

Author: Nyitrai Berta. Hungarian original was published in Keresztény Magvető, 1973, 79, 48-50, with the title: "A Templom Aranya"

All copyrights remain with the publisher.

UnitarianTorch contact: kokenyesi@unitariantorch.com

The Treasure of the Church.

Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold?

Matthew 23:17, AKJV

On the occasion of their confirmation, all youth received a gift, a new hymnal. Their eyes lit up from joy as we handed them the small booklets. They held this simple, but still precious, present close to their hearts. The golden goblet printed on the cover of the hymnal seemed to represent their young hearts. Those hearts, like a golden goblet, were filled with the wine of joy and reverence they offered to God on their confirmation day. At one time, the sweaty hands of the youngsters rubbed off the golden paint, and their faces were sad as they showed me the faded goblet. The goblet that was shiny in the morning lost its luster by the afternoon. I decided to remedy this issue and touched up the goblets with some gold paint; That completely restored the shine. I put away that memory of long ago and held onto it with the rest of my treasured mementos, and now I want to explain what those faded hymnals taught me.

I've seen many Unitarian hymnals in my life. Some of them still had the full shine of the gold paint; many more were so worn I could no longer make out the goblet. I have to admit, I never minded if I had to use a well-worn hymnal; it affected me more when I came across lightly used hymnals. I wondered if they were lightly worn because the churchgoers didn't want to rub off the gold paint. Those well-worn hymnals with yellowing pages tell me the stories of people in prayer whose hearts and souls flew to God on the wings of a hymn. Every time I saw those worn hymnals from my pulpit, it occurred to me that what truly matters is not the gilding, but the hymns that bring a shine to the faces, that bring color to fading dreams, that mend the broken gold of the soul. The cover of the hymnal is not significant; what is important is the multitudes of prayers set to song that have given solace and comfort from the psalms of King David to people of our time. The outward appearance is not significant; what is important is the content. The significance of gold is outweighed by the church that sanctifies the gold.

Yes, the church . . .

A long time ago, the devoted faithful lavished extravagant gifts to the church when God granted the wish in their prayers. Ornate altar, golden receptacles, bowls, goblets, and other riches symbolized the generosity of those grateful people. But then wars came

around, and those golden riches fell victim to the devastation. However, the real treasures of the church weren't objects that could be destroyed, but, rather, the spirit within, the spirit of God that always beckon prayerful souls into the church. Each time a hymn begins, what shines is the truth of the Gospels. The gold is not hallowed; it is the church that sanctifies the gold.

Yes, the church . . .

The smallest sanctuary of God has the biggest capacity. In our hearts, there is room for the heaven of love, but, yet, it can shrivel incredibly if our heart doesn't want to accept something or somebody. When that church is built, it is just as ornate and gorgeous as a cathedral. It radiates the energy of youth, good health, cheerful spirit, and filled with trust in the happiness of the coming years. Even the sun seems to smile brighter as its light bounces off those shiny treasures. It would be such a delight if all that remained unchanged, sighed our older folks whose eyes have seen many sunsets. It would be such a delight if we could hold on to the cheerfulness of the spirit, the triumph of good health and everlasting youth, the fairy princess hues of the dreams we weaved of our happiness. It would be such a delight if we could hold onto the treasures in our young hearts, the desire to learn, the thirst for that sacred light to which we aspire and worked for night and day. It would be such a delight if the golden treasures of the young heart would never be broken, like the love felt toward our spouse, the love that makes us present our best attributes to win over that person. It would be such a delight if we could hold onto the sacred treasure of being kind to each other, the treasure that brings fiery anthems from the heart to the lips of the youth and makes them perform unselfish deeds. Who could possibly list the myriad feelings that are among the golden treasures of the church of the youthful heart? What a pity that with the passage of the years, all the gold wears off the walls of that church; one after the other, those lovely golden goblets disappear; as we consume the bread of life, so vanish the golden bowls that once held that bread.

To our elderly folks whose eyes have witnessed many sunsets and whose aging may be more because of life's disappointments than from the number of their years, I say, do not overlook the essential. The essence is not the gold, not the troves of treasures, but the church itself. The heart that is devoted to God, even if life robs us of those riches, serves God all the way to its very last heartbeat. The heartbeat is the sound of bells for that church. As long as that bell is ringing, the church is still standing.

In our simple Unitarian churches, there is no ornate altar, lavish receptacles, expensive artwork, or golden treasures. I hope you have noticed that all along in this sermon I've been pointing your attention toward treasures of a different kind. And our churches have ample treasures of those different kinds.

A treasure of our churches are the newborns who are brought in for baptism.

A treasure of our churches are the youth who come for their confirmation to confess their faith before God.

A treasure of our churches is the love of couples who ask for a blessing of their “til death do us part” vow.

A treasure of our churches are the deceased, as teary-eyed prayers are said for them within our walls.

A treasure of our churches are the many hearts in prayer, seeking the proximity of God within our walls.

Within our walls that magnificent Son of God will gild the hearts of all who bring here their kindness to their neighbors.

The essence is the church . . .

Even gold itself can be sacred if the church sanctifies it.

Sacred is the white gold of our churches; the character of our white church walls that exemplifies the modesty of our religion.

For us, the steeple is sacred gold, whether it is made of stone or wood.

Sacred gold is the church bell, no matter the size or what it is made of.

The flower gardens around our churches also belong to the treasures of the church, because our faithful expressed their love toward the church with them.

The guardians of all that treasure is us; indeed, you all are.

Guard then those white walls of our churches, so they continue to spotlessly gleam about the modesty and clarity of our faith.

Guard then the church inside your hearts, so its treasure, the unity of love and virtue, will never be diminished. People of David Ferenc, do remain the keeper of your religious heritage. Safeguard it for the coming generations.

Do not, however, lock away those treasures; rather, put them onto the communion table and let others admire them; let others be lifted up by their glow.

Take care that your heart doesn't shrivel. Rather, it ought to remain the widest church of God, despite its small size. It ought to remain wide enough to lovingly embrace all of mankind and the Almighty God. Amen.