



*A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister*

*March 16, 2008*

## **ALL THAT IS**

We celebrate today the partnership that our church has had for quite a few years with a traditional Unitarian church in Hungary. The town in which our partner church is located is fairly near the Hungarian border southeast of Budapest, almost at the point where the westernmost tip of Romania meets the northern border of Serbia. I like knowing where places are. You can find it online, even the town's streets; I didn't have the address of it, or I might have been able to find it even more exactly.

I remember the odd surprise I felt when I first heard that one of the largest Unitarian populations in the world is in Transylvania. I mean, most of us have weird and wonderful associations with that place, thanks to Bram Stoker and Vlad the Impaler. I'd never have thought that this was also the location of a critical event in religious history, albeit one rendered barely a footnote in the triumphally written history of Christianity; but it was a real breakthrough in the history of Europe and of religion in general. I supposed I had assumed that Transylvania was something actually like the backwater of suspicion and paranoia that I'd read about; superstitious; spooky; no place where new thought would be born. How ignorant I can be.

Instead I learned that a piece of the story of our ideas, our faith goes back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century in a country that doesn't exist anymore as such. Transylvania is still a recognized region of Europe; it's a large central valley surrounded on almost all sides by mountains. It's now nearly entirely in Romania, but over time, as so much of eastern Europe has been, it was shifted and split back and forth between that country and Hungary, and for a brief time it had been an independent kingdom.

The people of Transylvania have for many centuries been ethnically mixed; some are German, some are Magyars or Hungarian speakers with roots in Russia, and some are Szekelys or Hungarian speakers who are descendents of the Huns. I'm geeky about this sort of thing too; who's what and from where. Why this is of interest to us is that the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century actually reached far to the east in Europe, in particular to Poland and Transylvania. At that time, German Transylvanians tended to become Lutherans, Magyars stayed Catholic, but the Szekelys, the remnants of the Huns, split into two parts: one became Calvinist and the other Unitarian. Now I find it wonderfully weird that in the homeland of Vlad the Impaler the descendents of Attila the Hun were among

those that stood up for religious freedom against the raging powers of competing orthodoxies. There is some ironic beauty in that fact.

I want to tell you some of the story of Unitarianism in Transylvania because it is one in which we current-day Unitarians far away in North America can still find value and inspiration. It's OK, I'm going to give you the short version.

Let's start with Francis David, the source of the sentences we just read in our responsive reading. Those of us here who have had a sequential spiritual path that led us here will relate to Francis David. He was born sometime in the early decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Koloszvar, now in Romania; as was almost universally so at that time and place, he was Catholic, and he happened to go to Wittenberg in Germany to study theology. There he encountered the early Protestant ideas of Martin Luther, which, by the time David returned from school, had spread also to his homeland. There, David converted to Lutheranism, but after a few years of debating the fine points of communion with the Calvinists, or the Reformed Church, he came to agree with and join them. Upon later Bible study, David came to doubt fundamental Christian ideas about the nature of God and Jesus, and he became and stayed Unitarian – which there and then meant that he saw God as different in essence from and supreme over Jesus, who nevertheless was *the* teacher of God's truth.

It happened that the Transylvanian King, John Sigismund, was a man ahead of his time; he disliked theological disputes, especially when one party was attempting to suppress or persecute another. He arranged a series of public debates between the four Christian teachings of that time. I heard recently here that in our religious education program a class of quite young children, upon hearing this story, asked whether Jews were included in these debates. I had to admit that, alas, anti-Semitism was alive and well in Transylvania; the King's openness to religious ideas didn't go *that* far! I also heard that the children were quite upset at the injustice of it – and we wonder sometimes if we're adequately instilling Unitarian Universalist values in our children!

At these debates, Francis David consistently argued the Unitarian position, using Scripture itself to prove his points. Although he didn't change the minds of his Catholic and Protestant opponents, Unitarian ideas took fire all over Transylvania, and the King himself espoused them. In fact, he established the first state recognition of religious freedom in all of Europe. After the King's death, however, his successor was not as supportive, yet he didn't dismantle this freedom. Instead, he turned it into state tolerance of religious difference, *as long as*, and this is important, as long as none of the religions introduced any innovation – that is, no *further* evolution of any religious ideas would be tolerated.

Francis David, however, was a theologian; he continued to study the Bible and to question certain ideas and practices. He thought he got around the law against innovation by simply discussing these ideas with others. One of his earliest

supporters, in fact the man who likely first introduced him to Unitarian ideas, Giorgio Biandrata, a Protestant Italian humanist and very early Unitarian, was the court physician. He became very alarmed that David was risking persecution for the whole Unitarian community by discussing these innovations, which, as it happens, Biandrata disagreed with. Biandrata outed David, which led to a trial resulting in David's imprisonment, and he died shortly after being jailed.

Biandrata became leader of the Unitarians, and he imposed some specific teachings more widely accepted by Unitarians elsewhere, such as in Poland, but some Transylvanian ministers refused to go along and they moved their congregations to Hungary. Much further along in time, Transylvanian Unitarians, which if you remember are mostly Hungarian ethnically, were oppressed by the Romanian majority, and even later, the Communist regime there, as in all of eastern Europe, oppressed *all* religions.

That in a nutshell is why some of our Transylvanian churches are in Hungary, and why all the congregations and church structures in that region have been so in need of our support since the collapse of Russian hegemony. They have had very little freedom to practice their religion, yet they have continued to do so, and without many resources to sustain themselves.

These people are heroes in my eyes, and I suggest that they should be in yours as well. For centuries they have had to live and endure the results of our most basic theological ideas: freedom of thought and religion and the use of reason. Even if some of us disagree with what they believe, their Unitarian Christianity is a result of the human study of Scriptures unshackled from religious tradition and orthodoxy. We should stand up proudly to say these are our brothers and sisters in principle, and we should dig deep in our pockets to help them regain their personal and religious dignity.

At this point you may be wondering how this all fits into the topic that I chose some weeks ago to speak on today. Well, for a brief moment on Thursday night, I wondered that myself in some degree of distress. Bryan Welwood, from whom you heard earlier, in his gentle way of asserting influence quietly said to me something like, "You are going to focus on our Partner Church program on Sunday I hope?" Now, I'd been building a service and making mental notes for a sermon on "All That Is" for today, so for a second I just looked at him and thought, "Wha'?"

In my newness here, I'd forgotten that this used to be Partner Church *Sunday* because this year we're raising money each week in March for it, so I hadn't made that connection. But then in a flash of inspiration, I realized there *is*, there *is* a connection between our partner church and Transylvanian Unitarian Christianity and what I was going to talk about. There *is*! Can you tell I'm channeling Natalie Wood in *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*? "There *is*, there *is* a swing in the back yard!" Now, just like you have to wait till the end of the movie to see if

she makes the connection between good old Kris Kringle and the one and only Santa Claus, you're going to have to wait a bit to see if there truly *is* a link between what I'd planned to speak about and Bryan's gentle admonition to remember Partner Sunday.

From time to time recently I've used the phrase All That Is in my spoken and written words. In the last few years, congregations which have grown significantly in numbers, maturity or quality have applied to be designated a Breakthrough Congregation; they then present a session at the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association mainly to share with others the ways they broke through previous barriers to their function. I remembered recently that last June at the Assembly in Portland, Oregon, I attended the program put on by All Soul's Unitarian Church of Kansas City, Missouri. One of the elements in this community's progress through a time of stagnant growth to a leap forward in its health and attractiveness to newcomers came about from the adoption of a common term to refer to whatever is Ultimate in the various conceptions of its members. That term is "All That Is."

Let's right now do a mental exercise together; I promise you my intention is not to take you anyplace you don't want to go or haven't been already in your own life.

Let the phrase All That Is hover in your mind. What does it mean to you? The words are naturally inclusive, so what does this phrase include in your mind? Does it include physical reality? Does it include the Great Story of the Universe? Does it include living things? Does it include human awareness: emotion, perception, consciousness? Does it include your fundamental sense of meaning? Your values? Your worldview? Does it include anything that I haven't asked about?

Think about your own history. Has the phrase All That Is represented different things to you at different times? Is it now a complete idea? Is it still developing for you? Does it include anything you don't know for sure? Does it contain doubt? Is there a question mark in it?

One last step: how do you feel about your conception of All That Is? Is the phrase, grammatically speaking, an object in your mind: something that you know or perceive or act upon? How do you feel about that object? Is the phrase a grammatical subject to you: something that knows or perceives or acts? If so, how do you feel about that subject? Do you have another name or phrase for All That Is? Whatever All That Is represents to you, does it generate a feeling of awe or wonder? If not, is there something else it holds in your experience that you've not yet thought to include? Take a moment to let those thoughts settle into your mind.

Now, here's the link between our Partner Church and my topic. One of Francis David's most famous statements was a point he tried to make to the Catholic,

Calvinist and Lutheran clerics who wanted to suppress him. You all said it in the Responsive Reading: "You need not think alike to love alike." I suggest that we need not all think alike to *speak* alike, that is we can use similar, inclusive words to talk together in our spiritual, religious and meaningful interactions even though we individually mean different things.

Some weeks ago the reading was a Psalm, an actual Psalm from the Bible, but it had been interpreted so that God was turned into Love and the Beloved; military images and projections of enemies became the battle against one's lower motivations, negative feelings and inner demons. These were common words in which we could understand the Psalm. The Order of Service now indicates a Time for Centering; each of us decides what centers us, and we turn to that at the same time in worship.

In each of our minds, hearts and spirits there is something we hold ultimate; something that commands our respect; something we honour and serve. For those of us still seeking the ultimate, one of our goals as a religious community is that we all move closer to knowing what that is for us, and become better oriented to what it calls us to do and how to live.

We need not think alike to love alike. We need not think the same to speak together in harmony.

In the name of All That Is, may this be so.