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Our Tradition of Renewal

"Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.'"

John 3, 7-8

"But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God *is* Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

John 4, 23-24

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

The anniversary of the proclamation of religious freedom is also the anniversary of the founding of the Hungarian Unitarian Church. The Edict of Torda became the Pentecost of our church community which has been devoutly guarding the spirit and the values of the founders. This true Christian community, whose members follow the teaching of renewal, and the example of Jesus bringing the message of a God whose love is unconditional, could not have chosen a better coat of arms that says we should be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves". Throughout our history that harmless dove reassured us like a phoenix bird rising from his ashes: despite the bonfires of church confiscations, censorship, persecution, denigration, ridicule, and a series of slights we got back on our feet time and time again. But even during those days of hardship we didn't disavow our rich intellectual heritage, and we didn't curb our patience, our respect, and our brotherly love toward our neighbors and foreigners alike. We acted like that, like disciples of Jesus, even when our very existence was threatened because we followed our faith and our convictions, and maintained a kind and peaceful attitude toward others. But, then we came back to life from what seemed like serious devastations. We not only survived all that, but we were born again, because it became evident that religious faith sanctified by the Holy Spirit is not a flickering flame, but it is a divine light for all who have "ears that hear and eyes that see". A divine light that proclaims forgiveness, love, mutual respect and tolerance, a just and equitable society.

A divine light for all who understand and sense that the true message of the Gospel is liberating and empowering human life with dignity. A divine light which is the sign of God's presence, and the source of the inner power that energizes and inspires action.

That wise political decision 450 years ago was assisted by the experience of the presence of the Holy Spirit and by the willingness to hear the message of the Gospel. In that vein, the decree of the Diet reflected the spirit of the Transylvanian people, was propelled forward by the energy and enthusiasm of Hungarian and Saxon nobleman, the Catholic and Protestant clergy, to create a lasting agreement. Instead of selfish interests, what won out that day was the shared interest such as domestic tranquility, undisturbed peaceful growth, mutual respect decreed and written in law. For those reasons the Day of Religious Freedom is a story of the difficult labor and subsequent success of the collaboration between individuals of different faiths, and between communities of different faiths. Once openness and patience won out over the trend of selfish interests, the trust in mutual respect was strengthened. All that would be unimaginable without the willingness to revise the older norms and frameworks.

In the year of 1568 Transylvania became officially the land of freedom of conscience and of freedom of religion, as that decree that started with the words "His Majesty Our Lord" ensured religious freedom for individuals; it enabled communities to choose a priest or minister of their liking, and it prohibited bishops from interfering in any way with religious freedom. The edict stated: "in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well. If not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the previous statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching. For faith is the gift of God and this comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God." (translation quoted from Ritchie, Susan J. (2014). *Children of the Same God: The Historical Relationship Between Unitarianism, Judaism, and Islam*. Skinner House Books.) It was Ferenc David who laid the foundation for the quote you just heard. With an approach typical for him, in his evangelical spirit and faith he turned to the Bible, and he used it to justify the necessity of religious freedom. He and the Diet referred to Letter to Ephesians ("For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God"; Ephesians 2, 8) when formulating the declaration stating that faith is the gift of God.

It is unlikely that without the demand for renewal the declaration of religious freedom would have been written into law at Torda. Without the demand for renewal our church wouldn't have been established, and the unitarian theology would not have been disseminated. That demand for renewal resulted in the expression of the wish to return to a type of Christianity that is deeply rooted in the Christian faith lived out without mediation.

The renewal, and its religious, conscience-related radical version, repentance, may be understood as a return to the kindness, and to the divine truth. Repentance is a frequent topic of conversation in the sense that we have to undergo a renewal to born again, to return to a conduct of life that satisfies God. In the New Testament John the Baptist preached about the necessity of that, and, later on, Jesus sounded a similarly urgent call. At the 450th anniversary of the decree the question for us is: how we might get actively involved in the protection of the freedom of conscience, and in its widespread acceptance.

The Gospel of John describes an intriguing meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus, who seeks out Jesus in secrecy. The writer of the Gospel positions Jesus as a teacher who is misunderstood by his peers, such as Nicodemus who consequently appears witless and stagnant-minded. Jesus nonetheless narrows down his answers to the essential: he talks about the Kingdom of God. To the question of why we should repent, reexamine and born again his answer is simple: because reaching the Kingdom of God is at stake. And the Kingdom of God is a treasure more valuable than any other. In some passages of the Gospels Jesus declares that one may enter the Kingdom of God only if one becomes I left that Gospel quote unfinished on purpose. We may easily misunderstand, as Nicodemus did, the essence of the teachings of Jesus, if we were to seek an itemized list, or a recipe-like instructions in the words of Jesus. In our time the questions of Nicodemus, and the answers of Jesus might be worded more contemporarily. For us the questions are: how we might change, what should we become to reach the Kingdom of God. Indeed, what should we become? There are few questions where the answers are so personal, and where the answers have such a decisive effect on the communities where we live. It is very much worthwhile to spend some time on this topic: "what do you want to become?". Do you want to be like any of your relatives or acquaintances? What are the conditions to become who you truly desire to be?

We inherited a church that deserves our sacrifices, because it is about the life of a community that is bravely and calmly walking down the path of living the life in the spirit of Jesus. Our search for the truth has led us to views of the world and views of the individual life, that are more inclusive and more humane than previous Christian views. Our Unitarian spirituality reflects the honest search for the truth without invoking dogmas. Our Unitarian spirituality reflects a scrupulous exploration from our natural stance that we can make true progress by grappling with difficult and inconvenient questions, rather than accepting one-size-fits-all kind of answers.

The spirit of the diet of Torda is calling on our church to be the conscience of our society, to lift up those who were unjustly slighted or persecuted without a real cause, to encourage and inspire those who were marginalized by the ruling ideological, political or economic interests. We, as a minority community, want to remain sensitive to the plight and the suffering of all other minorities, and continue to be compassionate consistent with the spirit of the Gospels. We want to continually seek the deeper truths of our

conscience, the possibilities for mutual peacefulness, with sincerity, humbleness, perseverance, curiosity, and gladness. We consider it our humanitarian and social calling to embrace our values and not to be alarmed by new uncertainties.

The 450 year history of our church, of our patience and intellect, of our dedication to social justice, inspire us to never forget that our church values all people as equals. The humane actions of our Unitarian forefathers, their rejection of violence, their choosing of dialogue based on mutual respect and tolerance instead of subjugation of others should provide us the guidance on this 450th anniversary. By embracing the dignity of all peoples, the unconditional love of God, the acceptance and tolerance of all those who are different, by the virtue of our spiritual lives and sensitivities, and by our willingness to act on behalf of human dignity and freedom, we may remain in our spirit similar to those prophetic and dedicated early reformers. The religious freedom and the freedom of conscience is the Pentecost of our church; that is the beginning of our church community brought to life by the Holy Spirit. We will renew in that spirit, so then we can be the leavening for the blessed progress toward the spirit and truth in our society.

Amen.