

## “Social Networks”

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UCC at The Villages, FL  
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Psalms 22:25-31

John 15:1-8

[Jesus said,]

‘Stay joined to me, and I will stay joined to you.

Just as a branch cannot produce fruit unless it stays joined to the vine,  
you cannot produce fruit unless you stay joined to me.’

John 15:4

Let us pray...O God,

Can you hear me now? Are you still there for me? For us?

Are you running with me, Jesus? Am I running with you?

Amen

Last Sunday, I said there were inspirational slogans from the 1960s and ‘70s  
that still speak to us in our time.

“Are you running with me, Jesus?” is the title of a collection of essays  
by political activist and ‘coffee house priest’, Father Malcolm Boyd,  
who was one of the most prominent members of the clergy  
to come out as a gay person in the 1970s.

He was a spokesperson for what was then called the “Now Generation”.

He was *hip* – back then.

Of course these days, we have all had to learn a whole new set of skills  
to be in touch with what’s happening now – to be ‘with it’.

I am very happy to say that most of our congregation is ‘on the internet’ –  
which generally means you can send and receive messages by e-mail  
and ‘open attachments’ and ‘forward’ cute stories, patriotic messages,  
awful jokes, beautiful slide shows, or religious messages  
that usually include the challenge about how  
“most people would delete this, but you will be blessed if forward this  
to ten friends” – what used to be called a ‘chain letter’,  
or what I suppose could be called ‘chain mail’ these days.

Early on, there were ‘blogs’ and ‘websites’ and now it’s about ‘social networks’  
like Facebook and Linked In.

Perhaps you have seen those little squares that look like a ‘Rorschach test’.  
That’s a QR or “Quick Response” code which can be read by your phone  
like a supermarket barcode to immediately direct you to a website.

Then there’s something called ‘apps’ as in ‘applications’ –  
and it just so happens that the theme for our Conference’s Annual Meeting was  
“Mission 2.0 - There’s an App for That” –  
which is an effort to get Florida UCC congregations hip to social media.

Willard, p.2

Mission 2.0 is meant to be a follow up to “Mission One” –  
which was a denomination-wide effort to “feed the hungry”  
by collecting food for local pantries, writing letters to lawmakers,  
and raising money to help the UCC fight hunger at home and abroad.

But Mission 2.0 is about survival –  
our survival as a Conference, as a Denomination, and as a congregation.

And our Conference is telling us that this means we have to stay connected –

Mission 2.0 is about how we understand our ‘mission’

as a denomination and church

and how well we can communicate that mission

with each other and the wider community.

And social media can help facilitate communication

as the next best way besides talking face to face.

Our Conference has a website where you can get information about activities  
and find contact information of all the other UCC churches in Florida.

Conference is also on Facebook where subscribers can get notifications

about an ongoing conversation called “Best Practices of The Florida Conference”

where churches share news and information about projects they are doing.

Facebook is being promoted as an effective media to keep in touch and get the word out  
to help us do our mission as the United Church of Christ.

We had two classes on Facebook specifically

about how it was a means to keep connected and get the word out.

I tell you what – I was getting hooked

and I could see how we could use pictures, especially,

to tell the story and provide some ways of talking about who we are.

And just putting it out there about UCC at The Villages.

And part of Facebook was letting people know that you ‘Liked’ their page –  
that means you clicked a box that said ‘Like’.

Everybody in the class had their laptops with them and were online,

and at one point, we were asked to call out the name of our church,

and everybody would go to their Facebook page

to do them the favor of ‘liking’ their church page

which would show up as a number for all the people who ‘liked’ that page.

It was like a game. It was fun!

Now, this is dependent on each person having a ‘personal page’

that allows you to access info and be accessible.

There is a concern about internet safety as this system can be intrusive –

but if a person limits what they put on there

and learns to use the controls built into the system,

the advantages can be significant for communication.

Willard, p.3

The construction of roads allowed the ancient Empire of Rome to establish itself and extend its influence.

When the Roman Empire did fall, it crumbled around Christianity which had also used those same roads to establish itself and extend its influence.

The internet is like that system of roadways and seaways that the early Christian Church used to spread throughout Europe and beyond.

It is something new in its application, but with a goal as old as the Church itself.

And our keynote speaker, Brian McLaren, urged us to see our message in a new way – to re-examine what that Good News, the Gospel – or ‘Godspell’ means and even allow it to break free from assumptions that have been laid over it.

McLaren grew up in a conservative, fundamentalist tradition and he underwent a radical transformation that began with a talk he gave to youth at a summer camp many years before.

He asked them about what were some of the issues that their church was dealing with and this started out in terms of what was appropriate during worship – but at the level of “was it OK to wear jeans to church or not”.

He asked them to go deeper and they came up with a list of justice issues like racism and war.

And then they looked for a connection – and he realized there was no connection, but there should have been.

And when he became a pastor he found himself always drawn by the church to the ‘worship’ list while the ‘justice’ list was consistently neglected.

He then took us through a re-visioning of how we look at the Gospel about Jesus and that most often we see Jesus through various historical interpreters – Rick Warren, Billy Graham, Martin Luther, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, and so forth to Paul and the 12 Disciples.

He said that maybe we need to start with Adam & Eve, Abraham & Sarah and Hagar – basically, to start with Jesus’ ancestors and the stories about them.

Then, McLaren had us look at Jesus by way of the Bible and culture he would’ve known and how this perspective would begin with Exodus – when God’s people were rescued from slavery in Egypt.

And this led to Genesis as a prequel to that story – which not only tells the origins of Creation, but also how God’s people came to Egypt and slavery in the first place.

And then, to look at the Book of Isaiah, and the message of the Prophets – and that it was foremost about liberation and reconciliation.

When you look at the story this way, when you look at what it’s about, it doesn’t place an emphasis on Original Sin and whether or not people will get into heaven, but about freeing people from what enslaves and oppresses them.

Willard, p.4

Then, McLaren jumped ahead to the Book of Acts and told about  
the Apostle Paul casting out a fortunetelling-spirit from a woman.  
The men who managed her had lost a means of making a profit,  
so they had Paul and another apostle, Silas, beaten and thrown into jail.  
But as it turned out, Paul was unjustly imprisoned as a Roman citizen  
who therefore had rights that were violated.  
When these town's men tried to make amends,  
Paul and Silas refused to leave the jail  
unless these men publicly came to escort them out.

The word 'saved' came up several times throughout this story,  
but McLaren pointed out that it was not in the context of whether or not  
someone was going to heaven, but about liberation, freedom –  
and I would add "healing".

Like Malcolm Boyd before him, Brian McLaren is a new voice on the scene  
that is helping us 'rediscover' Jesus the Liberator –  
Jesus as the personification of God's character, purpose, and mission  
of a God who cares foremost about poor people who are trapped in life.  
and that this Jesus is still running with us.

Our Conference is dealing with some convulsive change –  
like the continued trend of diminished offerings to the Conference  
which has led to the dismissal of our current Regional ministers,  
each of whom have been doing an excellent job;  
and now, the work of reorganizing those regions  
with the help of technology to keep them connected.

In the midst of all this, there is confidence that we will find our way ahead  
just as Christians have done all along.

As it says in a new hymn that has become a classic,  
*In the midst of new dimensions, in the face of changing ways,  
Who will lead the pilgrim peoples wandering in their separate ways?  
God of rainbow, fiery pillar, leading where the eagles soar.  
We your people, ours the journey, now and ever, now and ever,  
now and evermore.*

Amen

Psalm 22:25-31

- 25 When your people meet, you will fill my heart with your praises,  
Lord, and everyone will see me keep my promises to you.
- 26 The poor will eat and be full, and all who worship you will be thankful  
and live in hope.
- 27 Everyone on this earth will remember you, Lord.  
People all over the world will turn and worship you,  
28 because you are in control, the ruler of all nations.
- 29 All who are rich and have more than enough  
will bow down to you, Lord.  
Even those who are dying and almost in the grave  
will come and bow down.
- 30 In the future, everyone will worship and learn about you, our Lord.  
31 People not yet born will be told, "The Lord has saved us!"

John 15:1-8

15:1 Jesus said to his disciples:

I am the true vine,

and my Father is the gardener.

2 He cuts away every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit.

But he trims clean every branch that does produce fruit,  
so that it will produce even more fruit.

3 You are already clean because of what I have said to you.

4 Stay joined to me, and I will stay joined to you.

Just as a branch cannot produce fruit unless it stays joined to the vine,  
you cannot produce fruit unless you stay joined to me.

5 I am the vine, and you are the branches.

If you stay joined to me, and I stay joined to you,  
then you will produce lots of fruit.

But you cannot do anything without me.

6 If you don't stay joined to me, you will be thrown away.

You will be like dry branches that are gathered up and burned in a fire.

7 Stay joined to me and let my teachings become part of you.

Then you can pray for whatever you want,  
and your prayer will be answered.

8 When you become fruitful disciples of mine, my Father will be honored.