

Theology of the Chalice

A couple of weeks ago, I wrote about some of the practices with the chalice in Unitarian Universalist worship in the United States. The information is descriptive only, not prescriptive. There is no single way these rituals “should” be done.

This note is about the theology of it; why we do it. There are two reasons why we do it, and the story of its beginning. We light the chalice in worship

- 1.) to indicate that what is about to happen is sacred; it is important. It’s a symbol that initiates our worship time together, and
- 2.) to connect us to other Unitarian Universalist congregation across the world who also recognize the symbol of the chalice.

The chalice was a symbol commissioned by the Unitarian Service Committee to help identify people who were working hard to try to find safe routes for people to escape Nazi persecution during World War II. The director of the Service Committee, Rev. Charles Joy, often wrote letters to governments and other organizations asking for their help to save people in danger. Because they were a new organization, not many people had heard of the Unitarian Service Committee. Often, people who were escaping and people who wanted to help them escape didn’t speak the same language. Rev. Joy decided it would be better if the Service Committee had an official symbol, or picture, to help identify its members. He asked cartoonist, Hans Deutsch for help. Deutsch had escaped from the Nazis in Paris, France. Joy asked him to create a symbol to print on Service Committee papers to make them look important. He wanted the symbol to impress governments and police who had the power to help move people to safety, and a symbol to communicate between people who didn’t speak the same language.

Deutsch borrowed an old symbol of strength and freedom from Czechoslovakia – a chalice with a flame. The symbol was interpreted by Joy as a cup, or chalice, that is used for giving a healing drink to others, and a flame on top to represent the spirit of helpfulness and sacrifice. (There are many other interpretations of its meaning, too.) The flaming chalice became the official symbol of the Unitarian Service Committee. By the early 1970s enough Unitarian Universalists had heard the story of the flaming chalice symbol that they began to light a flaming chalice as a part of the worship service in their churches. Over the years, this practice has spread over most of the United States and Canada.

The flaming chalice is a unique symbol that distinguishes us from other groups – it identifies us as Unitarian or Unitarian Universalist, and it also indicates that we are connected to others different from us. I believe it means that we have important work to do – to help one another, especially in times of great injustice.

I forgot to mention when I wrote of the practice, that we extinguish the chalice at the end of worship, too. My favorite words for extinguishing the chalice flame are: “Though our worship service has ended, our service to the world is just begun.”