

Missionaries

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Many of us have an image that comes to mind when we hear the word missionary – is it the Mormon young man in a white shirt and a tie riding his bike down the street. OR the Jehovah’s witness with their rack of pamphlets in the park. Maybe you have read a book, or seen a movie with a missionary theme, such as the poisonwood bible, or the movie the Mission from which we heard the musical theme as our centering music.

The missionary work began in earnest when world was opening up beyond its tribal and clan limits. Religion spread as trade spread. Prior to then each area of the world had their indigenous or tribal religions. In most places there was no separation of church and state- the religion of the people was the religion of the ruler. Most people would not consider that there could be another way of being religious than the religion they knew. Until they were forced to by conquest, or, missionaries came along.

So how did a religion spread across a continent, or across the world? Some of the spread was simply due to trade routes opening and people becoming exposed to new ideas and ways of being religious. Generally, religions spread in three main ways -conquest, conversion of the ruler, or missionaries.

Islam spread primarily by conquest – through Arab lands and into Europe. However when they conquered a territory – like they did in Spain and Italy in 756 - they did not require the people to convert to Islam. They did require them to pay a tax to practice their religion. Under Muslim rule between 786 and 1492 in Andalusia area of Spain, Jews, Muslims and Christians all lived in together in reasonable peace.

Christianity was spread through all three ways - conquest, rulers and missionaries. Paul of Tarsus was the first great Christian church planter. After his profound conversion experience, he traveled all around the Mediterranean sharing the message of Jesus, establishing churches and training leaders to maintain them. Many of the books of the New Testament are letters that he wrote to encourage and sometimes chastise the congregations that he had set up in place like Rome, Corinth, and Galatia.

But it was when the Roman emperor Constantine converted that Christianity got a huge boost. It became the state religion of the Roman empire in 380 C.E. and stayed that way until the modern era.

Christianity spread aggressively through missionary work beginning in the 14th century and went hand in hand with colonization – spread the religion and takeover of territory. In this way Christianity was spread to Asia, South America and Africa. Imagine going to a new land to share your religion, and place where you know nothing about the language the culture. Christian missionaries tended to resist the culture that they sought to evangelize. And had a sense of superiority about their religion and culture. Indigenous practices were often discouraged.

Most of us who grew up in California were taught about the Catholic missions that dot the state. According to the CA mission foundation. In 1769, under order of the Spanish king, military troops and Franciscan missionaries were sent to the new land to colonize the territory and convert its Indian inhabitants to Christianity.

The foundation was established to maintain the mission and tell their story and to their credit they give an honest accounting. Prior colonization of the territory by the Spaniards had disrupted the lives of the indigenous people in the area, and the mission often provided resources that they needed to survive. According to the foundation the Mission System was highly coercive and once California Indian people entered the community, they were expected to live in ways that the padres and military officials deemed acceptable. Missionaries discouraged aspects of Native religion and culture. Native Americans who had entered the mission communities through baptism were not allowed to leave without permission. They were expected to work to support the mission. Many died from imported diseases to which they had no immunity.

Our own denomination – Unitarian and universalist – engaged in missionary work in the late 19th century, with missions to India and Japan. Though we didn't oppress or enslave people, our motives had no more humility than other Christian organizations – when speaking about the mission to Japan one of the Universalist leaders said – that the Universalists had a duty :to teach and civilize these ignorant and wretched barbarians who nevertheless are our brothers.” They expected to find nothing good in Japanese ideas and customs and saw their responsibility to replace them with Christian practices.

The mission got off to a rocky start – none of the missionaries spoke Japanese and relied on translators – and the translators had a challenge because there were no words in Japanese that could easily explain Universalist theology. Other Christian denominations shunned them

because of their theology of universal salvation. The mission lasted about 40 years, and one church now remains in Tokyo.

Buddhism gives us another model that did not rely on conquest or conversion of rulers to expand. Buddhism is the earliest of the major world religions, emerging from Hinduism in 528 BCE with the enlightenment of the Buddha and the establishment of the sangha – the community of monks and nuns who grounded the faith in place.

Buddhists were likely the first to use church planting to expand their adherents. A charismatic leader would go into a new area, bring a few monks with him, and establish a monastery. There they would invite people into the community to create a sangha – the religious community that includes the lay people as well as the monks and nuns. The sangha often served the needs of the community in secular ways. Rulers appreciated Buddhism because it focused on virtuous living and individual morality. The ordinary citizens loved Buddhism because it gave them a community to expand their spirituality and advance their education. From the beginning these monasteries were funded entirely by donations – small and large.

As Buddhism spread outside India and further into South and East Asia, they encountered cultures that were significantly different and accommodated them. People could engage with Buddhist practices and concepts without giving up their indigenous religion. Though approach was part of the Buddhist philosophy but it a good strategy. Over the centuries as Buddhism traveled East, several distinct branches of thought emerged. Within a thousand years of Buddha's enlightenment the religion he founded had spread throughout Asia. And within 1500 years it was worldwide. Their missionary approach was consistent with their values – no coercion, respecting and adapting to local culture, loving kindness and offering of the gifts of the Buddha.

Stay tuned for part 2.

Part 2 –

The first part of my sermon this morning gave you an overview of the missionary effort of the major world religions. Many of us have negative feelings about missionaries, and the history justifies this.

But that is not the whole story - I want to zoom in from the larger scale of the missionary efforts to the individual scale. Every mission - no matter how big or small involves one-on one connect – one person sharing their truth, their inspiration, their beliefs, with another. Tracy named this effectively when he talked about his motives for going on his mission to Paraguay – “I wanted to share what I knew to be true so that everyone could experience what Mormonism has to offer.”

I want to thank Tracy for sharing his story with us this morning. As I read his remarks in preparation for this service I realized that being a missionary is an act of profound courage and conviction. Worthy of respect. You may not agree with their religious perspective, but you have to admire their commitment and fortitude. I think many of us are challenged with flummoxed by the Jehovah's witness – we almost pity them, or consider that they have been duped. But they are out there speaking up for what is meaningful for them and that is worthy of respect.

What motivates people who engage in missionary work? Generally, I would say it is their commitment to the beliefs that have made a difference in their life – and their desire to share with others so that they can have the same experience. I imagine that each of us can relate to this – even if we are talking about a restaurant, or a book, or a medical cure. – or even a church! We say to our friends - Let me tell you about this thing that has made a difference my life.

I want to share with you the stories of two individuals whose whole lives were committed to sharing their good news. The first comes from our religious heritage – the Universalists. They were missionaries of a radical idea at the time - that a truly loving god would not send anyone to hell.

Their message counter the prevailing idea in the 17th and 18th century that humans were born depraved and on a select few would be redeemed by God – all others would be subjected to eternal suffering in hell. Our forebearers spoke out loudly that God was a loving god - and that all were saved. Universalism was a faith meant to bring the good news of God's unwavering love and mercy to all humanity. Now that sounds like a powerful message to me, but it was heretical at the time. Universalist circuit riders would travel from town to town preaching this message. One of the most committed was a man named Quillen Hamilton Shinn – he was called the grasshopper minister because he crisscrossed the country preaching the good news and establishing churches. He lived from 1862 to 1907. He dedicated his life, unreservedly to the dissemination of Universalist ideas. According the UUA by the time of his death from rheumatic fever at age 62, Shinn had crisscrossed North America preaching in every state in the Union as well as in Canada and Mexico, sometimes giving a sermon a day. He had founded eight churches, overseen the construction of at least 40 church buildings, and brought Universalism to hundreds, if not thousands, of people. His basic message was simple “there is no hell for any of us to fear outside ourselves.” Shinn was so enthusiastic to his mission that when he experienced an unreceptive audience, his reaction was puzzlement rather than discouragement. He simply could not understand why he could not convert people to this glorious faith.

I want to mention one more person who personifies the missionary commitment – that is Peter Ottolini, a Pentecostal evangelist in the 20th century. He was an Italian immigrant to the US and experienced the holy spirit in such a profound way that he became a tireless evangelist for decades. He planted churches around the country – and returned to Italy to evangelize his home country. He and his family made many sacrifices to support his work going without food and even shelter for a time so that he could put money into the fledgling church or go on another missionary trip to Italy. He was persecuted here and in his home country.

You are probably wondering why I chose to include an Italian Pentecostal evangelist in my sermon today and how I came to know his story. Peter Ottolini was my great grandfather.

When I was in seminary, I spent some time studying in Rome and I mentioned his name to the faculty at the protestant seminary where I studied – curious to see if they knew anything about his work. Boy did they! Totally unbeknownst to me he was quite famous among the protestants in Italy and credited with establishing many churches around the country.

I had a strong sense of pride hearing this. I am not a Pentecostal – have never been one. I have issues with some of their practices and beliefs. I would likely feel uncomfortable in the church he founded in St Louis that is now large and prosperous. But I respect that for some people the Pentecostal experience has a profound effect on their lives – liberated by the power of the holy spirit.

My pride comes from the knowledge that a close ancestor of mine made such a profound commitment to what he believed to be true, that he had the courage to speak up and share something that was meaningful to him and to make considerable sacrifice doing so. That is a part of my DNA. It is imbued in my call to ministry. Knowing that he is my ancestor gives the courage to speak up for the beliefs and values that are important to me, and I believe will make a difference for others.

What about you? How can you imagine having a missionary spirit in your life? We have a new values statement in our denomination with love at the center. How can we bring this message to others? Next week will share more of our history and the power of our message. I will reflect more deeply on this question of what it means to be UU missionary in the 21st century. I know what you are thinking – that I am going to tell you how to invite our friends to our church. My intention is to inspire you to bring our values deeper into your heart. I am not concerned with whether UU exists in the next century – I am concerned with whether our values can make a difference in our world.

Hope you will join me