

“Does God Have a Spam Filter?”

A Sermon Delivered by Justin Schroeder, Young Adult Minister
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You're here – again! Some for the first time, I know, but the rest of you, you're here again! What are you here for? Who called you? Why have you come?

Is it for your next set of operating instructions, as author Anne Lamott might say? Is it for the sacred silence, and the whisper that calls your name during that silence? Is it because here you can disable your spam filter, because what's coming at you is food for your soul? Whatever the reason, get out your compass. We're going adventuring.

It starts with my thirtieth birthday last week. It just crept up on me, and then blammo, I was thirty. Truth be told, it doesn't feel like such a big deal, because really, it's the last year-and-a-half - which happens to coincide with my thirtieth birthday – that has been a big deal. Let me elaborate. To do that, I need to start with Dungeons and Dragons - you know, Dungeons and Dragons, that role-playing adventure game, popular in the 1980's.

When I was twelve, my family took a cross-country road trip to the East Coast, from Colorado. On the first night, we stopped somewhere in the cornfields of Iowa at a Best Western Hotel. I was kind of a geeky kid, and I had spent all day dreaming about Dungeons and Dragons and had been mapping out a dungeon adventure in my head that I would take my friends through. We got to the hotel after 9:00 pm, and everyone soon fell asleep, except me. By the light of the bathroom, I began to draw the detailed map from my head – twisty corridors, monsters, hidden traps, and treasures. I knew every inch of the map and couldn't wait to guide my friends through it.

Now, seventeen years later, by the light of my thirtieth birthday, a different map is emerging from my imagination, one with a distinct spiritual orientation, and I'd like to guide you through parts of it.

It's an imaginary place, of course, but it's also quite real - and it doesn't contain anything you don't already know on some level. If I was to show it to you, the first thing you might notice on the map is a bunch of mail boxes. They dot the landscape. They're on street corners, in bedrooms, in bowling alleys, on back roads, and flowerbeds.

Life can be crazy and confusing and sometimes we have to write down our fears or thoughts, address them to God, or the big “”, and just stick them in a mailbox, because all these mail boxes – these in-boxes, in my map – lead to God, however you understand that concept.

Author Anne Lamott describes this letter-writing process as she struggles with being single and unexpectedly pregnant. She says:

I wrote down all my fears, and as I folded up the pieces of paper, I said to God, “Look, I am trying to keep my sticky little fingers off the controls here; I am willing to have the baby...if that is the right thing for us, and I am willing to have an abortion, if that would be best for us...so I am putting this in your in-box [your mail box], and I'm just going to wait for my next operating instructions.”¹

Don't let the idea of writing God a letter freak you out, like it's a fire breathing dragon in a dungeon somewhere. Is it crazy to write a letter to God? Maybe. Maybe not.

Later that week, Anne Lamott had a vivid dream in which it was clear that she was meant to keep her baby. Mailboxes. Inboxes. They're all over my map. The universe expects our engagement, our questions, our struggles. It will often answer us, if we listen. And paradoxically, operating instructions often come without any sort of letter or prompting.

For example, another thing you might notice on my map are some birthday balloons and a cake. They're from my thirteenth birthday, when my parents reserved the social hall at the Unitarian Church in Fort Collins so my friends and family could gather for cake, singing and celebration. I remember thinking, wow, I'm thirteen, I can get into PG-13 movies! Wow, my world is changing.

By 9 o'clock, everyone had left, except my dad and a group of men. Earlier, he had intentionally invited this group to stay and spend time with me on my thirteenth birthday. We sat

in a circle on the floor and these men shared their memories of turning thirteen, they gave advice on growing up, on relationships, on becoming a man, on being human. I can't remember all that was said because I was a bit nervous and overwhelmed, even though they didn't ask me to speak.

But I remember the feeling that came from a group of men talking honestly about life, and transitions. I remember the feeling of being part of that circle, of moving into manhood.

Although the candles from my thirteenth birthday have long since been blown out, what hasn't gone out is that flame of truth from those operating instructions – that speak of spending time with children, grandchildren, best friends, or others you love and care for. Saying “I love you” is important, doing “I love you” changes lives.

That circle of men was about love, not approval or judgment on whether or not I was or would be the perfect man. At the center of the circle was love.

Remembering this – now, today, here - allows me to give up my second home in Perfectionistville – the place I go whenever I want to deliver the perfect sermon. I may never rid myself of perfectionist notions, but I'm reminded that ideas of perfection pull me away from real life and can injure my spirit.

Rachel Naomi Remen writes of *her* struggle to overcome her father's notion of perfection, which profoundly shaped her: “If I came home with a test and had gotten a 98%, my dad would ask, where are the other two points?”²

As a result, Rachel felt she had to be perfect at all she did. Later in life, she applied for her driver's license. Before the test, she studied for days, memorizing the meaning of the white curb and the yellow curb. She writes:

My partner, David, would try to persuade me to join him for a walk or dancing or even just talk. I couldn't take the time. Of course I got 100% on the test. Triumphant, I rushed into David's studio shouting that I had gotten 100% on my driving test. David looked up from his painting with an expression of great tenderness. ‘My love,’ he said, ‘why would you want to do that?’ ...I had spent days studying for the test that I could have spent in much wiser ways.... I thought that if my father could not approve of me with anything less than 100, I could not approve of myself with less than 100 either...³

Life is not about perfection and so my map is filled with the tombstones of perfection – “Rest in Peace: Perfection.”

Now, besides all the mail boxes, the birthday balloons, and the tombstones...there’s something else on this map. It’s a story of my own series of letters and questions I’ve put into God’s mailbox – God’s inbox.

Because, honestly, you know what, I don’t have it figured out! Some days, I don’t believe in God. Some days, I can’t stand the God I don’t believe in. Other days, I do believe in God, but don’t even know what that means. Whatever this thing is, this question about me, us, the meaning of things, my life - it won’t let go of me! I feel like Jacob wrestling with the angel.

So over the past year, I’ve been writing letters to God. Frankly, it’s embarrassing, and weird, and healing – this process. The first letter I fired off was “What is the deal with God?” because I felt like that word was a block in my mind to something magical and powerful and transformative and alive, and I wanted to unlock it, but didn’t know how to name that, or what it was, or how to be in relationship with it. So I wrote “What is the deal with God?” And what came back to me was an invitation. It said, “I invite you to create a deeper relationship.”

What??! Furious at this non-answer, I fired off another letter, “What is the deal with that answer and with God?” This time, ten invitations came back. They all said, “I invite you to remember.” Huh?! I ask good questions and all that comes back is invitations??

I stopped writing. For a week. And then wrote again. Same question. A hundred invitations came back, this time with the note:

I invite you to consider this story: “A master once told his disciple, “Anything we say about God is just words, because God is unknowable. ‘Then why do you speak of God at all?’ said the disciple, and the master replied, ‘Why does the bird sing?’ She sings not because she has a statement but because she has a song.”⁴

Hmm. I wrote again. This time a different invitation came. A thousand of them. It said, “I invite you to listen,” and included a story from Anne Lamott’s book, *Operating Instructions*.

Lamott writes:

My friend Pammy (as she deals with chemo) is tiptoeing into the very beginning of some sort of relationship with God, or with a higher power, or something, but it is very hard for her...I recommend that she think of all the women who have most adored her in her life, and to come up with a sense of God based on that kind of love, on the sense of protectedness that it gives you to be loved by really fine women, a sense of some mysterious regenerative force at the center of things that is maybe just love. Pammy said with great surprise, when I suggested this, ‘I didn’t know you could do that,’ and I said, ‘Oh, yeah, you can do anything you want,’ and by that morning she’d found a picture of a big cat licking a little cat. She’s a great cat lover and it stuck...she said she’d picture this big cat licking her gently and carrying her in its mouth to safer places.⁵

Interesting, this letter. I was getting somewhere. “Tell me more,” I wrote and popped it into the mail box.

This time, 10,000 invitations, but they appeared to be a repeat. Disappointed, I read: “Anything we say about God is just words, because God is unknowable. ‘Then why do you speak of God at all?’ and the master replied, ‘Why does the bird sing?’ She sings not because she has a statement but because she has a song.” At the bottom of the letter was this note: “Justin: You have a song. Listen and then sing your song.” So I listened and reflected and slowly started to sing.

And what emerged was a song that spoke to my growing awareness of a deep, powerful, unsurpassable, ego-less current of love, that holds me, calls me, and moves through my life and the lives of others.

This awareness of unsurpassable love has become the true North on my map, the thing that casts a warm light on the rest of the map – that makes it readable – that holds it together – that answers some of my questions.

This awareness of deep love doesn’t mean that all my questions about suffering and life go away, but to me, it means that God is as real as deep love, as the deep love and care that emerged in the circle of men on my thirteenth birthday, as real as the deep love and care that

emerges in me and you when we reach out to students at Hamilton Middle School, as real as the deep love and care I felt two nights ago when the Young Adult Vocal Ensemble sang for the kids at the Laura Dester Shelter, as real as the deep love and care many of you have experienced. This love is bigger than fear, perfection, or death.

As a people, as a church, we are called by that source of deepest love to be and do something more. There is a higher calling – that points to a level of service and ego-less love beyond imagining. We’re just beginning to understand what that means for our lives. But rest assured, our lives are not just a hodge podge of random events; as a church, and as people, we are here for some reason, waiting for our next set of instructions – for our name to be called. Rest assured...something/someone is calling your name...listen...can you hear it? Listen.

¹ Lamott, Anne. *Operating Instructions*. Anchor Press, 2005. p. 39.

² Remen, Rachel. *My Grandfather’s Blessings*. Riverhead Books, 2000.

³ Ibid. p. 48.

⁴ Lamott, p. 181.

⁵ Lamott, p. 208.