

Faith Worth Dying For; Freedom Worth Living For

Rev. Lisa Doege

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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN, USA

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

It's right there. The first phrase in the first amendment to the United States Constitution: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof....

With our next presidential election just over twelve months away, we in this country hear a lot these days about religion and politics. Some potential candidates for the presidency contend that the United States of American was founded by Christians as a Christian nation. Some potential candidates argue that their particular strand of Christianity is the only *real* Christianity. Some potential candidates suggest, with cleverly fashioned deniability, that all members of certain non-Christian faiths are enemies of America. All potential candidates invoke the name of God, are photographed attending church services, publicly seek the counsel of religious leaders, wearing their religion as prominently as their patriotism.

These men and women who would be president enthusiastically herald freedom of religion as one of the things that makes the United States great. Yet often, it seems, they insist that that very freedom of religion is or should be restricted only to Christians and specifically Christians who are protestant, evangelical, or born-again.

There is plenty of precedent for this narrow view, of course. Even the Edict of Torda--earth-shattering though it was--guaranteed freedom of religion for Christians only (Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist). But 1568 was a long, long time ago, and Transylvania of that day was a very different country than the United States of American has ever been. Our country, from the very early days of Western settlement has been a refuge and a haven for those seeking to practice their religions free from oppression or persecution. Those early religious pilgrims were followed by successive waves. From communist countries that oppressed all religion, from countries where one particular religion or

another is oppressed by members of a majority religion, from nearly every continent, people of faith have made their way to the United States, lured by the promise of freedom of religion.

Those of us whose families have been in the country for more than a generation or two, however, tend to take that freedom for granted, even while we celebrate it as one of the defining characteristics of our country. We do so at our own peril, I believe. The rapidly changing world all around us daily brings news of what happens in other countries when freedoms such as freedom of religion are not guaranteed by law. History tells the same lesson.

This week brings Unitarian Universalists an important anniversary in the history of liberal religion. Spanish theologian and physician, Michael Servetus was burned at the stake in Geneva, Switzerland on October 27, 1553, on order of John Calvin.

We often say Servetus' books were his most important contributions to our faith tradition. After all, *On the Errors of the Trinity* (published 1531) and *The Restoration of Christianity* (published 1553) outlined some of the theology we have long considered central to Unitarian Universalism, including a disavowal of the doctrine of the trinity, as well as disavowal of Calvin's teachings on the depravity of humanity. Just as significant as Servetus's ideas, however, is his death.

Though having lived in hiding and under assumed names for much of his adult life, Servetus nevertheless almost "baited" Calvin. He had engaged in a lengthy, theological correspondence with Calvin and published the letters in *The Restoration of Christianity*. He also went to Geneva, knowing that Calvin was in residence and had ordered his execution. Historians report that bystanders were impressed by Servetus' faith. Even as the flames consumed him, his last words, "O Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have pity on me!" betrayed his heretical theology.

The anniversary of Servetus' martyrdom reminds us that religious beliefs can be dangerous in intolerant societies. Freedom of religion is our precious right in this country and must be defended--not against outsiders alone but also against those within our own society who would limit it.

Today is also an important anniversary of an event much closer to your hearts and your lives. Though Hungary remained under Soviet rule until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, the uprising on this day more than thirty years earlier stands as but one of many, many examples through the centuries of a people refusing to accept the rule of a larger, more powerful, more aggressive regime. People died in the days following

October 23, 1956, as Soviet tanks rolled in and opened fire. They died for freedom. They died, as Michael Servetus died, because freedom, because ideas, are worthy dying for.

The poet Mary Oliver (a favorite of Unitarians Universalists in our country) has written:

*You can
die for it--
an idea,
or the world. People*

*have done so,
brilliantly,
letting
their small bodies be bound*

*to the stake,
creating
an unforgettable
fury of light. But*

*this morning,
climbing the familiar hills
in the familiar
fabric of dawn, I thought*

*of China,
and India
and Europe, and I thought
how the sun*

*blazes
for everyone just
so joyfully
as it rises*

*under the lashes
of my own eyes, and I thought
I am so many!
What is my name?*

*What is the name
of the deep breath I would take
over and over
for all of us? Call it*

*whatever you want, it is
happiness, it is another one
of the ways to enter
fire. (Sunrise, by Mary Oliver)*

The lesson I take from Michael Servetus, nearly five hundred years ago and from the uprising in Budapest more than fifty years ago is this:

We can die for--an idea, the world or our precious freedom. We can die for it, and we can pray for the courage to do so if the moment comes, when the moment comes that we are tied to the stake or facing down the tanks of oppression. But until that moment comes, until the tanks roll, until the flames are kindled, we can *live* for it, too. We *must* live for it, too--the idea, the world, our precious freedom.

If we don't live for our freedom, for our ideas, for our world, then those who in earlier generations died for those same things died in vain. We live for our freedom when we protect the freedoms of those who are not like us. We live for our freedom when we speak aloud our ideas, our dreams, our critiques of power. We live for our freedom when we vote or run for office or campaign for candidates we believe in. We live for our freedom when we challenge bullies, welcome immigrants, forge alliances across faiths and races and ethnic divides.

There are lots of good reasons for Unitarian Universalist churches in the United States of America and Unitarian churches in Romania to be partners. We in the States have financial resources and encouragement to share. You in Benced have history and inspiration to share. But perhaps the best reason for our partnership is that it allows us all to practice living for our freedom, for our ideas, for our world.

When we struggle with the languages, when we recognize that we share a root theology but express it in very different ways, when we in Hanska, at Nora Church, see reflected in your minority status the blessing of our choice and privilege, when you in Benced see in our prosperity and our secure and rightful place as one religion among many in America a vision of what you might one day have--in all these instances, we practice our freedom. We practice living for our freedom by engaging in the struggle to embrace

and understand one another, instead of putting up walls or denying the humanity of the other.

Your minister offers us the words of James on this special Sunday: *But the one who peers into the perfect law of liberty and fixes his attention there, and does not become a forgetful listener but one who lives it out – he will be blessed in what he does.*

We have our liberty, our freedom, here in the United States and you have yours--though they differ one liberty from another. Let us all indeed be blessed as we strive today and into the future to live it out. Amen.