



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Keeping Faith

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This week, Pope Francis released a new document to the public entitled *Amoris Laetitia*, Latin for 'the joy of love.' The lengthy exhortation is the result of intense Synod deliberations over the past year, producing a vigorous discussion on marriage, family and human sexuality.

In every age, the church faces the problem this Pope is trying to address with *Amoris Laetitia*: how to keep faith with the faithful? If the Catholic Church is too defined by the timeless unchanged nature of the doctrine, which limits participation in the sacraments and traditions, the church is faced with two options: change the church to accommodate the believer, or change the believer to accommodate the church.

Amoris Laetitia is this Pope's response. While liberal Catholics have had hopes that Pope Francis would bring the church into the postmodern religious landscape, *Amoris Laetitia* asks that both believer and church meet somewhere in the middle. The document dodges any real doctrinal change by asking both church members and church leaders instead to have a deeper understanding of one another, to trust in one another and draw nearer to faith: faith in one another as pastor and member, faith in the institution, and faith in God they share as expressed through the Catholic tradition. Pastors and lay Catholics alike should exercise the values of "generosity, commitment, fidelity and patience."

Written in the gentle, open tone now synonymous with Pope Francis's papacy, *Amoris Laetitia* urges the church to be more understanding and encouraging of its members, softening its approach to modern family life. As you can imagine, there are many reasons why the Pope's idealism could be an uphill battle. While doubt and crisis clouds the church's past, Pope Francis preaches a hopeful message for sunny skies ahead. It remains to be seen how the faithful will respond to Pope Francis' beckoning: Will they keep the faith?

Soren Kierkegaard was a Danish philosopher, poet and theologian writing in the early 19th century, a part of our enlightenment lineage of liberal theology. Some call him the father of existentialism along with Friedrich Nietzsche. Kierkegaard was writing at another time of religious crisis in European culture. Kierkegaard felt that institutions of the Christian church were out of touch with the everyday person. Formerly invested with moral and spiritual authority, the church had lost its potency. It was no longer the moral center of community, but instead an archaic shell of itself, the playground for the bourgeois--where the wealthy and powerful, including clergy, exercised their status and privilege at the expense of the poor. On the other hand, on the heels of Kant and Hegel, the proliferation of moral philosophy could be empty and abstract, cold and rigid. Philosophy, while objectively illuminating human experience and reason, lacked warmth and could not provide community. It had little power to influence and inspire. Religious and philosophical authority, previously in the hands of the church or the academy, was now subject to the interpretation to the individual. If not vested in an institution, a clergy person, or a set of doctrines, what, then, was faith?

For Kierkegaard, all iterations of faith are not equally potent. Faith developed in stages. Here are a few ways he explains it.

Kierkegaard observed that some people assume that having faith is like attending an endless party. To this person, faith should only be about fun and uninterrupted pleasure. This faithful person delights mightily in the party-- this is the person who dances until the lights come on and doesn't want to go home. Kierkegaard also says this kind of faith is like the early days of falling in love. He thought that falling in love was the perfect way to describe the idea of having faith. We don't need evidence to prove why we fall in love, nor why people put their faith in God or a deeply held belief in some larger ideal, be it community, family, justice or truth. The faithful person is in a bubble of love and devotion, feeling as if they are the only person in the world experiencing such a connection. They can't imagine that the love and connection they feel could ever change. But Kierkegaard said we know that initial moment of new love can't last forever, nor can a party. These experiences are temporary at best.

Now think about the partygoer person of faith as the lights come on to show a dirty room, littered with trash and empty bottles. Think about the lover having the first real fight in the relationship. Kierkegaard talked about these moments of dissonance as turning points towards what he called authentic faith. The partygoer sobers up, facing that they must go to work the next day or return home to care for their children. The partygoer might also be in denial, choosing to stay up and keep partying. After a devastating first fight, the lover might see clearly that the relationship needs a path and a set of tools to sustain it with care and compromise. The lover, in despair, might break off the relationship, unable to process the failure of their ideal of perfect love.

To Kierkegaard, these partial ideas of faith can only mature into true faith through a process of testing and doubting that come to head in a crisis that shatters the very foundations upon which the person has built their faith. The person must face the reality that touchstone in which they invest their faith: a relationship or family system, a spiritual practice, an idea or belief, a church, a clergy person, these all might fail them in some way. Prayer can feel empty. Clergy members can disappoint and abuse their power. Doctrine can be biased and archaic. Church can be mired in conflict. Community can exclude and marginalize. Families and relationships break up.

Knowing this fully, the person of faith must choose the touchstone of faith again, willfully acknowledging this potential failure. This is the paradox of faith: the touchstone in which we ascribe our faith might be an illusion, and yet even so we believe in it. This is not blind faith, it is authentic faith.

In the mystery of the paradox of faith, we find a life-giving, redeeming power worth giving ourselves to in spite of our doubts and misgivings. Faith is not a temporary function, it is only in the repetition of faith, over time, responding to the moments of dissonance that make real faith not only possible but *authentic*.

To Kierkegaard, this is the grace that rewards the struggle of keeping faith. In authentic faith, renewed through crisis, we think we are keeping faith, but faith is keeping us, buoying us and renewing us even when our touchstones feel empty. I wonder how these ideas about faith are sitting with you. Perhaps you are resonating, or thinking about your own story, a time when you faced a crisis in your life, when your faith was shaken or shattered. A time when you doubted. How has your faith kept you in your struggles and in your hard times? Or has it?

In our own history as a congregation, we have had our own moments of our faith being tested. The congregation has weathered many crises and moments of doubt. I think of Ned's story about how some churches fail and others survive. Kierkegaard would say that a church is not a trustworthy touchstone of faith unless it has faced some kind of crisis, been tested, and renewed its commitment, called a covenant, to be a community of faith once again. I am thinking back to one point in the congregation's history in particular.

In 1968, the Neighborhood facility on California Blvd. and Pasadena Avenue was threatened because it stood directly in the path of a proposed freeway. The decision had been under discussion since 1960, but became final in 1968—although the freeway in question has yet to be built! The church property was sold to the State Division of Highways, which funded much of the new church but did not ease the sorrow many members felt about giving up their beautiful old building. A new site was purchased, just a few blocks north of the location of the original chapel, near the edge of the Arroyo Seco on the historic Westmoreland Place, adjacent to the Gamble House.

The new sanctuary would take four years to be built, during which time their new minister, the Reverend Brandy Lovely was called and a new director of religious education brought on board. The church also voted not to join the newly formed United Church of Christ, to leave behind its affiliation with the Congregationalists and to affirm its affiliation with the Unitarians. All of its touchstones of faith: the building and location, the denomination, the leadership and membership, seemed called in question.

You can imagine the time of great change and uncertainty for the congregation at this moment in the church's history. This week I spoke to one of our longtime members Mary Favre Holmes who grew up in this church. Mary's father, Henry Favre, was a key leader at the time. She spoke about the tension in the congregation, and how many members including her father were slow to warm to the idea. They could not imagine what would be waiting on the other side. Would the church be the same in a new building? Would the Neighborhood Church, named for its connection to Southwest Pasadena, maintain its identity as the Neighborhood Church without being situated in its historic location? Who would come along and who would the church lose along the way? How would they keep the faith?

Before the move, a small group of leaders had gotten together to create a covenant, a statement of faith and the promises the congregation made to its members and community. Among the signers was Mary's father Henry Favre. Listen to the text:

We regard the religious life as a process of continual growth, in which each person tries to achieve an ever deepening faith through his own searching and experience. We are proud of our Christian heritage, recognizing that faith must continually be reinterpreted in keeping with the ideas and the needs of the present day . . . In short, we cherish the best from the past, adapting it to the needs of the present, and seeking to grow in understanding and service in the days to come.

This covenant boldly states Neighborhood church's twofold commitment to keeping faith: our first commitment to support the individual person on his or her own spiritual journey, and the commitment of the church to continually evolve in light of the current needs of the community beyond the present moment. Remember the options in front of Pope Francis and the Catholic Church: change the church to accommodate the believer, or change the believer to accommodate the church? This church has adapted over time to better serve its members, whether through changes in theology, denominational commitments, facilities, staff or ministers. The church did not shy away from taking the necessary risks to live into this promise. The move did happen, new leadership was called whom would one day become beloved, and the church would grow and flourish. Kierkegaard would say this struggle and recommitment is what makes faith authentic.

For Neighborhood, our covenants, lodged in our bylaws, have been this constant touchstone that would help the community keep faith with each other, through the ups and downs of life together. Jewish existentialist Martin Buber said that humans are "the promise making, promise breaking, promise remaking creatures." And so we are here in the process of another transition, from one ministry to the next, a future in process of being defined through a renewed vision. It is a time full of excitement and promise, but also anxiety. How will we fare in this testing of our faith?

The question our board has put before the congregation brings together the two-fold commitments of the covenant I shared with you. They have asked: "How do our spiritual journeys bring us together, and where does our path lead us next?" Through our great leap into a new chapter, we are asking our members and friends to keep faith in the experience of church as a life-giving, sustaining power in your life, even when you doubt or struggle. Knowing we are not perfect, knowing we are a human institution with human leaders, built on the foundation of our history, we recommit to our covenant, and call one another in to community. As with every age in our history, after rain may we uncover the gift of grace, the light of love breaking through the clouds, blessing and guiding us on our way.