

“Missionaries and Radicals”

A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

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My mom teased me last night that the premise of today’s sermon sounds like a bad joke:

A missionary, a radical, and a pioneer woman walk into a bar...

no, a saloon...

only to reveal their Unitarian identity with a barrage of questions. Ba dum ching!

Actually, we couldn’t come up with a good punchline.

But this sermon is no joke, so listen close, as I tell three stories of the pioneering mid-western spirit...

Missionary - William Greenleaf Eliot

In the late 1820s, young William Greenleaf Eliot was working a summer job in his Washington D.C. home, sorting mail at the post office. Over the course of the summer, Eliot’s imagination was awakened by newspapers coming out of St. Louis, then a small but bustling port town and gateway to the pioneering West. He dreamed of riding West.

Some years later, as Eliot was finishing up divinity school at Harvard- then a bastion of liberal religion and Unitarian heresy – he received a letter from a friend in Louisville, Kentucky. The writer speculated that since there was a hunger for liberal, rational religion in Louisville, surely such a church could also be formed further West, in St. Louis.

Eliot’s interest in the wild west of Missouri had never waned and he enthusiastically responded with his desire to become a Unitarian Missionary to St. Louis. He wrote “Let them know that a youngster is ready to come there to live, to spend his life among them if they will provide food and lodging; for if I come I come to remain and to lay my ashes in the valley of the Mississippi.”

In August of 1834, Eliot was ordained as an Evangelist by the Unitarian Federal Street Church in Boston, and that October he departed for St. Louis, a journey that

took over a month. In November 1834 Eliot reached St. Louis and began his work spreading the liberal gospel. He was 23 years old.

Twenty-five years later Eliot wrote: "It never entered my head that failure was possible. I was determined to persevere. My faith in the power of Christian truth was such that I felt sure... By faith we may become one with God and receive from him power to do all things."

Indeed, Eliot did not fail; his Church of the Messiah, now called the First Unitarian Church of St. Louis, was the first Unitarian Church West of the Mississippi, and it thrived and grew, as did the influence of Eliot himself. His work for the social good extended into the areas of education (including the founding of what is now Washington University), sanitation, and peace. And his missionary spirit inspired him to travel all over the area and establish churches in Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

Eliot was driven by a classical Unitarian faith, in the oneness of God and in the perfectibility of humankind. He believed the goodness of God to be in each person, ready to be drawn forth through the example of Christ, and he very literally gave his life to that message and its work.

Eliot's prediction that his venture West would be the work of a lifetime proved true: after five decades serving in St. Louis and evangelizing the West, he died in 1887 and was laid to rest in the Mississippi River Valley of Missouri.

Radical - Jenkin Lloyd Jones

Some 30 years after Eliot's landing on the shores of the Mississippi, Wisconsin farm boy Jenkin Lloyd Jones managed to save \$100 of pay from his soldiering days in the civil war in order to start divinity school. With dreams of the ministry and a learned life, Jones made his way through school as a janitor, a wood-splitter, and a cook's assistant.

Starting his life in ministry with great personal sacrifice, it seems no surprise that he would thrive in the missionary spirit modeled by men like Eliot. And indeed, Jones founded four Unitarian churches in Wisconsin and one in Chicago even before he was later named full-time Missionary Secretary to the Western Unitarian Conference and traveled as far as California in that role.

But the message Jenkin Lloyd Jones sought to spread was not the same as the traditional Unitarian Christianity to which Eliot had given his life. In the pioneering culture of the West, a new, more radical message had sprung up – a radically free faith – suspicious of anything approaching creed and moving further away from the Christian Unitarianism rooted in the Boston establishment.

Along with his radical colleagues, Jones stressed the idea of Unity in religion and

moved the Western Unitarians to a less sectarian realm of belief, resulting in part, in the statement that we heard things morning as our reading "Things Commonly Believed Among Us." It is typical of the Western Radicals that the statement refrains from exclusively Christian language in favor of a more open approach centered in the Good and the One-in-All.

Indeed Jones may went so far in his theology as to dream of one universal church for all humankind, a vision of human unity which he glimpsed in reality, however briefly, as an organizer of the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893.

"Jesus wrote no creed, appointed no bishop, organized no church and taught no trinity," wrote Jones. "Taking these away, you have instead of Christianity only a blessed humanity left." It is up to us, he thought, to try to go beyond what is given us, saying: "Reverence lies not in the acceptance of dogma bequeathed to you, but in the receptive spirit, the truth-seeking attitude." What we will find in our search, he thought, is not creeds to protect, but deeds to accomplish."

This message of religious freedom, moral integrity, and universal human cooperation was the good news that Jones sought to spread, but this was not the same gospel proclaimed by East Coast Unitarians rooted in Boston's liberal Christian tradition, and the Western Unitarian Conference was known in Boston for a time as a radical outlier to Unitarian Orthodoxy.

Looking back – Jones' radical theology seemed a harbinger of things to come, as one reading the still-resonant statement "Things Commonly Believed Among Us" would be quick to recognize. Today, Unitarian Universalism nationwide arguably holds far more of that Western flavor of big tent theology than of the Boston protestant tradition.

Pioneering Woman - Mary Augusta Safford

Another aspect of today's Unitarian Universalist culture that can be in part traced back to the 19th century West is the prominence of women in our ministry.

On the Western frontier of the mid-1800s, traditional gender roles and assumptions were being challenged by the very fact of the pioneering lifestyle. Pioneer women were by necessity strong of will, mind, and body, and they pulled their weight in the community. For the most part, the rejection of anyone who could do a job was a foolish waste of limited resources, and limitations on women were lessened by that very practicality.

It was a practicality that eventually extended into the church.

Mary Augusta Safford was born on an Illinois farm in 1841, and her first pulpit was a tree stump, where she played preacher even as a little girl. Safford was denied a formal theological education by the circumstances of the hard pioneer life as well as

by the institutions the time, but she read voraciously from the library left her by her father – a library full of dangerous ideas like abolition, biblical fallibility, and Darwin’s theory of evolution.

Safford’s favorite texts, by far, were the sermons and essays of Unitarian Transcendentalist Theodore Parker, whose call for an unmediated, experiential faith and an unapologetic commitment to social responsibility was at that time challenging the Unitarian establishment in Boston and inspiring Western Radicals, including Safford.

In 1871 Safford formed a Literary Society to test out some of her new ideas, and ran the society while working as a teacher. But by the end of the decade her following had grown and included the patronage of several Unitarian missionaries. In 1879 she was encouraged to start a church of her own in Humboldt, Iowa and was supported in her efforts by the Western Unitarian Conference’s Missionary arm, led by Jenkin Lloyd Jones.

Though Jones himself was a great supporter of female leadership, the support of Safford by the conference was not entirely noble – they had trouble attracting and keeping East Coast trained male ministers out on the Western front, and turned to a woman in part to fill a void.

Nevertheless, the church Safford founded thrived, and Safford herself became a mentor to other women with similar ambitions. The Humboldt church became a training ground for women ministers who soon spread all across the state.

Safford was ordained to the Unitarian ministry in 1880, a hundred and thirty three years ago, and forty years before women gained the right to vote. Many of her Iowa sisters soon followed in ordination. These pioneering women, today known as the Iowa Sisterhood, so solidly set the expectation for Unitarian ministry on the Iowa frontier that, upon the occasion of a pulpit exchange between an Iowa sister and a male colleague, a scandalized little girl was heard to exclaim to her mother “Mama, there’s a *man* up there in the pulpit!”

So. A missionary. A radical. A pioneering woman. Three archetypes of our spiritual forbears in the Midwest, expressed in three individual stories. And they are only three stories among many, which tell us something powerful about the religious tradition and culture that we inherit.

What does it mean to us as mid-western Unitarian Universalists to be descended from missionaries who risked life and limb riding west to spread a religious message of reason, human agency, and hope? Surely only a deep and passionate faith would inspire such sacrifice.

And what does it mean to be descended from the radicals who took on the established institution to insist upon absolute freedom of conscience and a radically open faith – with room at the table for a great plurality? What does it mean to be descended from those who wished and worked for the wild dream of true unity in human relations?

And the women. What legacy do we carry from the pioneering women who found a way where there was no way - to live the calling of their souls? What do we possess of their strength and fortitude and steady innovation?

From our missionaries, from our radicals, from our pioneering women, we inherit a sacred calling.

It is the call to give our lives over to a radical message of good news, and to find a way, even where there seems to be no way, to embody that good news in our living.

And what is that mission?
And what makes it radical?
And where lies the frontier?

In the true plurality of our community, there are many answers to these questions, but perhaps, given our recent mission discernment, I can give it a start.

Our community claims a soul-saving message of radical inclusion and deep connection to one another and to the source of love from which we all come.

We carry the good news that all beings are beloved and intertwined - no exceptions, no exclusions, no divisions.

We hold the embodiment of extravagant and universal Love as the deep and passionate faith worth dying and worth living for - as the blessing we have for the world.

This historic faith in unity-through-love *is* a radical claim... Radical because it challenges the institutions of division and commodity and devalued human life that seem to form the world around us... Radical because it has never yet been fully lived... Radical because its true embodiment would fundamentally alter our world.

Each week, we gather here to be reminded and renewed in that radical message of universal love.

And each week we are sent forth to the frontiers in our lives – to find a way forward in our faith. We venture into frontiers of work and school and city streets where we are challenged daily to truly love the world and fully love one another.

We venture into frontiers online and in coffee shops seeking the wilds of deeper connection.

In doing so we meet and carry the call of our spiritual ancestors.

So I charge you today, inheritors of the Western Unitarian spirit. Go forth as missionaries. Go forth as radicals. Go forth as pioneers.

It is an impossible call. It is a wild proposition. But let us go forth to convert the world to Love.

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