

Soul Matters Theme: Freedom
Pagan Holiday: MidSummer
June 8, 2025

Sermon Title: "In the Fullness of Light: Embracing Freedom"

- Midsummer: The Sacred Light
 - Celebration of abundance, passion, and power
 - Midsummer is a festival of fire, of fullness, of sacred balance
 - The sun is seen not as a distant star, but a living power
 - lighting the crops, warming the waters, reminding us of life's wild generosity
 - Powerful crossroads in the wheel of the year
 - Sun is at its peak; the earth is full, lush, and generous
 - Litha
 - Anglo-Saxon name from the early Germanic calendar
 - Venerable Bede
 - "...means gentle or navigable, because ... the calm breezes are gentle and they were wont to sail upon the smooth sea"
 - Light stretches its longest across the day
 - doesn't just reveal beauty—it reveals truth
 - And truth, when truly seen and embraced, sets us free
- Soul Matters Theme: What is Freedom?
 - Freedom as Sacred
 - Freedom is not simply the absence of chains
 - means more than not being enslaved or imprisoned
 - It is the presence of possibility
 - It means to be seen, to be heard, to have agency, to thrive
 - Freedom in layers: overcoming limitations on many levels
 - Physical (historical struggles, e.g., Juneteenth)
 - liberation theology - social justice
 - Spiritual (freedom to seek, to believe, to become)
 - conscience - hold and express our own beliefs
 - Emotional (liberation from fear, shame, inherited burdens)

- inherent worth of every person
 - Freedom is a necessary expression of inherent worth, allowing individuals to live autonomously and pursue their own destinies
- Personal and spiritual freedom
 - Individual Freedom of Belief
 - UU 4th principle: each person has the right and responsibility to engage in a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning"
 - encourages individuals to draw from various sources—religious texts, personal experience, reason, and the natural world—to shape their own spiritual understanding
 - Church of Kurt example
 - Such freedom fosters humility about one's beliefs and promotes tolerance and openness toward differing perspectives
 - faith should be a personal choice, not forced upon individuals by any authority
 - individuals to live authentically and ethically
 - contributing to more compassionate and equitable world
 - Freedom not merely an end goal
 - but ongoing journey, a dynamic, evolving process that mirrors the natural world's rhythms
 - pursuit of truth and meaning is lifelong, requiring continual reflection, learning, and growth
 - remain open to new insights, adapt beliefs and actions in response to changing circumstances and deeper understanding
 - Freedom Within Community
 - Who still is not free? Those:
 - bound by poverty and systemic injustice.
 - marginalized because of race, gender, disability, or identity
 - whose lands were stolen, whose ancestors were enslaved
 - In this light, freedom is not just a personal journey—it's a collective mandate
 - Freedom not viewed as isolation but as an opportunity to engage collectively in spiritual growth and social action

- Example: congregation operates democratically, emphasizing shared values like justice, equity, and compassion
 - This communal aspect ensures that individual freedoms contribute to the well-being of the larger society
- Freedom as a Call to Justice
 - Collective Liberation
 - individual freedom is intrinsically linked to collective liberation
 - civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer: “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free”
 - ethos calls UUs to engage in social justice work
 - true freedom involves dismantling systemic oppression and fostering equity for all
 - racial justice, LGBTQ+ rights, environmental sustainability, etc
 - commitment to justice is not just a social stance but a spiritual imperative, reflecting the belief that freedom must be pursued not only for oneself but for all
- Freedom and Responsibility:
 - "Freedom is what we do with what is done to us" (Jean-Paul Sartre)
 - freedom is not just about the absence of constraints, but also about how we choose to act in response to our circumstances
- explore freedom not merely as a personal right but as a communal and spiritual practice
 - UU principles are lived out through actions rather than creeds
 - Heathen practice: "We are our deeds"
 - Havamal 78:

Cattle die, | and kinsmen die,
And so one dies one's self;
One thing now | that never dies,
The fame of a dead person's deeds.
- Light as Liberator
 - The sun as a symbol of illumination and clarity
 - shining light on oppression
 - freedom through understanding
 - Midsummer is a time to ask:
 - What does the light reveal in us?

- Where are we still held captive—by systems, beliefs, or wounds?
 - within ourselves, parts still chained by fear, perfectionism, shame, or silence?
 - What new path might the light make visible?
- mystics and theologies of liberation speak of light not only as a comfort, but as a challenge.
 - Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice"
 - progress towards justice may be slow and sometimes delayed, but it is ultimately inevitable
 - bending requires active effort and resistance against injustice, not passive acceptance
 - i.e. freedom takes effort!
- The light of the sun today challenges us:
 - To see what we would rather not see
 - To speak what we are afraid to name
 - To act where we have been passive
- Freedom and the Midsummer Transition
 - Midsummer symbolizes a peak of light and energy, marking a turning point in the natural cycle
 - Discussion of finding freedom through that light, but...
 - awareness of coming waning of the year
 - from now forward, days grow shorter, shadows longer
 - transition mirrors the understanding of freedom as dynamic and evolving
 - Freedom encourages embracing both the active and restful phases of life
 - Time of transition
 - On a personal level, what are we called to release?
 - Tension—between light and dark, abundance and impermanence, fullness and what must be let go
 - We stand in the long sunlight, asking not just “What is revealed?” but also “What is possible now?”
 - The solstice teaches: even the greatest light will wane

- So what will we do with this brief blaze of clarity?
- What do we need to burn away to truly be free?

- Oak King and the Holly King

- Long ago, before there were seasons, two brothers were born. One was radiant, and everywhere he went bloomed with life. He wore a crown made from oak, a tree known for its strength, beauty and noble presence.
- His brother brought cold and darkness, slumber and death. Trees would lose their leaves in preparation for his cold spells, and animals would hide away in the warmth of their burrows and dens. He took for his crown the evergreen holly.
- The brothers began to quarrel about the need for more light or more darkness, and quarreling led to testing the bounds of their range. At first, people loved the bright, sunny days and longed to stay in the court of the Oak King. They lent their support to him, and he grew more powerful. He was their fertility God, their Green Man of the Woods. The Holly King, Grandfather Winter, unsupported and alone, fled the lands, and the world thrived in an unbroken summer.
- Over time, the plants whose bloom had once been celebrated were now commonplace. Deciduous trees faded without any opportunity for dormancy, and insects grew more plentiful, bringing disease and obliterated crops. Everyone, including the Oak King himself, grew weak without sufficient rest.
- The Holly King watched from afar, and then one fateful day, he returned. The two brothers fought a battle for the crown. Tired and spent from keeping the world green, the Oak King fell, and rule passed to the Holly King, who made quick work of blanketing the world in ice and snow. Plants died off, animals burrowed deep and dropped into hibernation, and days grew shorter.
- The trees lost their leaves and were barren, except the pine and fir and holly, which reigned supreme. The people were at last able to rest.
- During Yule, the Winter Solstice, when the Holly King was at the height of his power, he was surprised to see his brother return, alive and well. The Oak King had risen, and after another fierce battle, he emerged victorious.

The Holly King was defeated, and the Oak King went to work bringing Spring—and life—back to the world.

- Since then, each year, just when one of them is at his strongest, the other emerges to battle for the crown.

- These two figures of course represent the waxing and waning halves of the year
 - the Oak King presides over the light, growth, and expansion of spring and summer
 - the Holly King governs the darkness, introspection, and rest/rejuvenation that comes with autumn and winter
- Their eternal battles, occurring at the solstices, symbolize the natural ebb and flow of life's energies
- This cyclical exchange of power reflects our journey toward freedom:
 - Acknowledgment of Cycles
 - Just as the kings' reigns are temporary yet recurring, freedom involves recognizing and navigating the cycles of personal and societal growth and regression
 - Personal: bask in illumination, revealing truths and inspiring transformations
 - Societal: recognize the cycles. Shine the light where it is needed. Channel righteous anger where it is needed.
 - Balance of Forces
 - myth teaches that both light and darkness are essential
 - Midsummer marks a moment of transition from increasing light to the return of darkness
 - invites contemplation on the freedoms found in accepting and moving with life's inevitable changes
 - freedom requires balancing reflection with action
 - periods of rest and introspection are as vital as moments of activism and change
 - Darkness helps!
 - Growth and Healing:

- As we leave this gathering, remember:
 - The sun does not apologize for its brilliance.
 - The earth does not question its right to grow.
 - You do not need permission to be free.
- Spiritual lesson of Midsummer is not simply to bask in the warmth
 - It's also to recognize a turning
 - When the light is brightest, we can see what we've ignored
 - When we feel strongest, we are called to serve others
 - When earth gives us everything, we are reminded to give back
 - The Wheel of the Year, the changing of the seasons, teaches that everything turns.
 - In that turning, we find both humility and hope
- Lets carry the energy of midsummer:
 - Boldness, honesty, the fire of transformation
- May the sun that rises over solstice fields rise also in you—clearing what no longer serves, and freeing what has waited too long to live.
- Blessed be the turning. Blessed be the burning. Blessed be the path ahead

The Journey
by Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.

It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life you could save.