

Can I Help You?

(Version 1a)

A Sunday service led by the
Reverend Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on December 11, 2016, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

WELCOME

Dear friends, some who are new, some who are not, you are welcome here – one and all. We are a welcoming community which honors the inherent worth of all people, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, orientation, socio-economic class, or other attributes that only serve to divide our society. Here, we welcome you as you are, and are glad you came to be with us today. You may have been coming here for years, even decades; or you may have been coming here for just a few weeks; or, this might even be your first time here, ever. Regardless of how long you have been here, we have one thing to say to you all: **Welcome Home!** Please take a few moments now to greet your neighbors.

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Each week, we come here, to gather, together...

We light a flame, the spirit of our fellowship,

To mark this time as special, this space as sacred.

We are here for the each other, our community.

You are not here for me, alone;

I am not here for any of you, alone.

We are all here, for all of us, together.

For this, the spirit that is our fellowship,

And for this community that feeds our souls,

We light our Flaming Chalice today.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

During our time of Silent Joys and Sorrows, we acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether they be joyful or sad. If you wish to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you're invited to come and choose a disc from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

Of course, these can mean whatever you want them to, but we picked out the colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies or yellow for sunny skies, while the dark stones can symbolize your sorrows, as an overcast or stormy sky. If you have a joy or sorrow you wish to acknowledge, please come forward.

MEDITATION

Being a caring community, we *celebrate* the joys and *share* the sorrows, whether we have told others about them or hold onto them in silence. We do so, so that our friends do not carry these alone. You are now invited into a moment of silence and meditation, as we hold these joys and these sorrows in our hearts and minds. We will bring our meditation to a conclusion by joining in singing a Musical Meditation, Hymn # _____, _____ (name) in the (grey/teal) hymnal.

[Silence]

Thank you. Blessed be.

OFFERING

Once upon a time, most folks used the offering plate to fulfill their pledges of financial support.

Nowadays lots of folks click on their church websites or set up automatic transfers from their checking accounts. Some still write a monthly check, paying their "church bill" along with all the others.

But passing the offering plate was never just a practical exercise. It has always been a ritual. Even if your pledge is paid up, it is worthwhile for you to bring even just a dollar to drop into the plate, as a ritual reminder of that form of love we call generosity. Let it be a reminder that, after meeting our obligations to ourselves and our households and the communities to which we belong and are committed, we must still keep

our capacity to give. The practice of giving, until it is second-nature and first-response, helps bring forth the realm of love.

- Paul R. Beedle¹

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering to support a worthy cause. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is _____.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning's offering will now be received.

¹ <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/offering/form-love-we-call-generosity>

Can I Help You?

Reverend Michael Walker

The season has changed again, the leaves have fallen and we have brisk, chilly air. I'm told that they have snow back home in Washington state, and that the storm is heading through the Midwest now. Perhaps it will reach us, or not. I, personally, wouldn't mind skipping the snow this year, but I know that many people love it. And isn't there something nostalgic about having a *White Christmas*?

During such cold times of year, our thoughts often turn to the warmth provided by our families and friends. At the same time, we may notice those outside and cold; those who are not held in the warmth of hearth and home.

Witnessing such a person will often cause to rise within us a desire to be of service, to provide compassion and care. This, we give from ourselves to others we love, as well as others we don't even know.

Can I help you? That is something we say so often that perhaps it is deeply ingrained into who we are as people. Even within this congregation gathered here, we affirm every week that *service is the law of this church*. In this case, we use *law* as a metaphor for our calling as a people of faith to be of service to our surrounding community.

Last week, we talked about the shadow-side of service, including codependency and the impulse to do for someone what they are capable of doing for themselves, and for which they did not ask for help. This

rescuing behavior is not what I'm talking about today, when we consider the question, "*Can I help you?*" Asking and then helping— out of goodness and not codependency – is a different sort of thing. I'm reminded that service has always been an important aspect of Unitarian Universalism, as we and our forebears have sought to live out our values and not just talk about them.

A lesson I have learned in life is that compassion is a gift that is multiplied in the giving of it, becoming something grander than we could have imagined at first. Grace and forgiveness, likewise. We don't set out to do something good for someone else in order to get something in return. The results of our service to others may be intangible, yet still rewarding.

Let me tell you a story about a boy who learned about the gift of service and sharing his love of life, with a little bit of Christmas cheer, as well.²

Mark was an 11-year-old orphan who lived with his aunt, a bitter middle-aged woman greatly annoyed with the burden of caring for her dead sister's son. She never failed to remind young Mark, if it hadn't been for her ... generosity, ... he would be a vagrant, homeless waif. Still, with all the scolding and chilliness at home, he was a sweet and gentle child.

Mark's teacher had not really noticed him much until he began staying after class each day

² Adapted by Michael Walker, from a short story, "An Empty Box?", author unknown. <https://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/service/>

(at the risk of arousing his aunt's anger, she later found out.) One day, he just asked her, "Can I help you?" So, he stayed to help straighten up the classroom. He did this service every day, quietly and comfortably, not speaking much. When they did talk, Mark spoke mostly about his mother. Though he was quite small when she died, he remembered her as kind, gentle, and loving, who always spent a lot of time with him.

As Christmas drew close, however, Mark stopped staying after school each day. His teacher looked forward to his coming, and when the days passed and he continued to scamper hurriedly from the room after class, she stopped him one afternoon and asked why he no longer helped her

in the room. She told him how she had missed him, and his large gray eyes lit up eagerly as he replied, "Did you really miss me?"

Mark's teacher explained how he had been her best helper. "I was making you a surprise," he whispered confidentially. "It's for Christmas." With that, he became embarrassed and dashed from the room.

Finally came the last school day before Christmas. Mark crept slowly into the room late that afternoon with his hands concealing something behind his back. "I have your present," he said timidly when his teacher looked up. "I hope you like it." He held out his hands holding a tiny, carved wooden box.

“It’s beautiful, Mark. Is there something in it?” she asked as she opened it to look inside.

“Oh, you can’t see what’s in it,” he replied, “and you can’t touch it, or taste it or feel it, but mother always said it makes you feel good all the time – warm on cold nights, and safe when you’re all alone.”

She gazed into the empty box and said, “What is it, Mark, that will make me feel so good?”

“It’s love,” he whispered softly, “and mother always said it’s best when you give it away.” And he turned and quietly left the room.

After the holiday recess, Mark returned with his classmates. Again, he stayed after school, and

he asked, “Can I help you straighten up the room?”

Mark had learned to be of service at a very young age, and learned the value of love in the quiet and sad times without his mother. Most importantly, he reflected back this love as he touched someone else’s life, even if it seemed he needed help and love more than his teacher did. Perhaps she learned a lesson, as well, that we may have no idea what is going on for someone else, unless we ask.

How can we be of service? It often feels like we can hardly afford to take time for charitable acts during this busy time of year.

How do we put our values into action? It is so

cold outside and so warm in our homes, that we can easily find ourselves staying inside, and not even witness the shivering of that homeless person I mentioned earlier.

How do we walk our talk? Many of us feel that we have left to give, after this year that was so difficult for so many of us.

Perhaps we can be of service. There are many ways to do so, and here are but a few:

- *If it snows and your neighbor has trouble getting around, ask them “can I help you?” And then, shovel their walk, as well as yours.*
- *Support your local cold weather homeless shelter.*
- *When you see someone that seems lost or confused, ask them “can I help you?”*

- *Call or visit – better to visit – someone with whom you feel a rift or broken relationship. Infuse some grace and love into that conversation – try to heal the rift.*
- *If you see someone in despair or overcome with sorrow, ask them “can I help you?” and offer freely from your store of compassion.*

The UU minister-turned-author, Rev. Robert Fulghum, has written several books I recommend. After his bestseller, *Everything I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, he wrote a sequel, *It Was on Fire When I Laid Down on It*. In the 2nd book, he says:³

³ Fulghum, Robert. *It was on Fire When I Laid Down on It*. (NY: Ballantine, 1989).

I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world – into the black places in the hearts of men – and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.

Isn't that the meaning of all our lives: to reflect a bit of light, a bit of love, into the dark corners of the world, into the lives of others who need us?

Although it, perhaps, goes without saying, let's say it anyway... In this holiday season, let us encourage folks here and elsewhere to be generous of heart. And, each of us should lead by example. Reach out to others,

especially in our church community, who may otherwise be alone at this time of year. Celebrate friendship and the holidays, together. Share good food and company; help to brighten another's day, and your day will also be golden!

Be charitable, as well, giving in some way (and I don't really mean money, although that may be part of it). More importantly, give of one's compassion, helping others who may be in need. *But, be sure to ask what is needed, though, and not just decide what you think others need.* Above all, practice love and grace and forgiveness. Not a one of us is perfect, and yet we all deserve to be cared about. And if one in our family or community has erred, now is a very good time to practice forgiveness.

And one more thing... If **you**, yourself, are going

to be alone or in need during this holiday season, please: I encourage you to reach out. I know that it's difficult; I also know that it's easy to think others don't care. But, they do. I encourage you to take that risk, reaching out to others here, because I truly believe that others here will respond with love and care. Share of yourself, because there are others here who wish that of you, and wish to do the same in-kind. That sharing of warmth and care is, I believe, the real reason for the season.

I will close with these words from the preacher, teacher and activist, the Rev. Howard Thurman, entitled: Now the Work of Christmas Begins:⁴

⁴ <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/affirmation/now-work-christmas-begins>

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.*

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Each week, we call upon each other
to strive, to aspire, to take action
as best we can, sharing with each other
a bit of the special nature that resides
within each and every person here

Each week, we depart this special place
and continue on with our lives
as we walk, share, and take action
as best we can, living in a world
fraught with troubles beyond our control

And, as we feel the cold of winter,
we call upon each other
to be safe, warm, and happy
and wherever we may go, to return here
that we may again share in each other's company

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!