

Prayer flags

7/22/17

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Today we are going to do something. We are going to do something with our hands rather than with our voices. Doing something together, making something together, is as an important part of worship as speaking or singing, but we sometimes we don't see it that way. We see worship as something that happens when we are here, in the sanctuary, but worship happens in many ways, every day. We worship together when we wash dishes after coffee hour or when we put on a dinner or when we paint the church or when we dump out the garbage. Every act is necessary and every act is holy because we do it with the intent of carrying out the work of community. We usually think of doing these things as a benefit to this community, to our church community, but every act we do when it is done to help, to nourish, to keep order and cleanliness, to beautify, every one of those essential acts also benefits the community of the world. They are all forms of worship.

In the same way, prayer flags are used to bring blessings and health to the whole world. Prayer flags are part of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition but they have migrated to many communities around the world and today they are in our community. Tibetans use prayer flags are to promote peace, compassion, strength, and wisdom. The flags do not carry prayers to gods, which is a common misconception; rather, they believe the prayers and [mantras used with the flags](#) will

be blown by the wind to spread the good will and compassion into all pervading space. Therefore, prayer flags are thought to bring benefit to all.

The *Lung ta* which are horizontal prayer flags are of square or rectangular shape, and are connected along their top edges to a long string or thread. They are commonly hung on a diagonal line from high to low between two objects (e.g., a rock and the top of a pole) in high places such as the tops of temples, monasteries, [stupas](#), and mountain passes. By hanging flags in high places, it is believed they will carry the blessings depicted on the flags to all beings. As wind passes over the surface of the flags, which are sensitive to the slightest movement of the wind, the air is purified and sanctified by the mantras.

The prayers of a flag become a permanent part of the universe as the images fade from exposure to the elements. Just as life moves on and is replaced by new life, Tibetans renew their hopes for the world by continually mounting new flags alongside the old. This act symbolizes a welcoming of life's changes and an acknowledgment that all beings are part of a greater ongoing cycle.

Prayer, the very word, can be a tricky proposition in a U-U church. Some find it a great help; others find it an empty gesture. The very idea of prayer can be repellant to people who have had prayer forced on them in the past. When people speak of prayer, there is always the question, to whom or what are you praying. But, all over

the world, people find themselves in prayer, sometimes without noticing that they have gone there.

For me, prayer is a concentration. It requires that we look within at our greatest longings and fears, hopes and despairs. It is a way of knowing our own hearts. It is a way to be mindful of those things that are truly important. It is a way to be mindful of this moment, right now, which is the only moment we ever really have.

We all seek peace, whether it is peace within ourselves or peace in the wider world. We all have many dreams; we all have many worries. In making prayer flags we join with people from a land and culture far from ours to manifest these longings, to create something that shows our cares and concerns for this world and for all its peoples. These brightly colored pieces of cloth become our messengers, our emissaries to all the world of the good will and compassion we have cultivated here.