

**Homily – Keeping Faith With Our Church**  
**September 30, 2007**  
**Estelle Brouwer**

The fruit of silence is prayer.  
The fruit of prayer is faith.  
The fruit of faith is love.  
The fruit of love is service.  
The fruit of service is peace.

You might recognize those words as the text of the anthem the Unity Choir sang last Sunday. They're attributed to Mother Teresa, and they suggest that faith lies somewhere along a spiritual continuum, a continuum that starts with silence and ends with peace. You might say that in Mother Teresa's view, faith is folded in the embrace of prayer and love.

I will be honest and share with you that I struggle with the meaning of the word faith when it's used in a religious context. However, I am blessed with what I consider to be a God-given forum for my struggles -- the group of seekers known here at Unity as the worship associates. Early in August, when the worship associates met with Janne and Rob to discuss topics for upcoming services, the idea of faith kept coming up. Some of us struggled with the meaning of the word – how is it different from belief? Is faith simply the absence of doubt? Some of us bemoaned the fact that the word has been hijacked by the religious right – and some thought it might be worth trying to reclaim it. I struggled particularly with the notion of faithful living. What does faithful living look like? Is it something that even has to be visible on the outside, or is it only about what's going on inside? And what, or who, is the object of our faith anyway?

Today, Janne, Rob and I are looking at the idea of faithful living – each through a different prism. My job is to reflect on what it means to live faithfully with our church.

We all know people who don't bother with church, who spend their Sunday mornings poring over the Sunday New York Times or taking quiet walks through the woods. Many of us have had times in our own lives when we weren't sure church was worth the hassle, and we were pretty sure we could get any spiritual sustenance we needed from some other source anyway. But here we are – each for our own reasons -- together in this sacred space we call church.

Let me share some of my reasons for being here. In the beginning, two things drew me – the music, and the theology of openness and acceptance that was a breath of fresh air after my Calvinist, Dutch Reformed up-bringing. Those things have continued to feed me and have kept me coming back. The thing I didn't expect when I first walked into this room at the age of 23, was that this church would become a central support to me as I spent the next decades seeking to clarify and live my values. But that has happened, and I have come to a deep understanding that if that process is to continue, I need to also continue to be in committed relationship with my church. For me, this

relationship – not only the values and actions that grow out of it, but the relationship itself -- is life-giving and sustaining. Let me explain.

In our private lives, we humans yearn for mature, committed relationships. I believe we need the same in our spiritual lives – a mature, committed relationship with a community that supports us in clarifying and living our values. But like any committed relationship, this one demands much of us. It requires honesty, patience, compromise, sacrifice, and forgiveness. It's more about giving than getting. It's about being in it for the long haul, even when there are day-to-day annoyances, even when we are wracked by doubt and despair. It's about holding ourselves -- and our leaders and peers -- accountable for bringing our whole, authentic selves to the relationship. It asks us to own, but not get stuck in, faith relationships that may have hurt us in the past. It's about walking through the wilderness side by side, not single file with someone out in front breaking the path. It is decidedly not about surrendering our selves to the relationship – we cannot let our own wells go dry. Above all else, it's about being compassionate -- with ourselves, with our leaders and fellow seekers, and with those who are strangers to us, both within and outside of these walls.

If we can build this kind of faithful relationship with our church, we will have prepared the way for something beautiful and holy to happen. We will find that our gifts of time and talent and spiritual and financial resources will be returned to us in many forms: As affirmation that we – each one of us -- are blessed, beautiful and worthy, no matter how broken or ugly we or others have led us to believe we are. As opportunities to experience what it means to live a life of integrity, service and joy. As countless opportunities to glimpse the divine – in the glorious music we experience week after week in this sanctuary, in words delivered from the pulpit or spoken by a neighbor in the pew, in the actions of the many church members who have found ways to extend their ministry across the neighborhood and across the globe.

During the years I've been connected to this church, I have given what I could -- of my time, talent and resources -- when I could. Even in the years I've given less of myself, I have always known there would be a place for me here, that I would be supported in my efforts to stretch and grow and practice living my values, that there is a well here that I can dip into when sustenance is what I need. By walking side by side with me, by having faith in **me**, this church community has helped me to see what faith is, has demonstrated that love **is** the fruit of faith, and has helped open my heart to the possibility and the promise of peace.

I suspect I'll continue to struggle with the idea of faith – that struggle is written on my soul I think -- but I feel profoundly blessed to be part of a supportive faith community that lifts up the struggle itself as something holy and beautiful and divine.

Amen.