I don't see why I should consider them enemies. Even the Holy Mother Church maintains that us, Catholics, should have affection for them" (Apro Peter: Metamorphosis Transylvaniae) [I want to thank Marko Bela for his excellent writing titled "Tornyok a vizben (Erdelyi valóságiródalom) appeared in Elet es Irodalom, LXII Evfolyam, 22 szám, 2018]. Accepting each other, respecting the free choice of religion by them is God's command.

My car slowly rolled into the yard of the Janos Zsigmond Unitarian High School. I turned off the engine, put the keys into my pocket, and stepped onto the stairs. Upwards.

Amen