



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### Conversion? Yes!

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So, why a story about conversion? I understand that the word “conversion” can be a little scary, if not terrifying. Let me assure you, I am not here to argue for a conversion, of the type from one religion to another. Nor am I even here to argue that we, UUs, be the ones converting others. The word “conversion” comes from Latin *convers-* “turned around.” I am here to argue for a little turning around, both of the internal type, and of the institutional type.

So I follow a principle – loosely called, “If you’re gonna read some Christian scripture, do it through the lens of liberation theology.” I’d like to introduce you to a contemporary liberation theologian named Miguel de la Torre. Miguel de la Torre is a Cuban-American, author of several books, Christian minister, and professor of social ethics at the Iliff School of Theology. Miguel de la Torre has a fascinating interpretation of the Book of Acts, and it is his interpretation, and essay written in 2008, that led me to choose this story as our reading today.

He writes, “The Book of Acts shows how God’s Holy Spirit taught the early church how to constantly welcome and accept those who were seen as having no claim to God’s promise of salvation.”<sup>1</sup> Let’s break that down.

The Book of Acts of the Apostles, provides a narrative sequel to the story of Jesus, and follows his death and resurrection. Acts shows a continuation of the ministry of Jesus through dramatic growth of the Christian community through miracles, conversions, and martyrdoms. One of the key themes of Acts is maintaining the continuity between Jesus and the Jewish tradition, while also demonstrating the entrance of Gentiles, or non-Jews, into the Christian movement. Cornelius demonstrates the conversion of a Roman citizen, and how through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, Peter comes to welcome him and accept him into the Christian community.

I suggest that in the passage we read today, there are two conversions that occur: Cornelius, *and Peter*.

And through Peter, conversion of the Christian church. Peter, a dedicated follower of Jesus, is going about his own business of tending to the small Christian community, which at the time consists mostly of people of Jewish backgrounds, Peter included. He receives a vision from God with the mysterious message showing all kinds of animals to be eaten. God tells him, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” Peter realizes later, that whereas before he would have refused to associate with Cornelius, that God has “shown him that I should not call *anyone* profane or unclean.” Peter thought he understood his community, their set boundaries, their rules and expectations; however, the Spirit surprises him, says, “Look over there! These are your people and they belong too!” Peter has been converted as well, to the recognition of a different set of people as his brothers and sisters, and members of the same

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<sup>1</sup> De la Torre, Miguel, “Converting the Church,” Aug. 25, 2008  
<http://www.ethicsdaily.com/news.php?viewStory=13056>

holy community. Peter's internal set of biases about inclusion and exclusion, are transformed and re-arranged.

Miguel de la Torre argues that, "The church constantly had to be converted in order to make the message of Jesus Christ relevant to a hurting and spiritually hungry world."<sup>2</sup>

Let me repeat that, "The church constantly had to be converted," in order to make the message of the church relevant to the world around it. I wonder what it would be like for us to think about conversion, not as how we can change other people around to our way of thinking or believing, but of how *we must constantly change* in order to keep our spiritual message relevant and meeting the needs of those around us.

In his essay, Miguel de la Torre tells the story of his first trip to Disneyland as a 10 year old in 1968. Young Miguel wants to buy something and he looks through the themed cups, license plates, and keychain decorations, all labeled with different names. No matter how hard he looks, he doesn't see anything with the name "Miguel" or any other Latino name. Only "Michael" or "Michelle."

Miguel writes, "It soon became apparent to me that I simply did not belong, unless I was to renounce what my identity has thus far been and become "Mike." At a young age I was reminded that what Euro-Americans take for granted was beyond my reach, I would always be an outsider, a foreigner."<sup>3</sup>

De la Torre then muses that his experience at Disneyland was similar to Cornelius. Cornelius, too, was worried about being an outsider, perpetually labeled as someone who does not belong in the new community of Christians. De la Torre humorously imagines the meetings Peter had before deciding to include Cornelius and other Gentile converts. Opposition may have said, "Well, there goes the neighborhood. Once we let one of those kind in the floodgates will burst open and they are all going to want to join us. Before long, they will change the ethos of our community. We may end up as a Gentile religious movement."<sup>4</sup>

Does this sound familiar? How many times have we heard this struggle between inclusion and exclusion? And how many have times have we heard the people in the center, the more privileged part of an institution, say about the people on the margins – "If only they looked or thought more like us then we would include them. As it is, we'll just have to wait for them to convert to our religion, our lifestyle, our way of being."?

In the story of Cornelius, there are visions and voices from the heavens; the nudging of God, is not so subtle! There is a clear movement against the inertia of the church institution, move

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

towards the discomfort. Move towards the margins. Take what you used to know about clean or unclean, sacred or profane, and see holiness in unexpected places.

In our current times, the nudging of the Spirit is not as easy to discern. The process of our constant self-transformation, of our own conversion to how to keep our spiritual message relevant and responsible to the needs of marginalized peoples takes a lot of internal and institutional reflection and self-critique.

An example from our history – James Reeb was a UU minister who left his associate ministry position at the church of All Souls in DC to join a community-based ministry in the poverty-stricken area of Roxbury in Boston. He went on join other Unitarians who were answering the call made by African Americans to march for civil rights. While staying in Selma before Martin Luther King’s march, Reeb and his companions were attacked and beaten by four white men, an attack that resulted in Reeb’s death, on March 11, 1965.

Reeb’s friend, J. Ronald Engel, states that he and Reeb were motivated to go to Selma to live out our deepest principles of equality, freedom, and justice. Engel states, “We rejected any notion that the church is the only sacred center. The world is filled with sacred centers, and it is the mission of the church to identify, celebrate, and serve the creativity of those places.”<sup>5</sup>

When James Reeb and many other white and black Unitarians and Universalists left their churches to join marches on the streets they were claiming those streets as a place for sacred justice. They were asking the church, the justice system, the education system, and the political system to be converted to the realities and inequalities of oppression and to be transformed into systems of equal access and treatment. They were marching to demonstrate the possibility of new community, not organized on a principle of privileging a few at the cost of many, but a community that recognizes the sacred worth of each person.

This process of conversion and transformation was long in coming and still on-going. This past month young people, activists, and clergy from all areas of the nation went to Ferguson, Missouri, to call for justice. This includes the Moral Monday protest and a week of resistance and calling for repentance. There are still ways to participate – look to the joint statement made by UUA President Peter Morales and Kenny Wiley about the upcoming protest to Stop Police Brutality, Repression, and the Criminalization of a Generation on Oct. 22. There are protests happening in cities all over, including LA.

As a religious tradition, Unitarian Universalists have often been on the forefront of listening to the voices of the margins and allowing ourselves to be transformed by the calls of feminists, GLBT members, people of color, groups of all abilities and disabilities, and other oppressed groups. Yet we have also at times missed opportunities and continue to struggle with our own privilege which we are sometimes blind to.

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<sup>5</sup> Parker, Kathleen, *Sacred Service in Civic Space: Three Hundred Years of Community Ministry in Unitarian Universalism*, Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2007, p.206.

Kenny Wiley is the DRE at Prairie UU Church in Parker, Colorado, and he is a life-long UU who happens to be black. He writes in the opening of his call to action the following statement, “When I was nine, a white UU adult told me after the service he loved that my black family worshipped at ‘his’ church. ‘It shows how far your people have come.’”<sup>6</sup> When I read this on Friday afternoon, I had chills. This is an expression of the belief that the best thing for the privileged center is to “convert” others from the margins to their way of doing things.

I grew up in a UU fellowship in east San Diego with approximately 100 members at the time. There were less than ten people of color members. I also grew up attending public schools, like my high school which was a large and diverse charter school with 3,000 students and was once used as a “cautionary tale” by white conservative school board members. They told other schools, “If you become charter, unwanted students will flood your doors and it will bring the risk of gun violence.” Never mind that the only two school shootings that occurred in the school district were committed by white students at predominantly white schools.

It was not until I was a student at Harvard Divinity School that I really started to question the lack of racial and ethnic diversity within my own denomination. It can be painful and startlingly isolating to attend church and always be assumed to be an “outsider,” not someone who was actually raised UU. It’s painful to realize that it took me a long time to meet another Asian-American UU woman minister, to see someone up in the pulpit who “looks like me.”

This sermon is my answer to the question I and other UU people of color are frequently asked, “How can we get more people like you into our congregations?” I’m happy to discuss many potential answers—music, ministerial mentorship and leadership, location, our order of service—but ultimately I believe that the question is a false one. The question is not about how we can “convert” more of the people out there to come inside the church. The question is how we as a church can convert ourselves to the reality of the world around us and remember our principles of being a community of hope, healing, and all-inclusive love.

Miguel de la Torre writes at the end of his essay that he visited Disneyland again more recently and found a bike license plate with the name “Miguel.” He proudly bought it. Now the reason that Disneyland decided to market items with Latino/a names was both the recognition of our multicultural America, but also the corporate desire to make more money. As a church, I believe we can do better than Disneyland.

When we not only listen, but engage with and welcome into our midst newcomers from the margins, we not only help our church transform to be sustainable in this world, but also we become a better, more loving, wider-welcoming church.

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<sup>6</sup> Wiley, Kenny, “My people of faith: Will we answer?” Oct. 17, 2014  
<http://standingonthesideoflove.org/blog/my-people-of-faith-will-we-answer/>

How are we to do this work of being responsible to the needs of the world, especially the areas of oppression, pain and violence? We must stay engaged in the many social justice movements of our time and practice deep listening and deep humility. We will sometimes be confronted with our own biases and prejudices, the voices within which say, "I don't know enough. Those aren't my kind of people. That's not my struggle." We must also listen to the voice of the Spirit, the voice of spiritual liberation and hope which calls us onward, and hear how it prompts us forward into those uncomfortable spaces, into the houses of our neighbors who we have not met before, and where we might find an unexpected welcome.

We are being asked to transform ourselves, and our institutions, into followers of the call to inclusive love and justice.

Neighborhood Church is entering into and ready for a time of transition in ministerial leadership. We are excited to meet Rev. Lissa Gundlach and all that she can bring. *And*, the conversion I'm talking about is not just a point in the future, nor a one-time occurrence, or a job to leave to only the ministers. It is a spiritual practice for every day, for all of us, and it is vital.

I want to close with a quote from Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed's book *Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism*. He writes:

Because it is not about bringing in people of different hues and cultures or about doing what seems morally correct. It is not about them. It is about healing ourselves and transforming Unitarian Universalism. This yearning is spiritually rooted in an intuition. It is a reality that [our] Seventh Principle points toward: 'the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.' We are deeply and inextricably connected to one another and all that ever was or shall be. We want one another. We yearn to feel connected—and whole.

Each of us is a unique manifestation of the eternally unfolding creation, each a member of one human family, each entwined in the arms of the Divine Mystery that is both parent and partner, all of us sharing a common destiny. As we love, are loved, and act out of that love, we are proclaiming twenty-first-century Universalism within our lives.<sup>7</sup>

As Engel and Reeb believed, we reject any notion that the church is the only sacred center. May we join together in discovering the creativity of sacred places, within and outside church walls. We yearn to feel connected and whole with one another. May we open our congregations and communities, open our doors and windows to our neighbors, to the stranger knocking and waiting for entry, to the oppressed and invisible, to those who are different from our "usual."

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<sup>7</sup> Morrison-Reed, Mark, *Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism*, Boston: Skinner House Books, 2011, p.308.

We welcome their challenge, knowing that our communities will be made richer by their presence. May we commit ourselves to the constant renewal and conversion of our spirits, through great love.

Amen and blessed be.