

John 17:20-26

#thatallmaybeone

Jesus prays this prayer for his followers as he is about to go to his death. We read it, as the church, at the time that we mark his Ascension to heaven and await the gift of the Holy Spirit.

20 "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 24 Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25 Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Two weeks ago, I attended a class at McCormick Seminary on Ministry and Social Media. The class, and all the readings leading up to it, focused on how we, as Christians, can interact on Social Media in ways that are meaningful and fulfilling, and that have integrity within our life of faith. So, in the spirit of that old saying, “When you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail,” after all that, this passage from John, in which Jesus prays that his followers will remember what he taught them when he is no longer in their physical presence, seemed to me to have a lot to say about how we should act on Social Media (because, obviously, Jesus was all about Facebook and Twitter and Instagram!).

My own Social Media presence has been like one of those moles in a whack-a-mole game: I pop up, and then I disappear; then I pop up again, and then I disappear again. Sometimes my skittishness is because of the mallets of negativity that I see all around me, and sometimes it’s just because of overwhelm. I long to get past the cheap, dumbed-down, gotcha conversations that seem to proliferate in cyberspace, and foster deeper, more authentic conversations and relationships, but it’s been hard to know how to do that.

At the same time, just disappearing doesn’t feel like a responsible option—not when so many people spend so much time on Social Media. As the professor, Angela Gorrell, pointed out in class, we now live hybrid lives, moving constantly between our physical, in-person interactions and our digital interactions—and those digital interactions are just as real as our in-person interactions, because they, too, involve real people with real lives.

So I think about this passage, and about Jesus, who would no longer be face-to-face with his disciples, but who, through the Holy Spirit, would, nevertheless, be present with them. His presence is still real. His presence still changes lives. And the nature of his presence—love, peace, empowerment—remains the same.

What about ours, as we toggle back and forth between physical and digital reality? Are we able, in both spheres, to act with authenticity?

Dr. Gorrell pointed out that Social Media has both glorious possibilities and profound brokenness. When she said that, I immediately thought: “Just like us!” We human beings have both glorious possibilities and profound brokenness, so Social Media is just an extension of who we are as human beings. The challenge for us, as followers of Jesus, is to find ways to nurture the glorious possibilities without feeding the brokenness.

If you are active online, at all, I’m guessing that you’ve experienced that brokenness. How many of you have ever been wounded by an online interaction? How many of you have spent hours scrolling through other people’s posts of their happy, perfect lives, and come away feeling lonely and depressed and inadequate? How many of you have found yourself responding to a post that offended you—particularly if it’s from someone you don’t know, personally—in snarky, abrupt, dismissive ways that you later regretted?

And, of course, we’ve all become acutely aware of the demonic ways in which Social Media has been used to spread lies and hatred, and to foment violence. Profound brokenness, indeed.

There are aspects to the very design of Social Media that work against human flourishing. The creators of Facebook, for example, consciously designed the site to keep users on it for as long as possible. Never mind that people you love are actually in the same room with you—it’s far too easy to ignore them, while you scroll through the postings of total strangers.

And Twitter’s character limitation is designed to facilitate quick sound-bites at the expense of in-depth conversation.

And Snap Chat is designed to foster competition. Its icons indicate who you send the most snaps to, and who sends the most snaps to you. If one of your friends sends as many snaps to another as they do to you, a grimace face pops up. Why a grimace? Why not an expanding heart to show the spread of friendship?

“As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, [said Jesus,] may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I

in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

That all may be one, bound in love. That’s Jesus’ goal. Much of Social Media’s design pulls against that—and yet, there are those glorious possibilities. I think of old friends I’d lost touch with, who reconnected with me on Facebook. I think of one young pastor, whom I barely know personally, but whose deep, thoughtful posts have helped me to process world events in meaningful ways. I think of online support groups with other clergy in which we share ideas and hold each other in prayer. I think of CaringBridge groups, where those who are going through difficult illnesses can keep their friends updated on their progress and on their needs. I think of genuinely funny memes that tickle me, and that I share with friends so that we can have a laugh together. All these things make me feel closer to others, closer to God, and closer to my better self.

Profound brokenness, and glorious possibilities.

This world tends to pull us apart—that’s always been true, long before there was the internet. This world tends to pull us apart from one another, and even within ourselves. We are a conflicted people. But Jesus, who was both fully human and fully God, provides both a model and a portal to a different way of being. In him, we see love that bridges the deep divides of race and nation and creed and gender and clan. We see love that embraces the hurting and stands up to the hurtful. We see love that doesn’t waver in the face of fear or danger or suffering. We see love that reigns from afar, across the bounds of time and space; and we see love that meets us here, at this table, in the humble gifts of bread and wine.

How do we, in our lives both online and offline, cultivate that deep integrity within ourselves, and that loving unity with others? It takes wisdom and discernment and balance. We need **wisdom** to choose the platforms on which we are able to be our better selves, and refrain from those that draw out our worst. We need **discernment** about when to post, what to post, and to whom to post, so that relationships are nurtured rather than ruptured. And we need **balance** to know when enough is enough.

Remember: even God took a Sabbath. And even Jesus had to get offline and go away by himself to pray, and to spend time with his closest companions.

No matter how glorious the possibilities are online, we still need actual, human contact. We still need physical touch. We still need the literal Communion that nurtures the spiritual communion with one another and with God.

In today's bulletin is a mango-colored insert from my class that gives a template for developing a personal rule of life for how we use Social Media. It's got my markings on it, because I didn't have a clean copy, but I wanted to share it because I thought it was helpful. I hope you'll take some time with it to think about your own online presence. Then, I'd love to hear from you about what thoughts you're having. In the next couple of days, I'll create a post on the church's Facebook page to share comments with one another—and I'd also love to hear from you, face-to-face.

The initial question the insert asks is, **“What kind of people are we aiming to be when we use social media?”** Honestly, that's a good question to ask in all the different areas of our lives: What kind of people are we aiming to be?

Jesus had a clear sense of who he was, and of who he wanted us to be. He wanted us to be community builders, he wanted us to be people of love and peace and justice, he wanted us to be a clear reflection of him, and of the God who made us all; he wanted us to be one.

And he, who, through the Spirit, moves freely through all time and space; and who is as present online as he is in this place; offers his prayers and his body so that the love of God that dwells in him may fill our hearts and our lives both online and offline, in this world, and in the world to come.