

Egy Az Isten (God is One)
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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

This month of August 2017 marks the 136th anniversary of the founding of Nora Church. We're proud of our 136 years. Proud of the ways Nora Church is both an immigrant church, born of the spirit of Norwegian radicals and preached to in Norwegian by our first several ministers, and a distinctly American church—having nothing of old world rules regarding the role of women or the rigid distinctions between community and outsiders. We're likewise proud of our unlikely location, atop a rural hill, surrounded by farmer's fields, in a politically conservative county, in an era when urban centers or university towns in Blue States are considered (not quite accurately) to be the places mostly likely to support Unitarian Universalist churches.

We, it is easy for us to believe, we are hardy, courageous, isolated, perhaps just this side of embattled. Not quite under siege but nevertheless remembering days when to be a member of Nora Church was to set oneself apart from the surrounding Lutheran community, and to be held in unfavorable regard by that surrounding Lutheran community.

And then we become a bit more acquainted with our partner religionists in Benced. We learn that their church is more than a thousand years old; has been Unitarian for half that period. We learn that they have not just mildly distrustful and unfriendly neighbors, but the brutal Communist regime of Ceausescu, and even now thrive as double minorities (of Hungarian ethnicity in Romania; Unitarians in an officially secular state where the predominant religion is Eastern Orthodox Christianity), an existence most if not all of us can't fully comprehend. We learn that theirs is a rural setting more isolated even than ours, in some respects—mountainous terrain with rough roads to traverse between villages and between village and town or city. We learn about that these partner Unitarians of ours don't survive these seeming hardships, they thrive. With children and youth in numbers we can only remember from our past. With camps and conferences and building projects and dreams.

Suddenly Nora Church looks like a newcomer on the religious scene and our geographical location seems less out of the way, our theological position seems downright mainstream. And we — or at least, I—wonder if we have taken for inevitable (the decline of the rural church, Nora included) that which need not be inevitable. We—or at least, I— wonder if Benced in the example of their vitality might offer us a far greater gift than the financial support we have been able to offer them. But that is a sermon for another time.

This is the day for proclaiming *Egy Az Isten*. God is One. Bear with me, atheists and humanists!

God is One. That declaration of radical monotheism lies at the heart of of the Unitarianism we share with our partner church. From its earliest incarnation as a disavowal of the doctrine of the trinity to the tired 20th century quip—Unitarians believe in one God. At most.—God is One has been the starting place for defining Unitarianism.

Words mean a lot to me, more than they should perhaps. Likewise, precision in the use of language. So when encountering the inevitable question, “Unitarian Universalism? What’s that?” I always start with the words.

Unitarian, I say, means a belief in one God, not one God in three persons. Early Unitarians believed that the Trinity was not a Biblical concept. Universalist, I say, refers to a belief in Universal salvation, the belief that a loving God could not/would not save some of God’s children and damn others any more than a loving parent could/would save some of their children and damn others. In this country, I say, the two denominations grew up side by side and, for a variety of reasons, merged in 1961. And moved progressively ‘left’ from the starting points of one God and universal salvation.

Only then do I go on to explain about not having a creed, about the wide-ranging beliefs to be found in our movement and indeed in any one of our congregations. But I start where we—or most of theological forbears—started, even if God language, God theology, clangs discordantly in some ears, sits uneasily in many reasoning and reasonable hearts.

I start where we started, with one God, one all-loving God refusing to forsake any of God's children. And on days like today, the morning after yet another bombing of a faith community, this one so very close to home, on days like today I am glad I do. And I wonder if perhaps all it really means in the end, at least in 21st Century American Unitarian Universalism, but maybe for our Unitarian and Universalist forbears through the ages, too, perhaps all it really means in the end, one God, is one creation, mundane and holy and whole. We are one with our partners in Benced. We are one with the Islamic community in the Twin Cities. We are one with the movement for Black Lives, and with Jewish communities, and with our Lutheran neighbors, and our Catholic relatives, and with the Jehovah's Witnesses who were set up outside the New Ulm Library again yesterday. We are one with the earth that gives us life. We are one. And we are too precious, too beloved to be damned, to be forsaken, to be sacrificed. Each community. Each faith. Each person. Each species and river and mountain and forest. Beloved, deserving of salvation. One, so that to sacrifice any is to sacrifice all.

Egy Az Isten. God is One. May this be the truth we proclaim and by which we live. Amen.