

If I Could Write a Letter to God

(Version 1a)

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

Presented on March 19, 2017, 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)

Come on in, take shelter from the weather and world.

Come on in, to this sanctuary of peace and love.

Come on in, be with this community of compassion.

Here we gather to support and care for each other.

Here we gather to be inspired on our spiritual journeys.

Here we gather to organize for justice and equity.

We light our Flaming Chalice, a beacon of freedom,

A symbol of faith, and the embodiment of the elements.

We light our Chalice in solidarity with so many others:

All those who walk with us a faith community,

Working together to make the world a better place.

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

This congregation offers a liberal spiritual home to seekers from all walks of life. We are proud of the work we do in the community, the classes we offer for children and adults, for the care and concern provided by this community and its staff, and for these two beautiful campuses that have each become a spiritual home for so many.

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to let the offering basket pass you by, because you are our honored guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home, we thank you for your continuing generosity.

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

If you are writing a check, please specify on the Memo line whether this is for your Pledge, an offering to UCH, or for the Share-the-Plate recipient.

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

If I Could Write a Letter to God

Reverend Michael Walker

Perhaps you've heard of kids sending letters to the North Pole. Did you know that some people also write letters to God and mail them to Jerusalem, where other people then take those letters and insert them into the Wailing Wall? Yes, it's true. I'm not going to mail my letter to Jerusalem, but I will share it with you.

I know that some here do not believe in God. There are some who do, but don't think of All-That-Is-Holy as a person who's paying attention to our personal lives. And there are those here who do talk to God, and believe that He or She does answer. I could wax philosophical and describe the mental gymnastics I

underwent in seminary, when I used Jungian concepts to explain my understanding of the Divine as an alternative to the traditional Christian theologians, such as Karl Barth or Paul Tillich, Gustavo Gutierrez or even Matthew Fox (although I admit I found more in common with Fox). But my theology and yours, important as that may be to each of us, is not actually all that relevant today.

For this sermon, I'm asking we approach our topic as a mental exercise considering various *what ifs*... What if God is real? What if God is aware of events around here? What if I could communicate with God? What then? Do I have something to say to God about what's happening in our lives or in the world? What if I could give God a piece of my mind? What then?

And so, my letter begins:

Dear God,

I don't know whether or not you read your own mail, but I thought I'd write to share some of my thoughts with you. If you care to know my thoughts... Perhaps you can give this letter a gander as you're enjoying your morning Starbucks. Or, is that just me projecting my own persona onto you? Maybe you don't even like Starbucks – heaven forbid! And I don't know if writing this letter is really going to work. I mean, really – I must have sent five or six letters to Santa Claus when I was a kid, and that dude never wrote back! Not even once.

By the way, how should I address you? You know, there's been a movement in some faith communities about using inclusive language. That's how some UUs

*and liberal Christians ended up with prayers that start off with Mother-Father God, if you were wondering where that came from. The thought is that if we are **all** made in your image than your image must encompass us all, in all our shapes and colors, genders and abilities. Somewhere along the line, some of us came to the conclusion that we don't know if you are male, female, both or none of the above. Some of us realize that many names are used to for you, around the world, and don't really know if one or another is the right name. And when it comes down to it, I'm not sure it matters.*

Regardless of what name we use for you, when I was a kid, I and my family prayed to you daily. Even so, I was never really sure that you heard me. I was taught that praying to you would help me through life, but when

I was five and my baby brother died, I didn't understand how you were helping us... When I look at things happening now, I suppose I still don't know how you are helping, so that's really why I'm writing to you. Perhaps there are things happening that you just aren't aware of... I imagine that you are pretty busy, so perhaps you delegated stuff on Earth to someone else. If so, I hesitate to report that they may be slacking...

My brother's illness was encephalitis and perhaps it could have been treated, if only someone had figured that out soon enough. It turns out that doctors treating babies have an extra challenge because their patients cannot verbalize what they are feeling. This seems to be true for veterinarians treating animals, as well. But, back to babies. Several times, I'm sad to say, I've sat

with a young couple mourning the loss of an infant – and it has always been difficult for me to find words that can truly comfort in that situation. Perhaps, next time, you can give some words that will help.

As you probably know, God, one of my personal concerns for most of my life has been healthcare and how access to that is affected by race, class, geography and even religion. For that last one, perhaps my first brush with a conflict between medicine and faith came in high school, when I found a new friend in one who was blind. It turns out that her parents came from one of those denominations that believe prayer is the only Biblically-allowed medicine. As a small child, my friend acquired an infection that was easily treatable by modern medicine, but her parents refused and their daughter

went blind. They allowed this out of their belief in your power and judgement, O God. Was that something you actually sanctioned, or was their belief misguided, or what? What was it? Somehow, I doubt you choose to make innocents suffer for no reason, but those parents seemed to think so. I'm glad to note that in more recent years, families that endanger their children by refusing well-tested medical treatments have been over-ruled by the state. But there are still those who would object, saying this is over-reach and interference into the deeply held religious beliefs of some. God, what do we say to those people? And should the religious beliefs of parents be allowed to dictate what happens to their children? I wonder if it is possible that advances in medicine might actually be sanctioned by you, for all we know, and if so,

how do we teach that to those who have a different viewpoint? This is a question that I faced many times in my previous career as a nurse, and even as a minister now, I still don't know the answer.

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Another form of health that I wonder about is the health of the environment. Some people know this about me, and those who don't may find it funny, but I've long had a thing for amphibians: frogs and toads, newts and salamanders. I have plenty of tchotchkes of frogs and related critters that people have given me over the years, but I'm a little concerned about the real-life ones... Scientists have learned that these little animals have a biological process called cellular respiration, in which they 'breathe' (so to speak) through their wet skin.

Because of this, when there are pollutants in their water, they 'breathe' in that, as well. And so, we've started to see various species of amphibians dying off, and some see that as a sort of "Canary in the Coal Mine" situation. I'm sad to note that pollutants generally find their way into waterways and the atmosphere through the malpractice or negligence of humans, for the most part.

Do you have any advice, God, on what to do about that?

Some have wondered if natural disasters are your response to some perceived wrong. Others say that they are a product of climate change, caused by the same pollutants discharged into the environment. Perhaps it's a little of both?

I'm happy to note, however, that once in a while (and just last month, in fact), scientists report the

discovery of some previously unknown species. Last month, we learned of several new species of frogs in South America. Were they there all along and we just didn't know it, or did they recently evolve? And while I'm think of it, God, can you answer this one question: Is a belief in the divine and a belief in evolution really mutually exclusive? Just wondering...

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To change the subject, if I may: God, I'd be remiss if I didn't ask you about war, too often carried out in your name. In history, whether it be called Crusade or Jihad, or some other name for a so-called Holy War – not to mention all the unholy wars – people have died. What has this accomplished? In various wars, hundreds, thousands, and in some cases, millions of people have

*died. Why? Although the religions of the world have different names for you, God, are you not The Most Holy for all people? And, if so, why must we fight over you? Or is this idea just reductive thinking on my part? Perhaps you're not one God, at all. **Or**, perhaps, you're not really there; or you're not really paying attention to our wars; or you're not really listening or reading my letter. I just don't know. And in this place of not-knowing, I'm left with a feeling of helplessness in a world that seems to be perpetually at war. God, what do we do about this?*

Well, if you will humor me, I have this idea – it's pretty radical – that instead of declaring war, we should call on our nations to declare peace, as a matter of course. I plan to preach on that topic next month, but

perhaps I can give you a preview. I ask you, God, what would happen to the powerless, if the powerful took a moral stand and declared peace? I ask this because of my past experience. Many folks know I'm a veteran, which of course means that I spent a period of service in my nation's military. Me, the pacifist-socialist-pagan-queer, actually served on active duty. Yes, God, it's true, I did – maybe, you already knew that.

My reason for serving was not out of a sense of patriotic duty, or because I wanted to go out and fight wars. Rather, I joined for mostly career, college and other personal reasons. In the end, my veteran's benefits paid for most of my seminary education. But prior to that, during my time in service, I met many people who I would daresay feel powerless. Many such young people

enlisted in order to give themselves a chance in life. A chance to escape a rural farming existence, or to get out of gangland in an inner city. For some, service was an opportunity to earn money for college, help in buying a house, or to see the world. When I hear from my fellow liberals that those who join the military are warmongers, I happen to know that that is generally not true. No, I believe most of the warmongers, if there are such, reside in the halls of power. They, who declare wars (or send out troops for undeclared wars), will not themselves fight in the trenches or walk the deck-plates of our ships. The powerful and the powerless have never had such a deep gulf as the one I have seen between governments and their militaries. Outside of the military, we have also found powerless people as private citizens, whose homes

just happen to be a war-zone. Too often, they did not want the war; but would rather live in a place of peace.

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There also seems to be a metaphorical war happening in our deeply divided nation. Recently, we've seen a growing dissatisfaction about life for some people. Also, it seems that vulgarity and racism have taken up residence in the White House, and this bothers me to no end. Over the years, I've heard people declare that they vote based on their beliefs of what you, God, would want. With that said, I just cannot imagine that what is currently happening in our country was, in any way, part of your plan. Please tell me it was not, because I just don't know how I would deal if it turned out that He Who Shall Not Be Named is actually caring out your plan for

the country. It seems more likely to me that those who purport to lead do so without any real connection to you, or to the people they serve, for that matter. Perhaps that is where we should start, when declaring peace. Maybe we should start with the half of our country who feel deeply unsatisfied with life. Also, can we just find ways to help our elected leaders declare peace and learn to work together? Can you make that happen, God? Sooner would better than later, if I may say so.

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Just so I don't end my letter to you on a sour note, I am also grateful for many things. First, I'm thankful for my family, and that they are all hale and hearty, for the most part. I'm grateful for this congregation, in which my service has been such a positive experience.

Thank you, God, for my life, love and health; and thank you for my Call to Ministry that has allowed me to touch the lives of other people, hopefully bringing hope and healing in their times of need. I also appreciate the democratic process, even if I'm not always happy with the results. And, I'm glad for the growing knowledge in our society about the planet we live on and what it needs to also be healthy. Finally, I would be most grateful for any guidance on how to deal with some of the problems I've shared with you in this letter. Thank you, God.

Sincerely, Mike

Writing this letter has been an interesting exercise, even if it goes no further than to the ears of you, who are listening today. I ask you to consider what you feel are

the big issues in your life or in the world. Consider what you have to be grateful about. If you could write a letter to God, what would you say? If this were like writing to a member of Congress, in which the letters of many people expressing the same opinion might sway that legislator, then maybe it takes the letters or prayers of many people to change things in the world. With that said, I also believe our letters and prayers must be linked to the work of our hands, for surely nothing ever changed without some effort on our part.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Our work to better the world is what we do 'out there.'

In here, we come to recharge so we are energized

To go back out and work some more.

Our sacred calling as spiritual people is to build

A beloved community within and beyond our walls.

Let us do this sacred work together:

It takes more than writing a letter;

It takes more than wishing upon a star.

It requires elbow-grease and the sweat off our brows.

Oh, yes, let us do this sacred work together,

And return here later to recharge, also together.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!
