

## On A Mission

Sermon, Sunday, September 26, 2010  
Unitarian Universalist Church, Concord, NH  
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I had recently turned seventeen and I knew exactly what I wanted. I knew I wanted to be around people who shared my passion for creating a more peaceful and sustainable world, the kind of place all people could live in, with dignity, and without unnecessary threats to their survival or well-being. I knew I was longing for a community that took the pain and suffering I saw all around the world seriously, seriously enough to do something about it.

I was on a mission and I was ready to be a missionary.

The word mission is based on the Latin “missio.” It refers to the “act of sending.” Wikipedia tells us that the word "mission" dates back to 1598, a term used by the Jesuits for sending members abroad. For many years, then, a missionary was assumed to be a person on a specifically religious mission.

When I was seventeen, I was neither a Jesuit nor a specifically religious person. My hope was to be sent to the United World College of South East Asia located in Singapore. This school, one of six United World Colleges at the time, was set up to bring students together from around the world, to make the ideal of international and intercultural understanding come alive through personal experience.

For the last two years of high school, I would get to be with students who had grown up speaking different languages, holding different religious beliefs, and steeped in cultural expectations quite different from my own.

Yet despite these differences, I would get to be with kindred spirits equally interested in that ultimate goal of a more peaceful and sustainable world. I would get to be with other students ready to do social service projects, to take responsibility for the local and global impacts of our own actions, and to learn to understand the systems that make change so difficult.

I was seventeen and I was on a mission.

Jumping the hoops that would convince the German government to send me to Singapore wasn't quite as intense as the search process that got me into this pulpit. Instead of a sermon, I simply had to prepare a presentation to be shared with a group of my peers, followed by a discussion I got to facilitate. Looking back, I find it ironic, that the topic I picked for my presentation was "The Goals and Impacts of the Christian Mission."

I had selected the topic to showcase the far reaching mistakes of today's missionary work and the irreversible damage being done by the cultural arrogance of many missionaries. Yet, by the time I had completed my research, the story I saw had changed quite drastically. It became clear that my own prejudice had blinded me, at least in part.

The core impulse for missionary work had shifted among many segments of the Christian Mission. The conversion of beliefs and the saving of souls had become secondary to the fight for justice and freedom. Solidarity with the oppressed and the disempowered had replaced the historic alliance with the powerful. Albert Schweitzer's "reverence for life" was increasingly guiding missionary attitudes and decisions. The social gospel movement that had started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century had left its mark.

I was seventeen and I was learning about what it means to be on a mission.

I did get to go to the United World College for my last two years of high school and I managed to find a number of kindred spirits. Some of them are still very close friends today. Yet, the clarity of the mission I was on those many years ago is harder to find now.

I am now a Unitarian Universalist. Many Unitarian Universalists are uncomfortable with the idea of missionary work, the idea to send one of us on a religious mission, or to be the one sent on that mission. We don't like to impose our religious beliefs on others. We have learned, after all, to value diversity of beliefs amongst ourselves and throughout the world.

I don't propose we change that. Instead, I propose we challenge each other to become a different kind of missionary, a missionary who recognizes that what we believe is less important than what we love. Our beliefs may guide what we love, but the power of our

faith manifests itself in how we show what we love. We all need to be missionaries, not of our beliefs, but of what we love.

Yet to be effective missionaries, we need to be clear about our mission. We need to be clear about what we love.

Love for ourselves, love of who we are is an important part of this mission. It provides the grounding for everything else. If we can't love ourselves it will be difficult to share our love with the world. Intentional spiritual work can help us find that love for ourselves, spiritual work in covenant groups, in meditation, in journaling, or walks through nature.

Yet spiritual work does not end with the private sphere or the inward focused. Spiritual work also involves the public realm.

The late Roman Catholic priest Henri Nouwen tells of another priest who canceled his subscription to *The New York Times* because he found that the news of wars and crimes distracted him from prayer and meditation.

“That is a sad story, Nouwen comments, because it suggests that only by denying the world can you live in it, that only by surrounding yourself by an artificial, self-induced quietude can you live a spiritual life. A real spiritual life does exactly the opposite: it makes us so alert and aware of the world around us, that all that is and happens becomes part of our contemplation and meditation and invites us to a free and fearless response.”

Spirituality, of course, is not easy to define, nor do we have to limit ourselves to a single definition. One definition, I like, is offered by Bill Murry in his book *Reason and Reverence*. For him, spirituality refers to a quality of life in the here and now, a quality that has to do with genuineness, depth, and devotion to values other than my own self-interest.

Murry later quotes Parker Palmer's definition that considers “spirituality [as] the eternal human longing to be connected to something larger than one's own ego,” to which Murry adds “something that enriches one's life and gives it meaning.”

These definitions get to the core of our mission. They remind us that what we love cannot be limited to our own self-interest or it will not feel meaningful. It will not do the job.

This may seem obvious when we think about our personal lives. We know how we feel when we make another person smile. We know how we feel when we are able to help a person in need, or change the system to prevent someone's suffering. And we know how we feel when we get self-absorbed and spend our days focused only on our own well-being.

George Bernard Shaw once suggested that every citizen of a civilized society ought to be brought before the bar of justice periodically to justify their existence. If they could not do so, they should summarily be put to death.

I wholeheartedly disagree with Shaw's recommended punishment, but his challenge to us seems pertinent. It's similar to the Rev. Henry Meserve's provocative question: "If you were arrested for being a Unitarian Universalist, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

For us to be convicted, we have to be on a mission, we have to show what we love in a public way. We have to stand on the side of love visibly, to use the language of our denomination's current outreach campaign.

The same is true for our church as a whole. It is critical that we are welcoming to our visitors and guest. It is critical that we offer a refuge for all who need healing. It is critical that we spend quality time in community with each other. Yet our mission as a church cannot and does not end there. For our church to have a chance at conviction on account of being Unitarian Universalist, we need to be intentional about sending each other as missionaries into the world.

Earlier we heard from the Benevolent Association. They are on a mission and they need our support. We heard about the Friendly Kitchen, and our UU missionaries who serve that local soup kitchen. They need our support. Next month we will hear more about the

work of Unitarian Universalist Friends of Refugees, and how their work expresses what we love. They need our support.

We also express what we love each week as we donate our entire Sunday collection to people in need within our church, around Concord, or the larger world. Thank you for supporting our community plate. Two weeks ago, we collected over \$900. That's amazing! Next Sunday we will let you know how much we collected for the CROP Walk today and last Sunday. Thank you in advance.

And there is other outreach, as well. Yet I have to wonder what our church would look like and feel like if each one of us became a missionary in some public way? I have to wonder how our guests and our kids would talk about us? I have to wonder how the way we talk and think about ourselves might change?

We are at a unique time in our ministry together. It's new and it's exciting, and it's a time, when many might have expected the unsettled part to be over, now that the new minister is settled. And in some ways that is true. We are settling down. Yet we are also exploring a whole new set of relationships which means we are just beginning to ask the question: now what?

Yes, we decided to get married, sort of, but what are we going to do now that we live together? What is the larger purpose of this relationship? What should be our mission for this church?

To answer these questions will take time and we have the time. To answer these questions will take creativity and soul-searching. We have the talent. In the meantime, we will "keep on moving forward."

May it be so.