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Benced, Romania

James 1, 25:

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.

It is with warm feelings that I am greeting you on the occasion of the partnership Sunday. What a lovely initiative and I believe whenever we think of each other our souls meet and we get closer to each other.

The most important achievement of the Unitarian faith was the proclamation of religious freedom at the Diet of Torda in 1568. It was first declared in Transylvania, that everyone should exercise the religion which agrees with his/her understanding, because "faith is the gift of God".

We consider the founding of the Unitarian Church to be from the proclamation of this law.

So our land is the land of freedom, but I think Your land is too the land of freedom, but our lives, our religions, our nations are different. We understand and define freedom differently, but I believe with James: "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."

Let me enumerate a few differences :

- We belong to a minority ethnic group, Hungarians living in Romania, feeling always threatened in our heritage and culture, a group, whose loyalty for the state is always under suspicion and whose members feel many times second-rate citizens. For you, as American citizens this is hard to understand, as you have the safety and assurance of belonging to your country, which was never questioned.
- We are simple people, with most of our congregations in villages and most of our parishioners farmers seeking out painstakingly a living from the land, people who do not travel further than the nearby small town, whose dreams and aspirations never soar above the land they inhabit. In contrast you are over-educated, sophisticated

people, with exquisite tastes, with many of you widely traveled and well-versed in the ways of the world.

- We live in a country so small that is hard to find it on the map and our language is so weird that nobody really bothers to learn it. In contrast your country is a super-power of the world and your language is the “lingua franca” of today.
- We are born into our religious community, while you have chosen yours. We have no choice in the matter, which is why sometimes we are so careless with our heritage, taking it for granted, while you give all your best abilities to further the cause you have chosen.
- We are Christian in our theology, while many of you have left behind traditional Christian communities to search for your spiritual freedom and for many of you every reminder is full of pain.
- We are poor people with our congregations struggling to get along, while economically you are well-off.
- We are traditional communities trying to survive in this globalized world, which is slowly running us over, while you are a liberal community taking in its stride any challenge.

So, if we need strangeness or even incompatibility to get attracted to each other, we cannot complain, we have the whole range. Our problem is that turning point in every relationship when these dissimilarities instead of being interesting or appealing turn towards obnoxious and incomprehensible — when we start wondering if perhaps the gap is too big to be filled with love and good intentions.

Can we find the common threads of our life when so many things separate and set us apart? Can we look beyond the unquestioned attraction of love to the honest assessment and acceptance of our differences and to what these might teach us about the other and about ourselves? We can but try if we do not want to call the whole thing off.

The inducement and references to our common heritage, to our roots might sound hollow for those who do not know and are not interested in the history of the denomination. Like Pallas Athena springing forth from the head of Zeus, for many of you the relationship starts with this community in this given time and place and a past history might not be that relevant. Yet, what we can offer would shed light not

just on your denomination's history but on all those values for which you chose it. Because even if on the surface we are very different, even if we use God-language, even if we are village farmers far away from the world of Academia, the basic values of our lives are the same and have their roots in our faith. We are the children of the freedom.

- When we talk of God and you of Spirit of life — we try to express the same human desire, the same human aspiration to overcome our limitations, to understand and make sense of our life and struggle, to feel the connectedness with the world around us.
- When we proclaim our faith in human reason, when we uphold the necessity and importance of a liberal education, the tolerance and acceptance of others, we do on a small scale what you are doing on a larger scale in your society — working against injustice, intolerance, and division.
- When we gather together as a community or when you gather together as a community — we and you do it to affirm what we believe, to proclaim that we belong, to enjoy our togetherness and to strengthen our community in working for the vision of a better world.

It is true — all this we do on a different scale from you, using a different language, in a different context and with all the limitations our society, culture and history imposes on us. But for you to perceive this, you have to overcome the fascination of either rejection or love and move beyond the surface.

Despite of these things, I consider that we are similar, because both we seek the freedom that is the gift of God. And this is one of the basic values that people in Bencéd are hoping for to realize on individual and congregational level. Let me introduce a little bit our congregation.

In 2006 Bencéd became a separate congregation, with its own minister. After becoming independent we established the Women and Youth Association, we meet weekly with members. Every Sunday more and more people are attending the church service. Last summer the congregation had 157 members; this went up to 177 this year. In Autumn fest we were 164 in the church. We bought the building of the parsonage from the state and renovated it, with Your financial aid, we renovated the Upper Bencéd's church due to Your donation, and now we started to renovate the Down Bencéd's church. Thank you for all the support you provided for this project.

So we are a self conscious community, and we would like to learn more about you and your church life and making steps to make this relationship flourishing. We invite You to come in our congregation, to help us understand each other better and share our faith and values.

We are gifted to have you as our partner and friend. We give thanks for this gift to God. I wish to my Friends the best, with love Rev. Ildiko Makkai-Ilkei and people from Benced.