



August 21, 2022
Hebrews 12:18-28

Faith: Please Install Updates

Prayer: O God, we give thanks for your living word. May the strength of your presence pervade us now, as we reflect on your word, gathered in your name. And let us listen beyond words, to the movement of your Spirit in our midst and in the world. Break the yokes that bind us to old ways, that we may hear and speak the prophet's blessing for our time...

A Long Walk to the Fire... A Hopeful or hopeless painting? Do they have faith in themselves? In each other? In their work?

Long
Walk to
the Fire

Notes: "I painted A Long Walk to the Fire in Aug 2011. It is oil on canvas and measures approx. 60x90 cm (2 ft x 3 ft / h x w). It was inspired by a photo I saw of men working together in the rubble of what I think was the Haitian earthquake but I re-imagined it as a road leading into the distance." -- Carsten Ten Brink

Date: 2011

Artist: Ten Brink, Carsten

You could say that they are engaging in an act of faith, you could also say they are up against some problems. Having faith means applying faith in particular circumstances. Our particular circumstances.

Our computer operating systems need to be updated; in the *received words*, delivered from cyberspace: "updates ready to install"

If you google *why* you get something like this: "In addition to security fixes, software updates can also include new or enhanced features, or better compatibility with different devices or applications. They can also **improve the stability of your software, and remove outdated features**. All of these updates are aimed at making **the** user experience better,"

If you do not install updates you are immediately at risk of all kinds of inconvenient malware attacks... unless, of course, they got it wrong...in which case you'll have to figure out how to uninstall the updates. Or they'll send you more updates to install, to patch up the last set of problems. This is a pain, and I've received and postponed this invitation numerous times, if I'm honest. Not now...not now...

Yet it remains true that it is easier (in computers and in faith) to install small updates routinely, than to throw out the whole thing and start over. With the decline of church attendance in the culture overall, we may be seeing quite a few people actually throwing out faith because they do not know how to update it to bring it forward. This is where I'd like to enlist your help. Let's consider small updates frequently. It's better to do it willingly and while it isn't a problem. If you throw out your faith, someone will likely need to go out and start over again.

Hebrews says in the Message translation:

You've come to Jesus, who presents us with a new covenant, a fresh charter from God. He is the Mediator of this covenant...

25-27 *So don't turn a deaf ear to these gracious words...His voice that time shook the earth to its foundations; this time—he's told us this quite plainly—he'll also rock the heavens: "One last shaking, from top to bottom, stem to stern." The phrase "one last shaking" means a thorough house cleaning, getting rid of all the historical and religious junk so that the unshakable essentials stand clear and uncluttered.*

28 *Do you see what we've got? An unshakable kingdom!*

There's a shaking out, a cleaning, holding on to the essentials and updating going on.

When I thought about this I came up with a lot of examples (a ton, you will too):

- Air Conditioning. I have been giving thanks for air conditioning all summer. It was controversial when it was installed.
- Another example is music. How many of you love music? How many of you have ever sung a hymn whose lyrics you did not like? How many of you have ever not liked updated lyrics to a hymn? People keep composing new music and new lyrics. Even though there's more than enough great old music.

Music has a capacity to hit people very deeply. And it lands differently for different people. It means accepting new music, new words, dissonance, and curating the best from the past. We have a new Music Director starting this week. Greg will encourage us to engage our music ministry, sometimes we'll love it immediately, sometimes we'll learn to love it, sometimes other people will love it.

- 31 years ago this congregation was among the first to become open and affirming. That meant that not only would people who are gay and lesbian be

allowed to come in and worship here – not required to repent of their identity – it also meant that leadership positions were available. The last three churches I have served have all been Open and Affirming for decades, what I notice is that while other churches say “we’re open, and everyone is welcome, always have been!” It does not mean that everyone can be in leadership comfortably, as they are, who they are. These churches are updated.

Yet 31 years ago same sex wedding were illegal. Today same sex marriage is legal. The Open and Affirming movement has gone on to advocate and support gender identity issues. The movement has gone from asking for recognition to love you who love, to asking for recognition for who we are. And by that we do not mean what your opinions are, or things you can change, it means identity. Accepting the identity of people.

Some of you are on board with this, and have been living this at home and at work; but unless you’ve had someone in your life pushing this agenda, talking it over with you, it’s pretty easy to get lost.

My mother lives in an independent living retirement community in Oregon and she tells me they’ve just had someone move in who said they prefer they/them pronouns. This caused a stir. As much as anything, because it is hard to change speech patterns after, and I’ll say this, my mother is going on 90 years old – Mom asked my sister and me on a recent zoom call about ...why she needs to change her pronouns? She finds it hard. “Um, mom, that’s what they are asking you to do.”

“Well, what if I get it wrong?” “...um, okay, either they’ll say nothing, they’ve lived most of their life with pronouns they’re uncomfortable with, **or** they’ll correct you.” oh.

I know that for many of you this is an easy switch to make. I suspect that you are good with languages, and brilliant, and I admire you. This next bit is not directed to you, for any of you who have found yourself tongue tied, I want you to know that you are not alone. I’ve found it very hard to change my speech patterns, especially the plural pronouns. So if any of you are like me, honestly I have needed to practice. I practice on things around the house:

It occurred to me that the Sourdough starter I created in pandemic lockdown has a plural identity. It is a large gooey colony of one celled yeast organisms and bacteria. My daughter named *them* “Yeast Lyme” get it? Will you get *them* out of the refrigerator? It’s time to feed *them*. *They* haven’t been fed for 2 weeks. *They* make wonderful cinnamon rolls. Practice.

It recently occurred to me that the lawn may be plural... is it *time to mow it*? Or time to ***mow them***?

Yeast Lyme and these lawn do not care what I call them, but *I* am getting practice. No one will ask you whether or not they **can** change their pronouns. What we hear instead is that they have – they want this change.

Mom told me that many of the people at the independent living community avoid the new person with the plural pronouns because they are afraid they'll slip up and say the wrong thing. Meanwhile they don't have many friends. So sad.

One of the strengths that South Church has is an intention to be a place of hospitality. In order to be a place of hospitality in the future, we'll all need to continue to install updates to our faith in God and one another. Learning new names, meeting new families, making new friends, seeing who they are.

One of the greatest gifts this church is to this community is being an intergenerational sacred space providing hospitality for all manner of people and activities. It's in the name of Christ we do this. It is because of Jesus' love for us all, as we are, loved and forgiven and invited to new life. And if you call someone by the wrong name or slip up, acknowledge the mistake, and keep trying.

- I'd like to leave you with one last update. this is an image from the 2012 Seventh Annual Walk out of Darkness, which is a suicide prevention and awareness event this one was in Virginia Beach. They made more than 1000 paper cranes and gathered to lift up those who were feeling worthless. An image of hope and love as a community gesture.

The faith has been carried by generations before us and has the capacity to last at least as many generations and more into the future. Installing the updates to this legacy of faith, hope and love is an enduring gift we can give in our generation and the future. I know it's a pain, and it takes time, nevertheless, when it comes to faith: please install updates.

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