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John 15: 1-8

“Life-Giving Fruit”

About a month ago, Henry and Tommy’s school notified all of the parents that someone, probably a student, had created a phony Facebook page under a phony name and had used it to threaten students that he was going to start a fight in downtown Kirkwood after school. The school wanted parents to talk to their children about the danger of “friending” someone on Facebook who they don’t actually know in real life. Since Tommy and Henry aren’t on FB, it wasn’t a big concern to me, but I did ask Henry why someone would friend someone they’ve never met. He didn’t know why, but did say it happens all the time, and some kids are known to have 600-700 Facebook friends.

About a month later, we got another e-mail from the school notifying us that once again, someone had created a Facebook page under the same phony name and already the person had 50 friends. *Talk to your kids*, the message said. *Tell them they shouldn’t friend people they don’t know!*

I’m not on FB . . .for a whole host of reasons that aren’t necessary to go into now, so take my words for what they’re worth, but FB is not a substitute for a real community. I realize I sound like an old fuddy-duddy for saying that, but I don’t think a FB friend (especially one you don’t know) is the equivalent of a real friend . . . someone you actually talk to and see in real life.

Of course, I’m also preaching today on a passage in which Jesus tells us that we should make our home *in him*, that he is the vine and we are the branches, and that apart from him, apart from real flesh and blood community with real people, we will wither and die, because life in isolation is just too darn difficult.

When Jesus speaks these words from John’s gospel, it’s Maundy Thursday. In less than 24 hours, he’ll be dead on the cross. He wants the disciples to be prepared and to stay with one another, because in the days and months ahead they are really going to need one another. What Jesus encourages today, in all his old-fashioned language about vines and branches and fruit, is to have a real relationship, in a real community, like this one . . .where we share joys and concerns and meet up at least once a week to worship and give thanks to God, but also to see one another. To connect with one another.

Now, I suppose one could argue that if Jesus were around today, he would encourage the disciples to connect with one another by whatever means necessary. And in today’s modern world, we know how to connect; we are more connected than ever. Obviously FB connects people; and it is a wonderful tool to connect to friends you rarely see or even see all the time. Twitter connects people, too. As does e-mail and texting and Skype and facetime. Why, on my hand-dandy iPhone I can connect people to 24/7. I get e-mail, I

can facetime, Skype, text, and if I were on FB or twitter, get a constant newsfeed of my friends latest comings and goings. This is a wonderful tool that helps me in my daily life.

But . . .but . . .this 24/7 connection at my fingertips is not a substitute for an actual/"irl" relationship.

This month's cover of Atlantic Monthly features the article "Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?" In case you missed the article or don't want to read it, the short answer is yes, it is. According to the author, FB and other social media facilitate our own inclinations. So if we're inclined to do things that make us lonely, social media makes it easier. It's not that FB or the like is responsible for the uptick in loneliness, but they do give us the opportunity to connect without really connecting.

A text message isn't a substitute for a real conversation. Clicking the "like" button on Facebook is not the same as congratulating someone in real life. In this regard, Sherry Turkle, one of the early adopters and promoters of the internet's capacity to help us connect with each other, recently began questioning what kind of connections it's helping us make. In a lecture she gave, she said that back in the dark ages of 1995, when people were just beginning to discover the virtual world and chat rooms (remember those?), the hope was that what we learned about ourselves in the virtual world would help us to live better lives in the real one. Seventeen years later, she argues that we are letting technology take us places we don't want to go. It is not only changing what we do, but who we are.

For example, she says, we now send text messages during meetings (when we should be paying attention to the meeting); we send text messages during dinner (while we should be conversing with our tablemates); we send text messages during church (yes, sometimes I see that going on!). In other words, we are together, but not together. We are getting used to being alone together. She calls this Goldilocks effect-we keep people not too close, not far, but just right.

In this virtual community we also have the ability to edit, delete, and retouch what we want people to see. We can leave a comment without engaging in a dialogue. We can have the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. As someone put it, social media is the junk food of relationships; they may give us the impression of being in a real community, and they may even taste better than a real community . . .because, let's face it, in a real community there are real people, and some of them are nicer than others; in a real community, it's hard to hide behind a screen. But one cannot survive on junk food alone. At some point we need something that has a higher nutritional value.

Writing about all of this, I was intrigued to read about a Presbyterian minister who is trying to start a church online. Some people are jumping on the bandwagon, but others are raising concerns and asking questions, most of which I've raised today, which is how can a church be a church without face-to-face time?

The originators of the idea say there will be face-to-face time in regional gatherings, but how can one gather for weekly worship? Is spending time around a computer screen an adequate substitute for gathering in a sanctuary?

I personally don't think it's the same, because I happen to believe that worship, the act of worshipping, is the most important thing a church does, because it is here that you are spiritually fed and nourished and equipped to go out and serve.

But there are others who disagree, who say the physical gathering isn't that necessary or that the physical building isn't that necessary. But Jesus didn't call his followers away from institutions and buildings, but into them with a purpose; called his followers to the synagogue and to the temple, where they spent a lot of time and could pray together and learn from one another and then go out into the world. Eugene Peterson says that's it's not possible to enlist Jesus in the effort to bash and denigrate institutions. He took institutions of his day, the synagogue and temple, very seriously. And so Jesus calls followers into churches today to be faithful here, and to go out from here and live for him, and then return there for comfort and encouragement and to say "thank you" along with other followers. "Abide in me," Jesus says. "Abide in me." The closest we come to that is this weekly gathering we call worship.

What Jesus offers us is much more than a connection, but a relationship. A real one, in a real community, with real people. And in that community we can be honest about who we are and what we are, our disappointments and dreams, our hopes and fears, our accomplishments and failures, and our blessings and our sins . . . and know that no matter what we are accepted and loved and forgiven by God . . . God, the Gardener who tends us, feeds us, and nurtures us, caring for us so that we will grow and thrive and bloom where we are planted. And not just for our own pleasure, but so that our lives may bear fruit for others, so that we become channels, if you will, for God's love.

I happen to believe that there is no better place to learn how to be those channels or to be nurtured and fed than here, in church, with other people, in a real community. I know there are people out there who disagree, who say that one can be fed spiritually by communing with nature, or watching a beautiful sunset, or listening to a beautiful symphony. Certainly in all of those things God's hand is present. But when the going gets tough, a person needs someone, needs a friend, needs a community that is going to hold them up when they cannot walk; needs a community to have faith for them when they don't have any themselves; needs to be surrounded by people who love God, when they don't feel very lovable.

That, I believe, you can only find in the church, the place in which we pray, gather, sing and give thanks to God.

Like leaves on a tree find its nourishment from the soil and air and sun and water, you are fed here, in worship, with a community, so that you may bear fruit, so that you may grow and flourish and go out into the world, tending to it . . . helping it to blossom, tending to the withered and dry places in it and in people's lives, and showing God's love in your

words and deeds. It is here God calls all of us to live in love, to abide with God, and to bear fruit that feeds the world.

And so whoever you are this morning—a member of this church, a member of another church, a long-time visitor or a first time visitor, I ask you this morning to consider seriously the idea that the church is God’s way of nurturing us and loving us. And I believe that of all the things you and I are called to build, none is more important than this, the church. And furthermore, that God calls you to be a part of it, to nurture and tend to it, to help it grow, to love, to serve, and to give.

Amen.

Sources:

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John Buchanan, “Called to Love and Serve”