

The Social Network

John 15:1-8

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6 May 2012

According to the World Book Dictionary, the primary current meaning for abide is “to put up with; endure; tolerate,” and gives the word use suggestion “She can’t abide him.”

That is not how the translators of the Gospel of John intend us to take the word. They meant one of the definitions that the dictionary now lists further down “to stay; remain; wait”, “to continue to live (in a place); reside; dwell,” or “to continue (in some state or action).”

One commentary I read said that the Greek word translated abide carries a range of meanings that together convey the idea that “vineyards are long-term investments and labor intensive.”

The gospel writer has taken this imagery of the vine, which would have been familiar to the original audience, and used it describe the followers of Jesus. They are connected with one another and with God in enduring relationships that bring mutual benefit and produce results.

It is good to read this passage on the church’s anniversary and on a communion Sunday. In the practice of communion, or the Eucharist, we are reminded of many things, and among these reminders are our connections with one another, with God, and with all creation. Communion reminds us that these are enduring relationships that bring mutual benefit and produce results. Theologian Daniel Izuzquiza proclaims that there is a “permanent Eucharistic call for a way of life based on radical sharing.”

The church has always reminded us of the importance of our relationships with others, with God, and the creation. It does this in both spiritual and practical ways. For instance, we’ve always understood that the church is some mystical, spiritual connection that transcends time and space, bringing us into relationship with people across the globe and even with those who have already died or will follow after us. The ritual of communion is a reminder of this spiritual, mystical relationship.

And there are very practical connections as well. In the church, we relate to diverse people that we might not have otherwise known. Together we organize activities, make decisions, and reinforce behavior.

In all the writing on the church and social networking, theologians keep coming back to a central point. The church has always been a social network.

We’ve always invited people into relationships of radical sharing and mutual responsibility for one another. New technologies just allow us to do these things in new ways and sometimes to do them more efficiently, in broader scope, and in a way that allows us to share with those outside the church more easily what it is that we are doing. Now we have a more direct, routine way to experience that mystical, spiritual connection that transcends time and space.

This Easter season I've been preaching about some of the things the church can learn from new developments in technology and design. Today I'm going to talk about social networks, experienced primarily through on-line sites like Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Pinterest, and more.

As I worked on this particular sermon, I realized that one could do an entire series of classes or talks on the various practical, ethical, ecclesiological, and theological issues that arise from these new technologies and their intersections with faith and religion. It is important for our faith to give us insight and guidance into our everyday lives.

In very practical ways, these new technologies have changed how we do church. We use them to organize events, to advertise, for social activism and volunteering, for evangelizing, and more.

In April 2010 the United Church of Christ national office invited all members and churches to participate in an on-line experiment. The UCC Stillspeaking initiative had had success with the television commercials that they had released during the Aughts. Many of you remember the "Bouncer" ad and the "Ejector Seat" ad. In 2010 they thought they'd try something new and released a commercial on-line with the hopes that it would go viral and be seen by lots of people.

One of the main reasons for doing it this way is that it is a whole lot cheaper than buying television time to broadcast a commercial. In the promotional information, the national church invited people to "do the math." Here's what they wrote:

The UCC has 25,386 fans on Facebook. If each posts [the video] for their Facebook friends to see, it will reach 3,554,040 viewers in minutes. And if just a fraction of these re-post it, even millions more will learn of the UCC.

At the time I was pastoring in Oklahoma City, where I crunched the math for that congregation. At the time we had 241 Facebook fans, and I calculated that together they had a total of 99,074 friends. CoH was running around 80 people in worship on a good day. But, very quickly, easily, and completely free, we had the potential to reach close to 100,000 people with information about our church and our faith.

Now, this week I didn't waste my time calculating the numbers for First Central, but my guess is that it is something similar. One of the reasons the national UCC has committed itself so passionately to new media is because it facilitates our evangelism.

Some congregations have been even more innovative. Entire churches now exist only on-line. Others, such as our sister church, Countryside Community, has a Sunday evening service that exists on-line. The UCC is currently planning for ways to use the internet to supply quality preaching and worship to rural churches who are finding it increasingly difficult to afford a minister.

Polls show that an ever-increasing number of people go to the internet for prayer, meditation, religious education, and worship.

And, then there is the array of ethical issues. What are the implications for privacy? Do on-line relationships improve or damage face-to-face relationships? Are we lonelier or not? Some studies show that people connected on-line actually engage in more community involvement and volunteerism. Other articles ask if our brains are being re-wired, and what

might this mean? And are we becoming more narcissistic? We also run the danger of creating a community within the community. All of these are topics that should be explored within the theological and spiritual conversations of the church.

My general sense is that some of the responses to these ethical topics are overwrought. These aren't new ethical questions. You should embody the virtues like kindness, self-control, compassion, generosity, humility, and others in your on-line life in the same way that you should in your face-to-face encounters.

Many are intrigued by the implications of these new technologies for ecclesiology. We are probably undergoing the most radical transformation in Christianity since the Protestant Reformation. The Protestant church arose in the wake of the printing press, as new technology made information available in new ways. That new technology radically altered the church. With the internet, social media, mobile phones, tablets, and all the other technological changes of our time, we are undergoing larger cultural shifts similar to those effected by the printing press, and so, the church is naturally changing as well.

For example, authority is changing. Hierarchies are being replaced by egalitarian networks. Individuals are experiencing greater autonomy and power. Fortunately for us, these developments fit naturally with our congregational heritage. These developments are much more of a threat to denominations who have emphasized centralized authority, and you can see them reacting by trying to reassert that centralized control.

Phyllis Tickle, who is one of the most respected observers of these things, writes that the church is a network -- an interlaced, dynamic structure -- and we are now awakening to what has always been true. She writes:

The duty, the challenge, the joy and excitement of the Church and for the Christians who compose her, then, is in discovering what it means to believe that the kingdom of God is within one and in understanding that one is thereby a pulsating, vibrating bit in a much grander network.

The religious possibilities of new media engage my passions. They are open-ended, adventurous, and egalitarian. They allow us to be present with one another in a way that is not limited to physical location. Last year Chris Steffen stopped by the office one day and said, "Though I haven't seen you in a few weeks, I feel like I just saw you yesterday because of your posts on Facebook."

One of my main passions is that we can more easily share our stories with each other. And watch them develop over time. We can see how others grow and change, how they react to world events and life circumstances, what they believe about the issues of the day, and even how their faith and spirituality informs all of this.

Though I do often feel the challenge of keeping up with it all. With the amount of information, and my ever-growing "friends" list. But also with all the new developments, changes in settings and privacy controls, all the new websites that come along (I haven't gotten into Pinterest, for example). And I sometimes wonder if it is a distraction from other things. So I can respect those who avoid the new technologies, or fast from them.

But I stay involved because I enjoy it and I do discover rich connections and experiences developing through my on-line social networks. Beyond that personal enjoyment, I do think

that profound things can occur. I don't want to sound like some ivory-tower thinker over-reacting to mundane routines, but there are possibilities for living out our Eucharistic connections in new ways. Theologian Jim Rice writes,

We now have vivid examples of the 'universal body of Christ' that never before existed. These instantaneous global interactions made possible by new media offer analogies of God's transcendence and immanence that have the potential to lead to profound new insights and understandings about the very nature of God and God's realm on earth.

New insights, drawn from new technologies, but rooted in an ancient reality. At the communion table we have learned of our deep connections with one another. We have been called to a life of radical sharing. We cannot separate who we are from our relationships with God, one another, and all creation.

And whether we use the new technologies of our time or the most ancient forms of social networking – things like sitting on the porch, eating a meal together, taking a walk, praying -- these relationships require long-term investments and are labor intensive. But if we abide, then we will bear much fruit.