



Reading

Excerpt from "A New Religious America," a sermon preached by Thomas Nickelson, May 18, 2003

Living on the border... has become ... a powerful metaphor of hope for the future. Borders have become defining in our lives. At the same time, people and groups who live at the borders have a special role to play. They can be the gatekeepers, the sergeants at arms, the border guards, but they also can be the bridge makers, the reconcilers, the weavers, the ones who are easing us into a new world beyond the old pressures of nationalism, religious parochialism, racial division, and class structures.

We are no longer a Christian nation. We are no longer a Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish nation. We are religiously diverse. Most of the religions of the world are growing here. This is work that changes everyone's view of our nation and of the world. We have no choice to choose this new future or refuse it. It's here ... It is in every city and in many towns. It is exciting, painful, challenging, filled with risks and possibilities. Some love it, some hate it; and I use the word hate advisedly. The hate of religious diversity in the country is a very tender point in our public life. We might make it one day to a healthy pluralism and we might not, but there is only one course ahead and that is to do the best we can with the new religious diversity.

It has not been easy for immigrants coming into America and establishing their religious practices. Religious freedom here guarantees people of all religious traditions the right of assembly, belief, and practice, but public attitudes are often a different story of suspicion, hostility, and exclusion. If we are willing to live at the religious borders in this country, even in this city, we will learn quickly what immigrants have had to endure to claim their rights. Hindus and Muslims and Buddhists have gathered their communities in this country. They have built temples and mosques and gurdwaras, but they still live in fear of popular reaction, and for good reason.

For us Unitarian Universalists, there is a very clear message here.... Diversity is not pluralism. Religious diversity is a given ... but, we are still far from true pluralism, ... Diversity is the sheer variety of religious groups and practices in our culture. It is one thing to tolerate them; it is quite another to embrace them. Tolerating diversity is ... very passive and it doesn't really change anything. It's like going swimming but sitting on the beach. Embracing diversity is active and intentional. It means jumping in. Embracing pluralism is positive, an expectation that diversity will strengthen the future. ... Diversity is a given. Pluralism ... has to be created. (Pause)

Sermon

There's a story that I read some time ago that I just can't shake. I don't know if the story is literally true, and yet there is most definitely truth in it. It is a story of a particular people. But, it also has a universal meaning, and so in that spirit I share it with you.

"About a century or two ago, the Pope decided that all the Jews had to leave Rome. Naturally there was a big uproar from the Jewish community. So the Pope made a deal. He would have a religious debate with a member of the Jewish community. If the Jew won, the Jews could stay. If the Pope won, the Jews would leave.



The Jews looked for a champion to defend their faith, but no one volunteered. It was too risky. Finally, an old man named Moishe who spent his life sweeping up after people, offered to do it, saying that his poverty and age meant he had less to lose. He asked only for one condition, that neither side be allowed to talk. The Pope agreed.

On the day of the debate, Moishe and the Pope sat opposite each other for a full minute before the Pope raised his hand and showed three fingers. Moishe raised one finger. The Pope waved his fingers in a circle around his head. Moishe pointed to the ground where he sat. The Pope pulled out a wafer and a glass of wine. Moishe pulled out an apple. The Pope stood up and said, "I give up. This man is too good. The Jews can stay."

The cardinals were all around the Pope asking him what happened. The Pope said, "First I held up three fingers to represent the Trinity. He responded by holding up one finger, to remind me that there was still one God common to both our religions. Then I waved my fingers around me to show him, that God was all around us. He responded by pointing to the ground, showing that God was also right here with us. I pulled out the wine and the wafer to show that God absolves us from our sins. He pulled out an apple to remind me of original sin. He had an answer for everything. What could I do?"

Meanwhile, the Jewish community had crowded around Moishe, amazed that this uneducated man had done what all their scholars had insisted was impossible! "What happened?" they asked.

"Well," said Moishe, "first he said to me that the Jews had three days to get out of here. I told him that not one of us was leaving. Then he told me that this whole city would be cleared of Jews. I let him know that we were staying right here. And then, I'm not sure what happened! He took out his lunch and I took out mine."

So often we think we're on the same page, that we're speaking the same language, and yet we are in completely different universes, with different understandings, different priorities, different hopes, fears and desires. How often do our attempts to communicate with each other, even within the same culture, end up in places none of us ever expected. Then it's not hard to imagine how challenging it is to communicate across cultures, not to mention when there is a significant difference in power between the people doing the communicating. It's pretty hard to communicate effectively when you don't feel on equal ground.

Far too often, the differences between us have lead to violence. Countless lives have been lost or uprooted because difference is seen as dangerous. Countless souls have been broken because fear of difference is used to dehumanize and control the one who is seen as different.

The story of Moishe and the Pope is a great example of missiology, a theological term that means the way a religion looks at the world around it. How do you view those who are different from you? In this case, the Pope had an exclusive missiology, which saw difference as bad and dangerous. This is the kind of missiology that will say there is only one truth and we have it. You've probably encountered that missiology because it's all around us. This missiology made it alright to send the Jews away. But Moishe's answers, in the Pope's mind at least, challenged his exclusive missiology, and opened him up to a more inclusive missiology, where he saw the connections between them. It became more difficult for him to dehumanize the Jewish community and to write it off.



Unitarianism and Universalism have a similar story. In both, our foremothers and forefathers have experienced persecution from those with more exclusive missiologies, and that experience shaped the kind of missiology we created and in fact, still practice today. And in both cases, our missiology has changed those around us because it has offered a different way of looking at the world.

In the early 1500s, a Spanish scholar named Michael Servetus studied the Scriptures in their original languages and found no proof of the doctrine of the Trinity. He came to the conclusion that the church's position that you had to go through Jesus to get to God was flawed. The church was confusing Jesus with his message. He was not the message. He was the messenger, sent from a loving God to offer humanity a renewed path to right living. When Servetus published *On the Errors of the Trinity*, many were deeply influenced by his ideas. The Catholic Church was not so impressed. Neither was the emerging Protestant Church. Both put a bounty on his head and when John Calvin, a leading Protestant reformer, managed to have him arrested, Servetus was burned at the stake, a copy of his book tied to his ankle. But his Unitarian ideas did not burn away. They spread through Europe, gaining traction especially in Poland and Romania. In the 1700s the ideas had spread to Britain, and then from Britain they came to North America. And at every stage in their history, the expansive ideas of Unitarianism were met by exclusive missiologies that saw them as dangerously threatening.

When Unitarian ideas of God and Jesus and humanity emerged in the liberal wing of the Congregationalist Church of New England in the late 1700s, sparks flew. Conservative Congregationalists with their exclusive missiologies worked overtime to suppress these new ideas and the liberals soon faced the painful reality that they had been turfed out of the churches they loved. They were going to have to form a new Christian denomination – Unitarianism.

The experience of that exclusion left a painful but powerful mark on them and has resulted in a missiology that is uniquely Unitarian and seems to respond particularly well to others who have faced exclusion in their churches of origin. Since the beginning, we have committed to an inclusive missiology, that values connecting with others over separating from them, that assumes there is a truth out there that we see but partially. We always look for the connections, for the points of agreement and understanding. You can see this missiological thread throughout our whole history.

For example, our missiology held us together in the first in-house theological battle that erupted in 1838. Ralph Waldo Emerson, after whom this church is named, challenged the centrality of the Bible. He said that not only didn't you need Jesus to get to God, you didn't need the Bible either. Both Jesus and the Bible were but one way to understand God, but you could easily approach God through other ways, like nature. You could have a direct connection to transcendence. There were some in the Unitarian church who found these ideas totally threatening and wanted to ask them to leave. And yet, somehow they couldn't bring themselves to do it. They remembered what it had been like to be rejected. They understood from their own experience that challenge and reform was a sign that you loved your church, not that you wanted to bring it down. And so, with great difficulty but firm commitment, they found a way to make the table bigger so that there was room for this new diversity. That's how our missiology works. You always look for what there is for you to learn.

The same thing can be seen in the next theological controversy, when humanism entered Unitarianism in the early 1900s. The humanists said that not only didn't you need Jesus, not only didn't you need the Bible, you didn't even need God to connect to the sacred and to live an ethical life. Living itself, right here on this earth, was a sacred thing. There were some theists who wished to expel the humanists, arguing that they were going to poison Unitarianism. And yet, somehow they couldn't bring themselves to do it. Even though all the Unitarians who had experienced the expulsion first hand were now dead, there was a strong institutional memory that inclusion and open mindedness is what Unitarianism has been about from its earliest days and they were not going to turn against that missiological tradition. So by the early 1900s we had Christian Unitarians who still held Jesus and the



Christian Bible as central aspects of their faith practice, Deist Unitarians who found less meaning in Jesus and the Bible but still had a strong connection to God, and Humanist Unitarians, who had no need for Jesus, the Bible or God, and looked into human consciousness for their eternal truths.

Now to be honest, it continued to be difficult for each of these groups not to think that they were the true Unitarians. Even to this day, we still have people who will see their own kind of Unitarian Universalism as more real and feel threatened by the diversity in our churches. Every time a new kind of diversity comes into our doors, there will be those who fear we are losing our church. But our missiology keeps pulling us back to the table. Basically, this is the truth of it. Our inclusive missiology is what welcomed every single one of you into this church, and it is now your inheritance and it is then up to you to bestow that inclusive missiology to those who come after you, even, and perhaps especially, when their particular theology makes you uncomfortable. And our missiology should make us healthily uncomfortable when we start to get exclusive. When we start thinking that we have a truer and more right way that makes us better than others. Or when we feel tempted to shut out anything that changes the church we fell in love with in the first place.

We live in a religiously conservative part of this country and we are frequently judged and often our children are judged, by people who go to churches with exclusive missiologies that say there is only one right and true way. We are experiencing, sometimes daily, what Unitarians have been experiencing for hundreds of years and sometimes it wears you down. When you have the experience of being judged, it's easy to take the hurt and to become hard ourselves and to be distrustful of difference. It's one of the ways we protect ourselves from getting hurt again. But our inclusive missiology shouldn't let us get away with that for long. If our response to judgment is to become hard ourselves, then we have joined the oppression and become oppressors. We have become the bearers of an exclusive missiology. If we really believe that there are many paths to truth, then we have to keep our eyes open to see the similarities even and perhaps especially with those who judge us.

Now some people make the mistake of thinking that our inclusive missiology means that anything goes, that you can believe anything you want. But that's simply not true. If your beliefs separate you from others, if your beliefs harden your heart, if your beliefs allow you to turn away from suffering and to resist taking on responsibilities that are yours, then you've misused our inclusive missiology. This is not a religion for the faint of heart. Cultivating the kind of awareness it takes to keep an open heart and mind is a discipline, a life long discipline. To the use the words of our reading, "It is exciting, painful, challenging, and filled with risks and possibilities." It means getting off the beach and into the water.

But it is so worth it because like all aspects of Unitarian Universalist theology, our missiology when lived faithfully is one part of the path to freedom, one part of the path to wholeness and beauty and sense of meaning and purpose. Our missiology, like all parts of our theology, is about claiming new life and being resurrected to ourselves and to the world. Countless lives have been lost or uprooted because difference is seen as dangerous. Countless souls have been broken because fear of difference is used to dehumanize and control the one who is seen as different. Our missiology is about turning the tide so that more and more of our fellow sisters and brothers can live in trust and peace and security.

Who knew that our theology was so powerful and so necessary for our beautiful and hurting world? And did you have any idea of how significant you are as you live it?

Amen and blessed be.