

The Story of Norbert Čápek : *[pronounced Chapek]*

The words we just read, were spoken at the original Flower Communion, which was created by Norbert Čápek for his Unitarian congregation in Prague, Czechoslovakia, in June 1923. Norbert Čápek grew up in Bohemia, in an area where Roman Catholicism was the official state religion. He started out as an altar boy, but by age 18, he had started on a long faith journey that led through being a Baptist evangelist to becoming a Unitarian minister. The accounts of his life indicate that he was an original thinker with a questioning mind and an inspiring and dynamic religious leader.

During the early years of the 20th century, Čápek became a strong proponent of religious freedom, and got in trouble with the government of Austria Hungary. Just before World War I broke out, he moved to the United States, where he served for five years as a Baptist minister in New York City and New Jersey before leaving the Baptist church in 1919. By 1921, he and his family had joined a Unitarian church in Orange, NJ.

After World War I, Czechoslovakia became an independent country and the Čápeks decided to return to their native land. There, they spent the next 20 years building a vigorous Unitarian movement that included schools and counseling programs as well as churches. By 1940, the Unitarian church in Prague was the largest Unitarian congregation in the world.

The vigor and enthusiasm of the Unitarians in Czechoslovakia did not escape the attention of the Nazis when they invaded that country at the beginning of World War II. At the age of 71, Norbert Čápek was arrested by the Gestapo and charged with treason. He ended up in Dachau, where he was killed in October 1942. The Benediction we will use today is taken from a meditation he composed at Dachau.