

WGUMC April 14, 2013
"There's No App for That"

Easter 3 John 20:24-29

Like many of you, I grew up with Phone Book, not Facebook. I typed all of my seminary papers on a typewriter. (Hey, look! It's got a built-in printer!) Even today, I have a dumb phone that's never charged, and I don't know how to use my iPad.

But I'm not as hopeless as one of my favorite parishioners back in Novato. The Chair of the Board of Trustees had gotten one of those "Go paperless; pay your bills online" notices in the mail. So she took it to her bank and talked it over with the teller. Then she went home and asked her son about online bill pay. Her son looked at his mother in disbelief and said, "Mom, you don't have a computer!"

Now you young whippersnappers can smirk all you want to as you watch the Phonebook generation slip below the digital divide. But around here, they still fill the pews and pay the bills. And they're going to make sure this church survives,

because they know something maybe you don't know: that we have here the answer to a problem that can't be solved by computers.

Craig Barnes is the new president of Princeton Theological Seminary. He tells a story about his nightmare experience with social media. He was a pastor when he was being interviewed at Princeton. Hopeful that he would be offered the job, he prepared tender letters to be sent first class mail to each of his parishioners explaining in detail the heart-wrenching decision he had made to leave his post as their spiritual leader. Within minutes of the vote to hire him, the news was burning through Facebook like wildfire. Within hours, the decision was posted on the seminary's website. Long before those love letters got to a mailbox, his congregation had learned that he was abandoning them. [*The Christian Century*, March 6, 2013]

Barnes worries that social media is making us less sociable. He certainly had the experience of Facebook making

relationships seem less real. Fortunately, the Methodist Church doesn't do things that way. We don't post pastoral appointments on Facebook. We still make those announcements face-to-face. When a pastor is moved, both the church they are leaving and the church they are going to are finding out simultaneously at Sunday morning worship. There's a lot of wisdom in that. It's a wisdom that is captured in our text from John's Gospel this morning.

The Bible is a face-to-face kind of book. The disciple Thomas hadn't been around when Jesus first appeared to the other disciples on Easter day. There was no internet, but there was a fully-functional grapevine. So, he had heard the report of the resurrection, but he wasn't ready to believe it. He had to experience it for himself. He had to look Jesus in the eye, hear him call his name, and touch his wounded hands and side.

We usually fault Thomas for doubting. Today, I want to defend him for demanding a face-to-face faith. He wanted his

own experience of the resurrection, not someone else's. For him, faith was something actual, not virtual. It involved his mind and spirit, yes, but also his body. For him, faith was tactile.

When you think about it, all the post-resurrection stories about Jesus in the Gospel of John are tactile. Remember Mary Magdalene at the tomb on Easter morning, wanting to hold on to Jesus. Then the disciples are locked in a room, and Jesus comes to breathe on them. Finally, he appears on the lakeshore to eat fish and chips with them.

From the very beginning, Christianity has been a tangible truth, a face-to-face faith. And the way Jesus was with his disciples then is the way we need to be disciples now. That's why going to church by turning on the TV doesn't work for me. And now there's virtual church on the internet. Web-based worship provides more options for interaction than conventional TV. Nevertheless, what they offer is a Facebook

faith, not a face-to-face faith.

As much as I like our new website (thank you, Tom), a visitor will never get a sense of who we really are unless we have a chance to get in their face, grab their hand, touch their heart and give them something real to hold onto.

I notice on Facebook that I get friend requests all the time from people I don't know. I don't know who they are or where they're from or how they know me. Those aren't the kind of friends most of us need. They can't read our face. They don't have our back. They can't give us a hug.

And they can't comb out our hair. When I started out as a pastor, I learned the importance of just being there. I went to visit an elderly woman with beautiful long gray hair. She had fallen and broken her shoulder. She was living in assisted living, but she wasn't getting enough assistance. When I asked her if there was anything I could do for her, she said, "I've had my hair in this bun for three weeks. Could you brush my hair?" So I

did. You would have thought I was giving her the sacrament. I didn't give her the Body of Christ, but in that moment, I was the Body of Christ. And I realized: this is church, face-to-face.

Why is it, then, that Jesus only showed his face to the first disciples? If it was important for them to see him, how are we supposed to believe in him? Even Jesus considers this question. He asks Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

If Jesus is blessing those who have not seen his face and believe, then could Jesus be endorsing our online virtual communities? I ask a further question. For those who have not seen, how did they come to believe? They came to believe because they were a part of a real community like this one at Willow Glen. Maybe they didn't see Jesus' face, but they saw yours. They came to church wanting to experience the resurrection for themselves, and they experienced you. And it

wasn't as much of a let-down as you think! In you, they encountered love they can see, grace they can hear (how sweet that sound!), and authenticity they can touch. My friends, there is no app for that. You can't put it on your iPhone, because it's not software. It's soulware. And neither Apple nor Samsung owns the patent.

By the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, the church does. That's how I know that each one can bring one to Christ in the next year. By spending less time on Facebook and more time getting face to face with the people we know who are yearning for a real relationship with God in their lives.

Wouldn't we give a friend some food if they were hungry? A drink if they were thirsty? Companionship if they were lonely? Then why won't we give them God when they are ready?

Think of someone you know who is without God in their life right now. It may be a friend, a neighbor, a co-worker, or a

family member, someone who has been on your heart recently, someone you've been wondering how you can help. It could even be a stranger you haven't met yet, a visitor to this church who hasn't shown up yet. Then I want you to spend some time thinking about this person, who they are, where they are, what motivates them, what frightens them, what delights them. Try to think about this person as God thinks about them. And then I'm going to ask you to make a commitment to pray for them, not just today but every day until the Day of Pentecost.

If each one is to bring one, we have to be very intentional and specific about it. At the same time, we have to realize that it is God's grace and not our good intentions that will make it happen. For us and for them, there is absolutely nothing to lose and heaven to gain by praying.

Let us pray. God, you love every one of us, whether we know it or not. And you can use every one of us, whether we believe it or not. There is someone out there who needs you today, and we don't want to be the one who sees their need and turns away. So we ask you to open our heart to this friend, this family member, this neighbor, this co-worker, this stranger. To

be honest, we don't know how to reach them, but you do. We don't know what to say to them, but you assure us that we don't need to. Just help us to begin to pray for them, and we'll see what happens. God, whatever is going on in the life of this sister or this brother, we pray that you will make an opening for your grace. We want for them everything you want for them. And if it be your will, we are willing to be a bearer of Christ for them. What an honor undeserved to be a messenger of your mercy and an instrument of your peace. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.