

Declaring Peace

(Version 2a)

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

Presented on April 23, 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)

*During the years of World War II, in Europe,
An effort was underway to save victims of atrocity.
Many people, from many religions, helped Jews
And other people escape from Nazi territories.
Those Unitarians that helped
Wore badges with flaming chalices on them,
So that those on this underground railroad
Would know that that person would secretly help.
Our Flaming Chalice has become for us
Like the torch of Lady Liberty, and it
Contains the Flame of Freedom
And the Flame of Peace.
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.

READING (Kathleen McTigue)¹

This is a house of peace.

*Breathe in a grateful breath that you sit here
this moment of your life
safely, and in silence.*

*There is a war raging,
far from this place of comfort.
We know it is there, we know our brothers and sisters
suffer its poisonous touch.
Our hearts are weighted with what we cannot resolve.
So here we lift a banner in our own souls,
and remember that in this place, in this moment,
we are not at war.*

*Breathe in the truth of this moment:
here is our strength, our deep well of courage.*

Breathing in, we rest our spirits.

Breathing out, we pray for peace.

*May those in harm's way be safe for another day.
May those who drive the engines of power
be awakened by compassion.*

*May we all hold the cup filled with courage and will
that has been carried by peacemakers in long ago
ages before us.
May we drink of it deeply, and be steadfast
in the ways of peace.*

To which I can only add:

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

¹ LOV #215.

Declaring Peace

Reverend Michael Walker

What is there for me to say about peace, that has not been said by many other religious leaders? What is there for me to say about peace, that will not seem like I am preaching to the choir? Is there anything left to say about peace?

Many religions have words that sound quite similar to these words from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount: "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*" (Mt. 5:9.) In the same vein, the Gautama Buddha is believed to have taught:²

² Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai. *The Teachings of Buddha*. (New Delhi: Sterling, 2004.)

To enjoy good health, to bring true happiness to one's family, to bring peace to all, one must first discipline and control one's own mind. If a [person] can control his [or her] mind [they] can find the way to Enlightenment, and all wisdom and virtue will naturally come to [them].

I will come back to this.

There are those who would say that this vexing problem of war has plagued humanity forever. I once came upon the webpage³ of a doctoral student, who catalogued violent protests and crackdowns and other conflagrations around the world. He developed software

³ http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/08/22/mapped_what_every_protest_in_the_last_34_years_looks_like

that collected data from thousands of international news sources, and created pinpoints on a map of the world where these violent events took place. He created a short animated map of the world that updates over the span of 30+ years. The reason this caught my attention was that there were a few pinpoints on the map, here and there every year starting in 1979, but they increased in frequency and distribution the closer you got to the present day. In other words, the map of many years ago had these pinpoints identifying violent events sparsely scattered on the map. But, in the present day, the pinpoints were so numerous, they almost covered the world map. Seeing that, I wonder: could it be that our world is at its most violent state since the Crusades?

Some of the most serious fighting happening in many parts of the world today have roots in religion. Some faith traditions have strong belief in their own *Truth*. When one side feels wronged, they may rely on some teaching about “*an eye for an eye*” to inform their response. Mahatma Gandhi once famously said, “*An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind.*” If every action is answered with an act of vengeance, when will it ever end?

Actions of war, and efforts to make peace, are complex issues. I will not stand here and advocate an *Isolationist* point of view. I have always believed that we have the right and responsibility to defend ourselves from foreign attack. But there will be quite a few people who will say: *US foreign policy is to blame for a lot of the*

religious fervor against America found in other countries of the world today. I believe in helping people, wherever they are in the world, and yet... We may ask: *does that make us vulnerable?*

There are quite a few places where dictatorships are treating the people of their nations egregiously. Innocents are gunned down in the streets, people drinking coffee at cafés are bombed, and chemical weapons are used to clear out entire villages. What is our responsibility in these cases?

In several places, foreign militaries, including ours, have been asked to leave said countries to their own resources. And in the absence of power, in the vacuum that is left by our departure, totalitarian regimes or theocratic dictatorships have developed in several cases.

It has been a long-standing American foreign policy that it's one of our duties to export democracy. And while we UU's uphold the democratic principle, I wonder if it really is our duty to export democracy to other countries...

I said that I'm not going to stand here and advocate an isolationist point of view. I realize that I walk a fine line, never wishing to be – or be seen as – a hypocrite. Anyone who knows me well, knows that I am a *veteran*. But a *warmonger*, I am not. But I see a problem: peacemaking efforts on the international stage are movements by national and local interests that compete for *power*. Our American foreign policy is confusing, reactionary, and ineffective. *Why does this matter to us? **Why am I talking about it at church?***

Amongst our UU principles, we have words about our commitment to upholding the inherent worth and dignity of every person; about working for justice, equity and compassion in human relations; about promoting a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; about the right of conscience and the use of democratic process; and about working towards the goal of world community with peace and liberty and justice for all. I just shared with you words from five of the seven principles that guide our denomination. It is a part of our inherent, shared theology that if there is a heaven, we create that heaven on earth, by the good deeds and hard work to uphold our principles to improve the lives, not only of ourselves, but of everyone around us and around the world. It seems like a massive undertaking. At times, it

seems so large a task that our little denomination cannot manage to accomplish it all. And that's true.

I haven't heard it so much in recent years, but there used to be a saying amongst activists (which also mentioned a couple weeks ago): *"think globally and act locally."* It is extremely important – it is a moral imperative – that we work collectively towards these goals. This is ongoing work that will last our entire lives and longer. But, it is our work. Another quote from Gandhi that I'm sure you've heard before: *"We must become the change we want to see in the world."* I would like to suggest a strategy for how that is possible.

When there were but a few lonely voices scattered around the country crying out for marriage equality, that possibility seemed like it was a hundred years away.

When the groundswell grew, and activists and everyday people joined their voices together – by the hundreds and even thousands – in front of city halls and state houses and court houses, a tectonic shift in American culture moved us. Culture changed when faced with a huge collective voice demanding change.

Some will remember the marches for civil rights. Parts of the Voting Rights Act were recently struck down, and I predict that what will happen in the next few years will be a growing groundswell of Americans demanding that civil rights be protected and that votes will not be suppressed. If this seems like *déjà vu*, I repeat what I said a moment ago – our work is never ending; it is our moral imperative and lifelong mission.

Some will remember the protests of past wars,

particularly regarding our involvement in the Vietnam and Southeast Asia conflict; more recently, we protested wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These nationwide movements were born out of thousands of local protests and demonstrations.

It doesn't always have to be protests; other kinds of local movements in which people are working together in common cause also help. This is what I've often asked each of us to contemplate. Of all the injustices in the world, is there something in which we collectively have the drive to work together on a local basis? Something which can feed into a growing national movement to affect positive change in our world? I ask this because the purpose of our faith community is not internal politics or raising money simply to continue our

existence. Although, both of those things are very important, too. Our church's real reason for being, in my view, is to develop spiritual practices that feeds each of our souls, to be part of a beloved community that supports each other in our times of need, and to heal ourselves so that we can then go out and heal the world. We have to get outside of these four walls. Let's challenge ourselves to direct our gaze outward and find ways to make a difference.

If you have been paying attention to the news, you may be alarmed at the growing nuclear ambitions of North Korea and Iran. Not so long ago, we witnessed the co-opting of democratic movements, collectively called the Arab Spring, by Al Qaeda affiliated organizations

who wish to set-up an Islamic caliphate. I do not want to fall into that great morass of misinformation – remember the human tendency to demonize the “Other” – in which all Muslims are painted with the same brush. Every single religion in the world has its **peacemakers**. And most of them have their **troublemakers**, too. But the recent news story that has me the most alarmed is about the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

Someone might say: *“It's not our country – we don't need to get involved.”* Someone else might say: *“Hundreds of innocent people died within moments, when exposed to toxic gases. So many of them were children.”* You might've guessed I'm in the latter camp – I feel that we have a moral imperative to protect the life of innocents. I think that is even more important, **far**

more important, than protecting democracy. It is an imperative to protect innocent life from being caught in the proverbial – or not so proverbial – crossfire of a conflict, of which they themselves wish to have no part.

However, since we are aware that someone in Syria crossed what was once called ‘the red line,’ there is reason to fear our military will soon be more engaged there than we already are. My problem with this is not that we might be going to help people – because I believe we should be doing that – but that I fear our leaders may have other motives to send our people into harm’s way. You see, if we overthrow Syria’s leader, Bashar al-Assad, we can stick it in the eye of Iran and Russia. But an eye for an eye is not effective foreign policy. It’s the wrong reason to be there, in my view. I dream of a world

in which we can replace militaries with armies of humanitarian workers. *You might be asking yourself: “What kind of fantasy world is this dude living in?”*

I believe that it is time – long past time – for us to **declare peace**. I know this seems huge. I know this seems impossible. I know that there will be some who think that I’m living in some utopian fantasy world. But I truly believe that we are entering a stage in world history that will make the Vietnam War and the protest movements that went with it look like peanuts. There are conflicts brewing – so huge, so vast, that I foresee something on the scale of the Second World War, but with all the religious fervor of the *Crusades*, or as they were known to the other side, *Jihads*. There are already places where the people there speak openly of jihad. It’s

alarming to contemplate, it may not happen next week, but I do worry that World War III is on the horizon, and I think it will be a Christian-Muslim war.

Is there any possibility that we can stop that before it happens? I often say: my crystal ball is foggy and it even has a crack in it, so I cannot predict the future with any certainty. However, I believe that we need thousands upon thousands of local activists around the world, demanding peace, to force the governments of our various nations to pay attention. It behooves us to start now, before we get even more involved in a war that we do not have the power to win. At least not without great loss of life... and it is part of our moral imperative to protect life. It is time for us to declare peace.

I said that I was going to return to the words of Jesus, that peacemakers are blessed, that they are children of God. I personally believe that we are all children of God, whatever God means. But the important piece here, in my opinion, is that whatever the beliefs are of the people sitting in this room, it would be a true statement to say the vast majority of our society does believe in God. And, it seems to me that it would be useful to remind these believers about the blessedness of peacemakers. It was the Buddha who told us to focus our minds, which I take to mean that we need to focus on the issue ahead of us and pay attention. To put that teaching in my own words: *Ostriches do not live longer by burying their heads in the sand – they only avoid having to look death in the face.* Buddha's teaching was simple:

if we can control our minds, we can find peace. It seems to me that we need to start with ourselves, then begin working with others – perhaps people here – and then connect our local movements with many other local movements, becoming a national and international movement. (I realize groups like UUPLAN and the group that arose out of the Women’s March on Washington are doing this.) What are the rest of us doing? We must declare peace, before someone else declares war for us, whether we like it or not.

Perhaps I have asked more questions today than I have answered. But my goal is to encourage you, first, to think, and second, to act! It is important that we seek to change, not some ‘fate’ woven in the strands of time, but

rather a future possibility that we can avoid. I believe we do not need more war. The level of conflict in our world has greatly increased in recent decades – and all of us together have the power to hold our elected leaders accountable, to reduce violence and declare peace. We can be part of that. And, so, that’s my final word.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION

In benediction, let us go out to the world with these words by Maya Angelou ringing in our ears. This is an excerpt of her poem, Amazing Peace:

In our joy, we think we hear a whisper.

At first it is too soft. Then only half heard.

We listen carefully as it gathers strength.

We hear a sweetness.

The word is Peace.

It is loud now.

Louder than the explosion of bombs.

We tremble at the sound.

We are thrilled by its presence.

It is what we have hungered for.

Not just the absence of war. But true Peace.

A harmony of spirit, and comfort of courtesies.

Security for our beloveds and their beloveds.

We, Angels and Mortals, Believers and Nonbelievers,

Look heavenward and speak the word aloud.

Peace. We look at each other, then into ourselves,

And we say without shyness or apology or hesitation:

Peace, My Brother.

Peace, My Sister.

Peace, My Soul.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!
