

Constant Connectivity and Community

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## Introduction

In my own life, I have held a tenuous relationship with social media. I saw its huge potential as a way to reconnect with people, and to easily share details about my life with others. It has connected people and cultures, and has given individuals the potential to have spheres of influence of which they could not achieve without this technology. However, when I was a youth minister I quickly discovered something about myself in relation to social media with which I was not comfortable. I sacrificed *knowing* my students for knowing *about* my students. I would scroll through Facebook and check in on everybody. When I would see them next, I found that there was not much to talk about other than telling them that I saw what they were sharing online. A depth of connection was lost because I was always connected.

In a personal experiment I removed myself from social media. I wanted to have connections with people beyond the levels that social media offered. I found myself having to work much harder to maintain relationships. I also lost out on some opportunities for influence whether it be through sharing articles or entering into conversations that were held exclusively online. However, I found that the relationships at which I had to work harder to maintain were much richer. Our actual, not virtual, time together was full, and we sought opportunities for more of it. I saw loneliness across the spectrum of people who maintained an active online presence, and I thought there was something important about my decision to abstain.

My decision to stay away from social media has affected many areas of my life. In the summer of 2016, members of the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church, of which I am a member, proposed a controversial resolution called “Social Media Guidelines for

Clergy and Congregational Leaders”<sup>1</sup> that did not pass. The proposal was meant to give clergy and churches a guide on what is proper to post on the internet as representatives of the church. It was controversial because clergy and laity thought that the conference was trying to police what they saw as freedom of speech. While listening to the debate, and with my own relationship with social media in my mind, I wondered why no one was asking the question of *should* clergy and congregational leaders be on social media. It was accepted as a given. My question has led me to several places, but it was when I had a conversation with a college student about the Bible that I began to understand the new paradigm in which churches find themselves.

When I asked the student about the Bible, he immediately began quoting popular authors and what they had to say about the Bible. I realized that he did not know the Bible, but knew a lot about the Bible. We are living in what some call the Age of Information where anyone can access any kind of knowledge they seek. However, I think our desire to know a lot about a lot of things has prevented us from knowing things. Psalm 46:10 (NRSV) says, “Be still, and know that I am God!” Psalm 46 is a Psalm of trust in God’s hand being upon those who are under siege. There is danger at the gates, and the Psalm repetitively reaffirms God’s presence and God’s power. In the commentary of the *Interpreter’s Bible* it says of verses 8-11, “The brash, self-confidence boast, the pose and the ostentation of the proud man, are his efforts to conceal a subconscious sense of insecurity.”<sup>2</sup> The new technological wave we are experiencing particularly through social media fuels much of our insecurities, and the Psalm calls us to remember that God

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<sup>1</sup> “Social Media Guidelines for Clergy and Congregational Leaders,” *North Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church*, updated February 2016, accessed March 10, 2017, <http://www.ngum-c.org/files/fileslibrary/communications/social+media+guidelines+2016.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> J.R.P. Sclater, Edwin McNeill Poteat, and Frank H. Ballard, “The Book of Psalms,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. George Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955), 4: 243.

holds power in creation. This project is an attempt to follow those verses as a foundation. I will analyze relationships with technology that keep us constantly distracted, constantly moving, and satisfied with knowing about God, but limits our capacity of vulnerability and trust to our digitally connected existence.

### Constant Connectivity

American Christians are now living in a world of constant connectivity. While working with college students I found this to be immediately true as the students with whom I was in ministry never really knew a time before they and their families were constantly connected. I soon discovered that they were "digital natives" as so aptly described by Marc Prensky in his 2001 essay "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants:"

Today's students...represent the first generations to grow up with this new technology. They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, video games, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age...It is now clear that as a result of this ubiquitous environment and the sheer volume of their interaction with it, today's students *think and process information fundamentally differently* from their predecessors.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the fundamental differences Prensky goes on to describe are that digital natives prefer information very fast, prefer graphics before the text, constantly multi-task, and demand instant gratification in their learning. The natives social location in relation to technology is different than "digital immigrants," so it only makes sense that they view and practice things differently.

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<sup>3</sup> Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1," *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5, (October 2001): 1, accessed October, 2016, <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf>.

The new paradigm of our constant connectivity through technology is affecting people generally, but the focus of this project will be its specific effects on the lived faith of people in Christian community. Constant connectivity through technology is deteriorating our ability to be in community with one another, which is knocking down a central pillar of the way faith is practiced, in community.

Social theorists are continually finding out that our current tidal wave of new technologies is affecting all generations in many different arenas and ways. It is affecting us socially, psychologically, and even physiologically. Nicholas Carr writes extensively about this in his book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*. Carr compares this current seismological shift of constant connectivity to the shift from an oral culture to a written one. The past shift was also aided by new technology in the invention of the printing press. He calls the old way of thinking the “linear mind.” Describing the shift in which we find ourselves, he writes, “Calm, focused, undistracted, the linear mind is being pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts—the faster, the better.”<sup>4</sup> Because the way we communicate with one another is changing, all of the means of communication are changing as well. Television shows that used to be linear are now more disjointed and scattered. Programs and advertisements have set themselves up to look like webpages, and fan interaction has become a central component of any kind of performance. There are even some live theatre performances that reserve “tweet seats” for audience members to interact with Twitter even though they are physically at a performance. “It refers to something you’d find in an area of a theatre—usually a back row—reserved for those sad souls who simply

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<sup>4</sup> Nicolas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 10, Kindle edition.

can't stand a nanosecond away from their smartphones and who want to send their Twitter followers a blow-by-blow account of the progress of the show."<sup>5</sup>

Carr builds off a thinker who in retrospect seems like a modern Nostradamus. Marshall McLuhan wrote *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* in 1964. The first chapter of his book states, "In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the *medium is the message*."<sup>6</sup> Carr extrapolates upon McLuhan's tremendous insight by stating, "What both enthusiast and skeptic miss is what McLuhan saw: that in the long run a medium's content matters less than the medium itself in influencing how we think and act. As our window onto the world, and onto ourselves, a popular medium molds what we see and how we see it-and eventually, if we use it enough, it changes who we are, as individuals and as a society."<sup>7</sup>

It is not the creation of the internet that has changed us, but our using of the creation, because, to take McLuhan's point, the use of the tools we create have more of an effect on us than their content. As an example, compare a page in a book to a webpage. In a book there is a linear progression of the eye and the mind. Not only does one read left to right on the page, but also in the turning of the page. It is a linear process of thought with each point building to the next. On a webpage, there may be a linear block of text in the middle, but there is also an image

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<sup>5</sup> Rupert Christiansen, "Why theatre seats of Twitter Junkies is a #goodidea," *The Telegraph*, October 17, 2014. Accessed October 3, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/11169040/Why-theatre-seats-for-Twitter-junkies-is-a-goodidea.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (Berkeley: Gingko Press, 2013), 23.

<sup>7</sup> Carr, *The Shallows*, 3 (emphasis mine).

associated with it eliminating the imagination and guiding a conclusion. There may also be advertisements along the side or popping up in the middle breaking the linear thought. There are hyperlinks that can let you jump from a single word or idea to a completely different place than where the author wanted. According to Carr, "What we're experiencing is, in a metaphorical sense, a reversal of the early trajectory of civilization: we are evolving from being cultivators of personal knowledge to being hunters and gatherers in the electronic data forest."<sup>8</sup> Just the medium of the content shows the shift from concentrated attention to scattered distraction; "our attachment to any one text becomes more tenuous, more provisional."<sup>9</sup>

Our constant connectivity is changing us, especially as more people have access to technology and access their content through the Internet. Society in general has accepted that this change is good and only a natural progression. More people have more access to information and cultures than ever before. An individual's reach can travel all around the world in an instant through the massive connectivity of the Internet. People can receive free promotion of products and ideas that are important to them through this reach, and do not depend on the "taste makers" to tell them what is important, leaving the individual with more autonomy and choice. Entire movements have happened because of connectivity, like both the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street<sup>10</sup> just to name two. Despite its benefits, I still think our acquiescence to the age of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>10</sup> Both the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street were large social movements that were organized and launched mainly through online social media connection. The Arab Spring was democratic uprisings against totalitarian governments in many countries throughout the Arab World. Occupy Wall Street was a movement where people camped in prominent places throughout the United States trying to bring light to the concentration of wealth among the country's top one percent of citizens.

information is concerning. Despite our newfound connection, we have become more distracted and more isolated, but many are unaware of it.

Sherry Turkle is a sociologist who is exploring the meaning of technology's effects and wrote a book called, *Alone Together*. The subtitle and conclusion of the book is this: "We expect more from technology and less from each other."<sup>11</sup> After interviewing many people about their online behaviors and opinions, Turkle came to understand that this new constantly connected and distracted way of life is not preferred, but people are resigned to it. She writes, "Teenagers seem to feel that things should be different but are reconciled to a new kind of life."<sup>12</sup> Continuing to build on McLuhan's insight that "all matters—some delicate, some not—are crammed into a medium that quickly communicates a state but is not well suited for opening a dialogue about complexity of feeling."<sup>13</sup> Turkle visited all kinds of places people go online and saw all of the ways we are connected, or, as she puts it, "tethered." She visited Second Life, online confessionals, social media sites, and chat rooms and came away with the same conclusion; that most people who are constantly active on these sites are maintaining a curated online presence. Their activity leaves them in a constant state of anxiety while at the same time removes them from actual relationships.

Even after interviewing people who are deeply immersed in online connection, Turkle found that people still felt lonely. She says, "The ties we form through the Internet are not, in the end, the ties that bind. But they are the ties that preoccupy. We text each other at family dinners,

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<sup>11</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), Location 161, Kindle edition.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 268.



while we jog, while we drive, as we push our children on swings in the park."<sup>14</sup> To describe this constantly connected reality in which we find ourselves, many have turned to addiction language. People facetiously talk about how they are addicted to their phone or to social media. Turkle thinks this is accurate in some ways because we exhibit the behaviors of an addict, but, "the idea of addiction, with its one solution that we know we won't take, makes us feel hopeless."<sup>15</sup> Not satisfied to leave the conversation there, she continues,

We have invented inspiring and enhancing technologies, and yet we have allowed them to diminish us. The prospect of loving, or being loved by, a machine changes what love can be. We know that the young are tempted. They have been brought up to be. Those who have known lifetimes of love can surely offer them more.<sup>16</sup>

The situation I have described is a reality that is lived through constant connection in technology and is making us more distracted and lonely. There is a litany of other theorists, filmmakers, and thinkers who have come to similar conclusions, yet, there are scant attempts at a solution. I am under no delusion that there is a silver bullet approach to this. I do not think anything that claims it is a one-stop solution is taking into account the massiveness of the Internet and its effects. Constant connectivity has become engrained in our world. If it is an actual addiction for some, they may never know it because it is shrugged off as reality. We are so entangled in and by our technologies that it is going to take discipline and practice to put ourselves in right relationship with them. I think practices in the Bible and of the church can move us in the direction many say they want to go: an authentic life lived with meaning. I

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 295.

believe community as I have already described it is what people are searching for on the Internet, but it has been found wanting. Therefore, the church can offer a biblical picture of community that can address the ways we are being changed, and bring us back into personal relationship with one another.

## Community

Community is a concept that has been at the heart of the church since it began. Community is woven into the church's character from its beginning and in its theological formulation of the Trinity. The disciples showed love for one another and those they met as they walked with Jesus. When others were concerned with hierarchical structure and propriety, Jesus ate with sinners and touched the untouchable. Following his example of ministry, the disciples established the church and held things in common. (Acts 4:32, NRSV) They took care of the sick, gave to the poor, and shared food. Very early on, the disciples had to establish some kind of structure of their community because they were getting bogged down in the details of the ministry acts they were performing and did not have time for prayer and evangelism. (Acts 6)

At its theological level, the God to whom Christians pray is a community. The Trinity is how Christians believe in God. Trinity, in all of its iterations, is one God in a community of persons.<sup>17</sup> Richard Rohr believes that there needs to be a resurgence of Trinitarian understanding in Christian churches to counteract the creeping individualism that plagues it. Rohr writes, "If we take the depiction of God in The Trinity seriously, we have to say, 'In the beginning was the

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<sup>17</sup> The term "persons" is used to label the three different aspects of the Trinity. There are several different titles for the three persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer; e.g.), but person is used to describe the three distinct parts of the Trinity while still maintaining the oneness of God.

relationship.”<sup>18</sup> The relationship within the concept of the Christian God is what calls Christ followers to community. Rohr continues, “At the heart of Christian revelation, God is not seen as a distant, static monarch but—as we will explore together—a divine circle dance, as the early Fathers of the church dared to call it (In Greek, perichoresis, the origin of our word choreography). God is the Holy One presented in the dynamic and loving action of Three.”<sup>19</sup>

It is also important to note that a community at its most basic level is made of multiple people gathered together in some way. For instance, “the church in the strict sense is found where there is a specific group of people who assemble together to call on the name of the Lord in prayer and fellowship.”<sup>20</sup> The church as a Christian community has faith in Jesus as its organizing principal, and arranges itself around that principle in some shared way. Community is not just a Christian concept, however. It is also a basic part of being human. Humans long for community: biologically, mentally, culturally, and spiritually. It is why humans have organized themselves in groups all around the world. Wendell Berry offers a clear picture of the form and function of community:

A community identifies itself by an understood mutuality of interests. But it lives and acts by the common virtues of trust, goodwill, forbearance, self-restraint, compassion, and forgiveness. If it hopes to continue long as a community, it will wish to—and will have to—encourage respect for all stations and occupations. Such a community has the power—not invariably but as a rule—to enforce decency without litigation. It has the power, that is, to influence behavior. And it exercises this power not by coercion or violence but by

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (New Kensington: Whitaker House, 2016), Location 423, Kindle edition.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 439.

<sup>20</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 23, Kindle edition.

teaching the young and by preserving stories and songs that tell (among other things) what works and what does not work in a given place.<sup>21</sup>

Christian community gathers around Jesus Christ and seeks to follow his example in how to identify themselves, how to determine what is acceptable behavior, and how to pray. My focus on Christian community for the purposes of this project started from an analysis of weekly communion services on a college campus. When I asked one of the students, a sophomore who regularly attended services the year before we started taking weekly communion, how communion changed our worship, he said that he felt more connected to the people around him. He was not just singing the words on the screen or listening to me preach, but that he looked into the eyes of those around him. After that comment, I found that the service of Lord and Table II found in the United Methodist Hymnal, which was the pattern we used for those weekly communion services, actually describes what happens in Christian community.<sup>22</sup>

The service starts with invitation. There needs to be an agreed upon time and space where people gather. The invitation accomplishes this and gathers people together. Then there is confession and pardon. A community is open with one another, as we are open to God, and practices forgiveness. A community that is not honest with one another or holds resentment is not strongly connected. Then the people offer peace to one another and make an offering. There is relief that is offered through confession and pardoning. There are actions that are taken, but to strengthen the community there also needs to be giving to the community. Community members who only receive but do not give are not fully involved with the gathering. Then, in response to

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<sup>21</sup> Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 120.

<sup>22</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 12.

this formation of a community, the gathered participate in The Great Thanksgiving, which is a confession and prayer of what makes us followers of Christ in the participation of his sacrifice for us. By organizing, offering, confession, and prayer a gathering of people become community.

Stanley Hauerwas calls the formation of community the thing that we ultimately seek, and is the motivation for our actions, stating, "For finally what we seek is not power, or security, or equality, or even dignity, but a sense of worth gained from participation and contribution to a common adventure."<sup>23</sup> I agree with Hauerwas here because some of the most passionate people I see identify with a common cause. There are many examples of this in our world in politics, occupation, and sports. Formative development of the Christian faith happens in community. People form their lives around other organizing principals, which is why community is a basic part of being human, but Christians make community in Christ the bedrock of our practice. The Christian gives themselves to the community living in the story of God, embodying Hauerwas' notion that "what is crucial is not that Christians know the truth, but that they be the truth."<sup>24</sup>

However, in Biblical times as well as today, the practice of community gets out of balance. As an example, Paul writes his letters to the Corinthians because they were arguing about their community: who was truly a follower of Jesus Christ and who was not, based upon their practice. People were being told to wait outside the church doors, and some were even claiming that their conversion was not valid. It is usually when hierarchy and individualism infest the basic conceptions of community that the church community begins to break down. People begin to focus on their status within the community and follow an individual ethic, rather

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<sup>23</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971), 13.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

than keep the community as a whole as their guiding principle. For example, when Paul wrote his letter detailing and outlining the gifts of the spirit, it was to a situation where people were saying their gifts were better than someone else's gift. Some argued, for example, that speaking in tongues showed greater blessing from God than having eloquence. It is to this situation that Paul writes that all of these account for nothing if there is not love for one another. (1 Corinthians 13). He is recalibrating the church by appealing to their shared understanding. The love of God in Christ is how they have life. When that concept is made the pillar of a communal organization, then the community is stable. The scale can tip, however, as sin and idolatry disconnect people from God and one another. James Fowler, in *Stages of Faith* writes, "Real idolatry, in the Jewish and Christian traditions, does not have to do with the worship of statues or pagan altars. Idolatry is rather the profoundly serious business of committing oneself or betting one's life on finite centers of value and power as the source of one's (or one's group's) confirmation of worth and meaning, and as the guarantor of survival with quality."<sup>25</sup>

In our modern context, community formation has taken a backseat to the development of the individual. This shift has been happening since the invention of a new technology at the time, the printing press. In the book *Flickering Pixels*, Shane Hipps writes,

Community in the print age has been understood primarily as a collection of discrete individuals working concurrently on their personal relationships with Jesus. The church became a thousand points of light and lost sight of itself as the body of Christ—a living, breathing entity whose power is derived from the whole, not the sum of its parts. Under the influence of the print age, our experience of faith gradually moves from something that is personal to something private.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperOne, 1981), 18.

<sup>26</sup> Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 57, Kindle edition.

What we are currently seeing in churches is a gathering of individuals in the same place, but not gathering to become something else. Churches have put a big emphasis on discipleship training so the individual can learn to follow Jesus, and many churches have also begun calling themselves a family of faith rather than a community. There is a big difference between family and community, as a person is born into a family but chooses to be a part of a community. A community is also organized around something whereas a family comes into existence biologically.

The long trend toward individualism has led churches to focus on an individual's spirituality without burdening them with community. To be a part of a community you are expected to give of yourself to it as an offering. There was once a time when the community even gathered to read the Scripture, because there were only so many copies that could be read by only so many people, and part of that gathering was the expectation that you give of your money to be a part of it. Part of the genius of John Wesley's church organization is that there was a financial expectation to be part of a Methodist society. In John Wesley's organization the classes of individuals shared themselves completely with the others, and those small communities were the basic building blocks of the church. There was not a single benefactor identified in an area to start a Methodist society, but a community committed to one another. Joining a Methodist society had implications on the life of the individual. There were financial, behavioral, and societal expectations communicated to the person who desired to be a part of the Methodist movement.

The danger to the church with the move away from community and all of its requirements to a gathering of a group of individuals and nurturing their individual spirituality is

that the church is being consistently undermined. It is here again that Berry expresses the current state of things: "The community, wherever you look, is being destroyed by the desires and ambitions of both private and public life, which for want of the intervention of community interests are also destroying one another. Community life is by definition a life of cooperation and responsibility. Private life and public life, without the disciplines of community interest, necessarily gravitate toward competition and exploitation."<sup>27</sup> When churches replace community and their place within local communities with a focus on the individual, then they are losing their foundational voice. I think this is the reason we are seeing more "spiritual but not religious" types in the world, and also why mega churches are just getting larger and the overall religious landscape is waning.<sup>28</sup> Authentic Christian community, the shared life together organized around Jesus Christ, requires more of a vulnerable connection than our shallow connection through our technological tethers allow.

In a recent book, *Fresh Expressions of Church*, Travis Collins showcases an attempt being made by many faith communities around the world to be church within the new reality of technological innovation. Collins writes, "A giant cultural wave has swept the North American church into a brand new world—a pluralistic, complicated, jaded, *high tech, low-touch world*."<sup>29</sup> The high tech, low-touch world has led to disastrous result. In a recent New York Times article published just before the 2016 presidential election the author writes, "You would think that

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<sup>27</sup> Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 121.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Lipka, "5 key findings about the changing U.S. Religious Landscape," *Fact Tank*, May 12, 2015, accessed January 19th, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/5-key-findings-u-s-religious-landscape/>.

<sup>29</sup> Travis Collins, *Fresh Expressions of Church* (Franklin: Seedbed, 2015), 25 (emphasis mine).



greater primary documentation would lead to a better cultural agreement about the ‘truth.’ In fact, the opposite has happened.”<sup>30</sup> People now seek, and find, anything that supports their already held biases. We have seen the playing out of Berry’s prediction that the breakdown of community leads to competition and exploitation where there are no standards of truth, only what sounds good in individual echo chambers.

### Effects on Faith and Solution

Constant connectivity through the Internet has proved to be a poor substitute for lived community, yet many feel resigned to it. One of the problems with social media, as explained by Sherry Turkle, is that the online life is a curated life. Thought and deliberation goes into what is shared and not shared, and the curated presence precludes vulnerability and trust. Social media isolates us from being vulnerable with one another, which in turn has a detrimental effect on the practice of community.

However, I think the church can offer a solution to the problem not only by placing communal behaviors of prayer, confession, offering, and gathering into their practice, but also by practicing the discipline of fasting. These are practices put in place in the early church that have largely been abandoned by the contemporary church, but I think have relevance to the situation in which we find ourselves. Church communities should no longer be satisfied with knowing *about* God or knowing *about* our neighbors, but seek to *know* God and *know* our neighbors.

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<sup>30</sup> Farhad Manjoo, “How the Internet is Loosening our Grip on the Truth,” *New York Times*, November 2nd, 2016, Accessed November 3rd, 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/03/technology/how-the-internet-is-loosening-our-grip-on-the-truth.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/03/technology/how-the-internet-is-loosening-our-grip-on-the-truth.html?_r=0).

In Phyllis Tickle's book *The Great Emergence*, she shows how the church undergoes a significant change, usually associated with an advent of a new technology.<sup>31</sup> Following her logic, I do not think it is a stretch to say the church is undergoing a significant change due to our current technological shift. Larger churches continue to get larger, but the overall commitment to a church community is declining. Churches can now be compared to the way people used to buy albums of music, but now buy mp3s. Whereas the ministries of which you were a part were connected to one church, now people will go to several churches based upon their ministry offerings. It is not uncommon for someone to send their infant to a preschool at the Methodist church, go to a daytime Bible study at the Baptist church, and worship at the non-denominational campus. I think this disjointedness is related to the fragmentation of our lives that we experience in constant Internet connectivity. I often observed college students who would spend significant amounts of time sitting with other people, but were constantly somewhere else on their devices. I even feel my own life disjointed when asked to video record my daughters singing in a choir so that we can share it with others later. I think community realized through a period of prayer and fasting from constant connectivity will reconnect our faith communities.

I propose we fast from constantly being connected, which is not easy in the current context. When I first proposed fasting from social media to a group of college students they, in their zeal, enthusiastically agreed, but soon began to point to all of the areas in which it would be impossible to keep their fast. Social media did not exist more than fifteen years ago with the beginnings of MySpace, yet it has become indispensable for life. I joked with some of them that these excuses probably would not be as prevalent if I had asked them to fast from food, one of

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<sup>31</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 15.

the basics of life, but they simply shrugged their shoulders. I heard frequently throughout the fasting period that they “had” to get on social media because it was the only place they could access something. Not only has social media become ubiquitous, it seems that it has become indispensable, and necessary for life.

Constant connectivity leads to distraction, which keeps us from paying attention to one another and keeps us from realizing community. In order to practice community, we must pay attention to one another. There is general agreement that the current generation of youth and young adults are more narcissistic than previous ones, but I think it is because we have given ourselves over to the tools that make us so. We live experiences through sharing them with those who are not there, which displaces us from where we are. In speaking about praying for our enemies or laying on of hands or washing someone's feet, Barbara Brown Taylor says,

If you have ever done any of these things, then you know that it is just about impossible to do them without suffering a sudden onset of reverence. They accomplish this, I think, by giving you something so important to do that you are entirely captured by the present moment for once. For once, you are not looking through them, or around them, toward the next thing, which will become see-through in its turn. For once, you are giving yourself entirely to what is right in front of you, and what is right in front of you is returning the favor so that reverence is all but unavoidable.<sup>32</sup>

Simone Weil also shows us that "we do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them"<sup>33</sup> If we desire these precious gifts of God and reverence for God,

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<sup>32</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (New York: Harper One, 2009), 29.

<sup>33</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting For God* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1951), 62.

God's creation, and our Christian community, we must wait and pay attention, which is nearly impossible to do in a constantly connected and distracted culture.

I am turning to the practice of fasting because something significant should be done to both make us realize the state in which we live and to reorient our communal life. We cannot know the extent of our problem until we are convicted of it. If constant connectivity is the only reality to which we have subscribed, then we need to see there are other ways life can be lived. According to an analysis of New Testament practices of fasting, "Fasting may be a means of gaining spiritual authority or an aid in resisting temptation to sin."<sup>34</sup> In the book, *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says, "More than any other Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ."<sup>35</sup> When people begin to talk about how they are addicted to social media or their devices, we can assuredly say that there are things that control us. Fasting, when done in the right spirit of being reminded that God sustains us, reveals all of the false gods to which we have pledged our allegiance.

A fast from social media will also rebalance lives that seem to constantly run between two poles and wonder why they can never be still. Graham Standish uses the image of "the divine fulcrum." If there is a board resting on a fulcrum that represents our life, we keep running to opposite ends and so never achieve balance that would happen if we centered over the fulcrum. In speaking of American Christians he says, "We constantly feel the need to appease the gods of hurry, acquire, do, gratify, stimulate, accomplish, achieve, be noticed, obtain, and

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<sup>34</sup> S.H. Matthews, *Christian Fasting: Biblical and Evangelical Perspectives* (London: Lexington Books, 2015), 136.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1978), 55.

attain.”<sup>36</sup> All of the verbs in the previous quote can be achieved using the engine of social media. Standish’s book was written in 2002, just before the social media explosion, and even then our idols of distraction and imbalance were hurting faith communities. Then, through our technologies, constant connectivity engrained those idols even further into the fabric of life. Fasting is a practice to which Christians and Christ himself have turned to reprioritize and rebalance the life of faith.

### Proposed Project

Richard Rohr writes in *The Divine Dance*, “I’m convinced that beneath the ugly manifestations of our present evils-political corruption, ecological devastation, warring against one another, hating each other based on race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation—the greatest dis-ease facing humanity right now is our profound and painful sense of disconnection. Disconnection from God, certainly, but also from ourselves (our bodies), from each other, and from our world.”<sup>37</sup> Because of the problems of our constantly connected world and its effects on the church, I have written a curriculum that helps people fast from social media and connect with one another in small groups. It is a six-week fast that lets people define their level of connectivity and dial it down. Just staying off of a personal Facebook page while still maintaining work social media relationships, for example, is one of the many iterations of how people can participate in the fast. Members of the group may also choose not to fast, but are asked to take notice of the

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<sup>36</sup> N. Graham Standish, *Discovering the Narrow Path* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 48.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (New Kensington: Whitaker House, 2016), Location 569, Kindle edition.

change in those who do. The irony of the proposal is not lost on me. In order to address the problem of disconnection, I ask people to disconnect from social media, one of the main vehicles they use to connect with others. However, as I hope I have shown, our constant connectivity as it is made manifest actually reinforces our disconnection with one another.

Luke 4:1-13, Jesus' temptation in the wilderness before he begins his Galilean ministry, is scripture that served as a main motivation of this work. First, because the discipline of fasting is prominent in the story, but also because there is a particular temptation that I think lines up with the temptation of constant connectivity, Luke writes, "Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" (Luke 4: 5-8, NRSV)

The longing for influence and power has been a problem in our relationship with God for a significant amount of time. Jesus could have influenced a lot of people and ushered in eons of peace if he had authority over all of the kingdoms. Just like with our constant connectivity we can point to the large sphere of influence, constant flow of information, and instant mobilization as reasons for its use, but it still would not keep God in the position of authority. Things have gotten out of balance in our constantly connected world. Our communities of faith do not know how to continue their practices of community and thus become islands unto themselves pointing at worship attendance and sphere of influence as markers of a successful church. However, this fast will hopefully help people reorient their lives to God and one another in such a way that authentic community is once again realized.

I had three groups practice the six-week fast at different locations at three different times. The first group consisted of ten college students at Reinhardt University, where I served as chaplain from 2013-2016. They fasted during Lent of 2016, and I wrote a weekly devotional guide and emailed it to them each Wednesday during the fast. The second group is a young adult Sunday school class at the church I currently serve, Creekside United Methodist Church. The third group was staff and laypeople at a church in North Carolina, with whom I have never personally interacted.

#### Reinhardt Students

I provided the students a journal and asked them to write about their experiences. I told them at the beginning and throughout that if they would like to share their thoughts and the journal with me then I could continue to incorporate their thoughts and challenges during the fast.

The results were quite interesting. When I told colleagues about what I was doing many of them wondered how I was going to convince college students, “the digital natives” of our world, to give up social media for any length of time. It turns out that many jumped at the chance to be away from it. As I had found in conversations, many students are resigned to its use, but do not like its power over their lives. Their problem is that they do not see an alternative. Social media is where their friends are, and where they hear news, and how they stay in connection with one another. Many lament its necessity, but are not actively seeking an alternative.

Other than the instruction to stay off of social media and write about your experience, I did not provide much by the way of instruction. If they asked a question about what could or

could not be done, or what is considered social media, I told them to trust their own discernment. Just as when fasting from food, I told them to fast from social media so that they were hungry. They needed to feel its absence from their life.

The scriptures I chose for their weekly readings were all based upon the discipline of fasting and prayer. I started with the Scripture I already mentioned, Jesus fasting in the wilderness and experiencing temptation by the Devil, Luke 4:1-15. From that starting point the participants read Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus' instructions on fasting; Luke 24:36-43, Jesus' appearance to the disciples in Galilee; Acts 10:1-11:18, Peter and Cornelius; Psalm 63, Psalm of desire for God; and Mark 2:18-22, the question of why Jesus' disciples do not fast. I wanted the participants to get as full a picture of fasting as possible, while also encouraging their own embodiment in the world.

The results were impressive. The students were led to the experiences I hoped for them, and they changed their outlook on social media's effects on their lives. The behaviors that are necessary for prayer and community were realized. One student wrote, "I'm finding that I've missed having in-person conversations and am re-learning how to be a good conversationalist as well as a listener. Most importantly a listener." A few weeks into the fast the same student writes, "One thing I have noticed through this fast is that I think more completely than in short, witty blurbs that I'd post. I yearn for conversations about life, want to listen to others." Her experience, I think, is a realization that her connections on Facebook (her social media of choice) did not satisfy her need for community. She expresses the state of many in our world that while she is constantly connected to seemingly endless information and numbers of people, she is missing authentic communion with others. What she shares on Facebook and what she sees other people



share are not the important details in life, and while it gives her satisfaction in the same way junk food satisfies hunger, it does not give her sustenance. Another student shared, “I’m starting to think that social media makes me mindless. Its like I get caught up in things that don’t really make a difference in my life.” She also realized a new sense of community with her friends, writing, “I enjoy being able to talk about things that aren’t gossip.”

Another student realized the filters that she was putting on her life and others, stating, “I really want for this time of no social media to be a time for not only me to grow closer to God, but also continue to figure out who I am without the filter of a social media post.” Vulnerability is necessary to community, because the community needs to know one another. A theological lens for this is the Incarnation: God’s vulnerability in God’s love for God’s creation in order to save it. We trust in the goodness of God because we trust in God’s love of us. Filters on our lives make us suspicious of one another, and it even goes beyond the personal where we have become suspicious of anything we have heard, making us retreat to our echo chambers.

The same student had an experience in her fasting from social media that gets at the heart of the fast:

I’m not being overly vocal about being off social media. In fact, most people don’t know. Like one of my track teammates asked if I had seen her post on Instagram, and I then had to tell her no. This led to her having to tell me what was going on in her life face to face, which actually led to a much deeper conversation than had I just read an Instagram post.

Because this student was not maintaining her curated connections through social media, she was able to make a genuine connection with another person in her community.

It was my hope that the fast would deepen the students’ prayer lives as it strengthened their community, but not many expressed that experience. Many relayed that they were less

distracted and more present in their lived life, but did not express this in their prayer life. One student did say, “Because there are less distractions, time spent with God is more intentional, because our mind wanders less.” One thing in which I was disappointed is that many, after completing the fast, quickly reconnected their lives. It is common knowledge that social media is not going anywhere, but I hoped that its use would be much more intentional after the fast. I plan to address this with instruction on how to reintroduce social media into their lives, possibly with an intentional assessment at the end of the fast.

#### Young Adult Class

A second group that participated in the fast was a young adult Sunday school class. Most work full time and are parents of young children, and have been a Sunday school class together for about five years. I convinced the leaders of the class to do the fast and it was communicated to the class that this is what they will be doing, so it did not translate as fully to all the participants as I would have liked. Many did not believe constant connectivity was a difficulty in their life and saw too many possible detriments to their life to participate.

For those that did, however, the fast was meaningful. For this group I wrote an introduction to try and convince them that by doing this fast they would gain more of a sense of spiritual and community balance in their lives. I also wrote more explicit instructions and advice on how to fast from constant connectivity and did not limit it only to social media. The motivation behind this group was different, as can be expected because they are in a different stage of life. This is a group that was already tightly connected, as they have been a Sunday school class together for several years. They share prayer requests together. They have also

celebrated births, prayed through transitions, and have mourned deaths together. They already do many things to tightly bond them together as a community. They also do not consider themselves digital natives, and none of them would begin to use addiction language when it comes to their social media use. The distinction between the Sunday school class and the college students is that they are already a community of faith whereas the community formation was a hoped-for result for the college students.

To a degree, however, this makes the fast more important to them than college students. College students are still in an inquisitive stage of life where they are trying to form friend groups and make lasting decisions. This makes them more open to changes within their life routines than others who are more established. The young adults in this Sunday school class are married, have children, and mortgages. They have jobs that will not relocate them to another part of the country, and they have established themselves as part of a church body. Convincing them to reassess their constant connectivity as a means of strengthening their community may be more difficult than with college students, but I think it is necessary. It is necessary because as the religious landscape is changing, people who are in the churches need to be best equipped to handle the challenges churches are going to face. To address this particular challenge I think the participants need to go through an assessment of their Internet connectivity, and discern its place in their life. Some are hardly on social media, but find themselves checking sports scores constantly. The ability to distract ourselves at any time has removed some people from personal interaction, and the participants in this group needed to be made aware of when this is happening.

The scriptures remained the same for this group, but I more explicitly gave them a guide for prayer. I included time of silence and instructions on how to make that happen in a culture that seems to have noise everywhere. I also put guided questions into their weekly readings and left space for the participants to write down their insights with the purpose of them sharing it with the class. I also organized the study into packets because unlike with the college students, I was not present every week to guide them through the fast. Instead, I left that to their regular Sunday school teachers, which challenged me to make things much more clear because they only had what I gave them and did not have the benefit of the theory, theology, and reading behind the study.

I sat in on one group discussion during their fast just to observe the conversation. What I found interesting about that experience is the participants did not do what they were instructed, which is to share their personal insights and story with the members of their class thus, hopefully, creating a tightly knit community. Instead, they spent a lot of time pointing out how the digital natives in their lives exhibited the problems pointed out with constant connectivity, but did not see problems in their own behavior. This is disappointing, but makes sense. The problem I have identified of constant connectivity eroding community is a vast problem, and thus hard to recognize among ourselves. To address this, I think more explicit instructions should be given to the facilitator of the small group discussions to guide conversation back to personal behaviors. The participants did not recognize the constant connectivity in themselves, so more pastoral guidance is needed.

Another difference in implementation of the fast in the Sunday school group is I created a pre and post survey for the participants. I did this so I could find out if they changed throughout

the course of the fast, but also so I could view where they were in relation to the problem of constant connectivity. Most said that they did not think they had a problem with social media. Many also refused to participate in the fast because the use of social media was too important for their work and their lives. Some had fasted from food before, but did not find it particularly meaningful. The ones who had not fasted before had never really considered it something in which they should participate. However, when comparing their pre-survey to their post survey, most were surprised at the disparity between their perception of their social media use and the reality. They correctly identified the total amount of time they usually spent through connective technologies, but were surprised to learn how much of that time came from quickly checking their phone at all times all throughout the day. Many people found that they were filling every second of down time with scrolling through their phone. It is a different form of distraction than the college students were experiencing. The young adults did not feel that their phone pulled them away from the present moment, but instead took up their attention as soon as it was free.

Even though many in the Sunday school class did not feel that a fast from technology was as necessary for them as it is for digital natives, many found it more difficult than what I perceived from the college students. They found it was more difficult to break their constant connectivity habits. This may also have to do with their stage in life. The connections the adults use in their life are there for a reason and not just because it is what everybody else has. This made the fast more meaningful, and I think the discoveries were more profound. When asked at the end of the fast, what did you learn about God and/or the Bible that you discovered through the fast, one person responded, “For me I saw that when I am in constant relationship and communication with God I feel so much more connected across all relationships in my life. It

also opened new connections and relationships for me.” My analysis of this statement is that when the means of constantly knowing about things was taken away, they were more free to get to know God, themselves, and others. Another person discovered, “That I do not make time to read the Bible. It’s not that I don’t have the time. If I have the time to devote 30 minutes to FB (Facebook) each evening, then I have the time to read the Bible. It’s all about priorities.” This says that the people who participated in the fast discovered how much time constant connectivity actually takes, and what it supplants.

In the conclusion of the devotional guide I encourage the participants to be intentional about how they reintroduce social media, or whatever iteration of it, back into their lives. Taking cues from guides on how to fast from food, I say that to all of a sudden go back to what you always ate will be a shock to your system. One participant said, “I turned off notifications on my phone, and I am trying to be more conscious about just staring at my phone whenever I’m not doing something else. I plan to spend more time in silence, reflection, and prayer.” Another said, “I hope to continue to be very intentional and keep my focus on my relationship with God and others to keep growing them to be even stronger.” I am encouraged by these words. Even though the class went through the study at the direction of their teachers at my request, I feel it made them more aware of their place in the community and how much they focus on their relationships with God and one another.

The results of the church in North Carolina were roughly the same as the young adult Sunday school class. They are around the same age and are all invested in a church. The pastor of the church did offer one insight that gives a nice summary of the fast:

Jesus said I came to give life abundantly. Unfortunately for me, the only abundance I ever experience was found in my inbox. Leading my congregation and staff in a technology fast allowed me to experience firsthand the beauty of the slow communication movement. After just a few weeks of fasting, I found I was no longer the quivering mass of electronic availability I once was, now I was a pastor who could be fully present and engaged with those things that mattered most. Now that I've experienced this kind of abundant life, I'm never going back.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

In the post survey I had an open question for the participants if they felt particularly strong about any aspect of their experience. One person said:

It made me more focused on my faith, specifically my prayer life. I found myself thinking differently. Anytime I wanted to reach for my phone to check Facebook I would stop and turn my focus on more important things like God, who I could be praying for, what I could be reading. It also made me focused on my relationships. Specifically with my daughter and being intentional and focused during my time with her. As well as time with my husband.

It is difficult to put into words how meaningful it is to hear these words. I believe that our culture has become disconnected and distracted through constant connectivity. It is not the fault of technology, but it is through our giving away of our responsibilities to technology that we have lost our abilities. Our relationships with one another are suffering because we do not allow ourselves to be vulnerable to another person or responsible for our brothers and sisters.

Vulnerability, accessibility, knowledge, and relationship are the things offered to us through Jesus Christ and we have given them away.

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<sup>38</sup> Rev. David Beam, e-mail message to author, January, 2017.

The participants in the fast from social media and an emphasis on prayer expressed that they felt less distracted and more connected. I think that if we could offer these same basic gifts to our churches then the depth of their worship and the strength of their communities would be something amazing. I believe it is the abundance that Christ offers, but we have given it away in the name of efficiency and surface relationships. My hope is that by offering this depth of relationship with God, as well as a confidence in promises of scripture that churches can be beacons of connection in their communities.



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## **\*Appendix A: Social Media Fast Devotional Guide**

### **Pre Social Media Fast Survey**

- 1) How much time do you think you spend per day interacting with social media?
  
- 2) What are the names of the people or places with which social media is your primary interaction? (e.g. Facebook groups, news sites, friends from out of town, etc.)?
  
- 3) What do you fear you will miss by being away from social media for this short time?
  
- 4) What will make it hard to keep this fast going? (Friends, alerts on your phone, etc.)?
  
- 5) What is your experience with fasting in general? Have you ever fasted before? What kind of fast did you do and how did it go?
  
- 6) If you have fasted, what spiritual benefits did you experience (if any)?
  
- 7) If you have not fasted, why not?
  
- 8) Have you ever journaled regularly or kept a diary?
  
- 9) What do you think the biggest challenge and benefit will be of this fast?

Five helpful tips on how to fast from social media.

- 1) *Tell people with whom you primarily interact with on social media that you are not going to be on it for a while.* If there is a work aspect of social media for you, try to find a way around it.

It is not forever, but it is a break. Give them your phone number in case they need it. I would not suggest making a general announcement on social media that you are taking a break from social media. Instead, make a list of people who are important to you and that you primarily interact with on social media and have a conversation with them.

2) *Delete the apps.* To put it in terms of fasting from food, you would not go to dinner at your favorite restaurant if you cannot eat anything there. The problem with these apps is that they are constantly bringing things up and pulling your attention toward them all the time. If you keep the app and stop using Facebook for a while, the app may even send you an alert wondering where you have been. Do not worry, you can get the apps back later. Also, change your settings within social media so that it does not email you.

3) *Take fewer pictures.* I know this one does not seem like it is related, but it is. One of the ways social media is most successful is that you can share pictures of your family or what you are doing with everyone at the same time. Try to be more intentional about when to take pictures and to whom you want to send them.

4) *Choose an outlet to get your news and information.* We have become a culture that relies on our information to be brought to us in the form of alerts and RSS feeds. Pick a place where you are going to go to keep yourself informed. Instead of signing up for breaking news alerts, many news outlets will offer a daily newsletter. By opting for the newsletter you can control the time you spend on information.

5) *Dedicate to prayer and journaling.* This will keep you focused and purposeful in your fast.

Week 1

One day I saw an advertisement for a company that claims it can train your brain to have better capacity for memory, vocabulary, math skills, etc with simple computer games on your phone all based on the science of neuroplasticity. I asked a friend, who is a computer science professor at one of the best schools in the world for computer science, if neuroplasticity is a real thing. He explained that neuroplasticity is a real thing, but those apps are a scam. It turns out that yes, our brains do change. It was a long held belief that this was not the case; that we were born and our brain developed, but it more or less worked the same way all throughout our lives. It was not until much later that scientists discovered that our brains change, and it is due to repetitive behaviors done over a long period of time that our brains actually function differently. Different neural pathways are opened or closed. This happens in basically the same way exercise builds your muscles. If you do a repeated action over and over, it will develop. However, if you do not use muscles for a long period of time, it will atrophy. This is a problem with our brains, if certain neural pathways are opened due to repeated use, then others are not used as much and we lose some abilities we may have already developed.

This is concerning for many reasons, but particularly for the church, an institution that has been practicing faith for thousands of years by developing community, worshipping, and reading. It is now undergoing a seismic shift in technology application that can be compared to the invention of the printing press. When Gutenberg turned his loom into a machine that could produce books at an exponentially faster rate than that which was painstakingly copied by hand, the world changed. Some scholars posit that the American and French revolutions can be attributed to this invention, because the rise in literacy and the dissemination of information was made available to the public. The Dark Ages gave way to the Age of Enlightenment and the Renaissance because people could print things.

The current shift in which we find ourselves may look a lot like the invention of the printing press, but we still do not know yet what the implications will be (though we do know it is

changing us). The internet is a wondrous invention. Anyone with access anywhere in the world can find anything anywhere else in the world through this World Wide Web, and with that access comes connection. I remember as an elementary school kid we would get 1000 free hours of on-line access from America Online in the mail. We did not have a computer with a modem at my house, but my neighbor down the street did, so all of us in the neighborhood amassed as many of these discs as we could find and took them over to his house. I remember the thrill of talking to complete strangers in chat rooms. We flirted with girls (or so we thought) in chat rooms, and could just simply walk away whenever we wanted. We could become instantly connected to anyone else in the world through the computer screen.

From the rise in internet usage, this connection was something that caused more people to get online. Not only could we send a letter electronically to someone whenever we wanted and it did not cost the exorbitant price of a postage stamp, but we could also get together in groups of similar interests spanning oceans and borders with the click of a mouse. We could watch movies and videos taken from around the world. With this desire for more connection, social media was born. Websites where you could get together with your friends and see what celebrities were doing became something that is a part of seemingly everyone's life. No longer did we need to put in the efforts of calling or writing to find out about our friends and family, instead it was delivered to us in complicated algorithms that could tell us what we liked and did not like instantly.

Among this technological shift, new inventions and possibilities have happened at an alarmingly fast rate. The entire way we educate students has changed. The way we consume things has changed. People who used to be anonymous can go viral, be on the news, and fade within one week. News and events you did not know about all on the other side of the world are now on your screen. The Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street happened because of organizers online. There is a change taking place among us and all around us. Constant connectivity, and the technology that brings it to us, is amazing, but what is it doing to us?

Because of its overwhelming and overarching narrative in our lives television programs have reformatted to look like websites, books are filled with online material and hyperlinks, likes on Facebook and retweets on Twitter are now a part of the morning news. I propose we take a break. Fasting is a spiritual discipline all throughout the Bible, and the main way it is presented in the Bible is through the absence of food. But the purpose of fasting sometimes gets lost. The purpose of fasting is to recalibrate our lives, take away things that have become too important so that we can focus on our relationship with our creator. When the thing that has become too important in our lives is taken away, we find that our prayer lives become more rich, and consequently our relationship with God grows. This is why Jesus often goes off by himself to pray. (Matthew 4: 1-2; Matthew 14:23; Mark 1:35; Mark 6: 46; and a host of others) . It is why fasting from work once a week is prescribed by God in the Ten Commandments. It is taking a break for the short term so that everything can be in its proper place, with God as primary.

This is why I think we should take a fast from constant connection. It has become all-inclusive and pervasive throughout our lives which shows its importance. It can be a good tool and it has benefits, just like food does, but has it become too important? That is a question you will answer for yourself as you take a break from it and focus that energy on your relationship with God and others.

*And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing in those days; and when they were ended, he was hungry. Luke 4:1-2.*

What follows is the pattern I want you to try while you are fasting. Please take time to commit to this three times a week. It does not take an extraordinarily long time and can be done at work or

at home. The structure comes from St. Ignatius' *Examen* which he did every day at the end of the day. It has been a wonderful pattern of prayer for me, and I hope it is for you as well.

### Silence

This does not have to be long. If setting a timer is good for you, then you can do that. Try it for at least 2 minutes as you enter into prayer.

### Reading of Scripture (Week 1, Luke 4:1-13)

#### Internal Conversation about the scripture

What stood out to you in the reading? What have you not noticed before? What have you heard about it in the past? What does it have to do with your fasting? (Write this down! Your insights are wonderful and can be shared with your group!)

#### Prayer/Journaling

What has happened to you today that gives you particular insight into this scripture?  
What are some times that you felt the "hunger pains" of social media? Who did you see today?  
What is going on in their life?

#### Closing Prayer

Lord, I long to grow closer to you. Let everything that pulls my attention somewhere else fall away. I pray that through my focus, I will hear your call more clearly, and will learn more about your world.



Final thoughts: this first week I want you to focus and enter into the practice of fasting, which is not easy. Take notice of what fasting is like and in what ways you can change your behavior patterns for good or bad. To give you some insight into this week's scripture; Luke 4:1-13 is the basis for our fasting during the season of Lent. It is where we get the 40 days as our timeline, and it also shows us how Jesus took seriously the practice of fasting and prayer. The three temptations by satan are interesting as well. I like to look at them as the satisfaction of hunger in different ways. Verse 2 tells us that Jesus was hungry, and so the adversary wanted to take advantage of that. It shows that temptation often strikes us at our weakest point- and we all have weak points in some way or another. The first temptation was Jesus' physical hunger. The second was the human hunger for power. And the third was hunger for proof of God. All three are very real in our current culture. Look to Jesus as a model on how to resist the temptations of hunger. He knew scripture, and he knew God. He relied on the things he had grown up hearing and learning, on the presence of the Holy Spirit at his baptism, and the cloud of witnesses that surrounded him. It is also significant that he did this before he started his ministry in Galilee, so that says something about the importance of fasting and prayer in the ability to serve others.

### **Group Conversation about Week 1 insights**

## Week 2

### *Matthew 6:16-18*

*And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

There is this joke I heard recently that I think applies to our scripture here: How can you tell if someone is in Crossfit? Don't worry, they will tell you.

We like to share good news and accomplishments with people. If we have succeeded, or if our families have succeeded, we want people to know and admire it. We live in a culture now where satisfaction in a job well done is tough for people to understand. I remember when I first got out of college and was working a job and was given a task. I worked as hard as I could on that task to make it the best possible outcome it could be. Then, when I submitted it, all the feedback I got was thanks. I do not quite know what I expected, but I had been conditioned my whole life in school that if you submitted something you were given a grade. You were told how great, average, or poor it was. This was not the case in my first job, and I felt that angst.

Luckily, social media often times fills that void. Now, we can share something we have done well or an honor we have received with everyone we know and feel the digital love in return. Every time we receive these tiny affirmations, whether through a "like," "retweet," or "reply," we receive a tiny jolt of dopamine in our brains that actually makes these tiny affirmations habit-forming. When I was on social media, I remember that every time I posted I would regularly check back in over and over again to see how many likes or comments I received. The more of

those I got, the better I felt about myself. The “humblebrag” was invented because of social media. We want to brag, but we do not want to appear arrogant. So we invented this word to describe how to brag about ourselves or our kids by saying how honored, thankful, or humble we are that we did this great thing. I will admit to you, I have done it many times over, because I craved that feedback.

I remember when I first started running using an app that would track my progress, speed, and time. After I was done it would ask for my feedback. What kind of terrain was I on? How did I feel? How far did I go? Then, that app would link to my social media account and, in real time, people could write encouraging notes to me that would pipe in through my headphones while I was running! It felt good, but then that became the reason I was doing it. I was no longer running to be healthy or for my own enjoyment; I was running to tell people I was running.

This was the problem the Pharisees were having that Jesus so often talked about. The problem was not that they were following the law. The law was good. The law was what kept people in a right relationship with God. The problem was that they spent all of their time telling people to watch them following the law and that they knew the best way to follow the law and were the experts on the law. Everything had to go through them. But that was not why the people of Israel had the law. The law was given to Moses to help people be in relationship with God and to separate themselves from the world.

This is why Jesus gives us this instruction about fasting. Fasting is to help us in our relationship with God, not to make ourselves better than others. We are not supposed to put ourselves in the position of more serious Christians than others because we are fasting. Fasting is between a person and God. So we do not need to go around humblebragging about the fact that we are taking a break from social media. That is not the point. The point is not for others to see us doing this. The point is to know God and know your neighbor. Here is the journaling pattern for the week:

## Silence

This does not have to be long. If setting a timer is good for you, then you can do that. Try it for at least 2 minutes as you enter into prayer.

## Reading of Scripture (Week 2, Matthew 6:16-18)

### Internal Conversation about the scripture

What stood out to you in the reading? What have you not noticed before? What have you heard about it in the past? What does it have to do with your fasting? (Write this down! Your insights are wonderful and can be shared with your group!)

### Prayer/Journaling

What has happened to you today that gives you particular insight into this scripture? Did you have an opportunity to express joy at someone else's accomplishment today? Were you able to show empathy for someone else's life?

### Closing Prayer

## **Group Conversation about Week 2 insights**

### Week 3

#### *Luke 24:36-43*

*While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you got anything to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.*

I heard an interview with someone who consistently struggles with his weight, and he is a big advocate of observing a "cheat day." The problem with his cheat day, however, is that he would go completely overboard, so any healthy gains he had during a week of dieting would be erased. He began to live for his cheat day. He would be healthy six days a week just so he could go berserk on the seventh day.

As we are entering into the third week of the fast from social media, I want to encourage you in what you have done so far. I know going through something like this is hard, especially in our current cultural context where it seems that everyone around us knows things about everyone else and we feel out of the loop. I also want to discourage you from taking a cheat day, or even a cheat hour. Save your reentry into social media for when you are done with the fast. Because if you jump back in for even a minute, then the fast is going to be that much harder for you moving forward. The hunger for it will return and will be more intense.

I want you instead to turn your attention to other things and to take an outsider's perspective. Now that social media is absent from your life, with what have you filled that void? In our current culture, social media has become engrained in everything. The back of food packaging wrappers encourage us to like their company on Facebook, for the chance to win a contest or get a discount! You are encouraged to "check-in" at businesses to tell everyone where you shop. Television programs have entire sections of the broadcast dedicated to what is trending in social media. Commercials are even fashioning themselves to look like a series of tweets, and of course there is a hashtag at the end.

I have encouraged you to pray, and I hope that this is still going well for you, but I also want you to pay attention to your body. I think constant internet connectivity causes a sense of disembodiment. We forget that we exist in time and space and that it is important to have a bodily presence in the world. In worship, being there and with other people is as important as the songs we sing or the words we preach. As revealed in the scripture above, after the Resurrection Jesus did not come to the disciples as a spirit. He says in verse 39, "Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And then later he asks, "Have you anything here to eat?" It is almost as if the Gospel writer is going out of his way to show that when Jesus rose, he rose as a "body," as a person who is hungry-and has scars-just like us.

So, now that you are awakening from a (sometimes) disembodied existence on social media, what is happening with your body? Where are you going? Where is it important that you attend? Are you really missing anything or misinformed now that you are living your social life in your body? What about in your faith? Are you having a new faith experience as you are living an intentional embodied life?

The more we are living our lives online, the more we seem to be forgetting. A recent study that suggests that not only are we forgetting all of the things we are storing on our devices,

(such as phone numbers and passwords) we are actually forgetting how to be physically in the world. The example they point to is our GPS on our phones. We no longer have to learn how to get anywhere, so we do not remember. I find this phenomenon to be true. If I only use my GPS, I never learn how to get places. I have a friend who lived in the same place five years, and every time I went to his house I used the GPS to get there and to get home, citing the convenience of real time traffic. But the truth is, I could never remember how to get there. If that is what is happening to my memory and focus with directions telling me which way to turn, I wonder what is happening as more of my life is put online? Do I like things because I am listening to the directions of social media? Do I sometimes hesitate in sharing my faith because I assume everyone has already seen it?

In watching college students these past three years, I noticed that whenever they were walking across campus, they were on their phones. They never were where they were standing. What would even drive me crazier is when I would teach and put notes on the board and no one would write anything. They would just take a picture with their phones at the end.

Bodies matter, according to Jesus-what we eat and what we drink. Who we are with, and how we treat others matters. I think we forget these things when we view our lives on the screen.

## Silence

This does not have to be long. If setting a timer is good for you, then you can do that. Try it for at least 2 minutes as you enter into prayer.

## Reading of Scripture (Luke 24:36-43)

## Internal Conversation about the scripture

What stood out to you in the reading? What have you not noticed before? What have you heard about it in the past? What does it have to do with your fasting? (Write this down! Your insights are wonderful and can be shared with your group!)

#### Prayer/Journaling

What has happened to you today that gives you particular insight into this scripture? Where have you noticed fresh about social media's presence that you did not notice before? How has your "outsider's perspective" given you new insight into your own social media presence and practice?

#### Closing Prayer

#### **Group Conversation about Week 3 insights**



## Week 4

*In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.*

*About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.*

*Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three[a] men are search-*

*ing for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.” So Peter went down to the men and said, “I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?” They answered, “Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.” So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.*

*The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. On Peter’s arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. But Peter made him get up, saying, “Stand up; I am only a mortal.” And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; and he said to them, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?”*

*Cornelius replied, “Four days ago at this very hour, at three o’clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. He said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.’ Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.”*

*Gentiles Hear the Good News*

*Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”*

#### *Gentiles Receive the Holy Spirit*

*While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.*

#### *Peter’s Report to the Church at Jerusalem*

*Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” Then Peter began to explain*

*it to them, step by step, saying, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."*

This is a long scripture reading, and there are so many different things that can be "taken away" from it. But the part I want to focus on for this fasting context is that of prayer. Both Cornelius and Peter were praying when they received messages and visions from God, and they were the answer to one another's prayer. Both Peter and Cornelius's answers to prayer were a complete topsy turvey of the established religious order. Gentiles were not allowed to be part of the family

of God, and Peter was not supposed to allow Gentiles to be a part of the family of God. Peter was even brought to "trial" so to speak for his inclusion of them.

The key to all of this was, BOTH Cornelius and Peter were in places in their prayer where they could hear the voice of God. There are times in the Bible where God interrupts our lives in order to say something to us. I think of Moses and the burning bush or Jonah going to Ninevah as examples. But there are also times where God speaks and only those who are listening can hear God.

I absolutely think God can break through the technological din in which we all exist. I think God can communicate across RSS news feeds, Facebook messages, and Google alerts. I also think that while this noise is constantly going on in our lives, God is still speaking; however, we are too distracted to hear him. That is our problem, not God's. We are not paying attention while we are praying!

To give you a personal example, last spring I felt a lack of effectiveness in my prayer life. I would either fall asleep or chase rabbit trails in my mind, and when I got to "Amen," I would find I had said or heard nothing. I realized that right before I started praying, I was checking my emails one last time. Then while I prayed, I thought about someone so I decided to send them a text message. Then a little while later they replied and I immediately looked at my phone again, which caused me to check my email again, which inevitably had something from Facebook or a news flash. It is no wonder I was so tired during and after my prayer! If God spoke, I was in no position to hear.

So while you are going through this fast, I want to encourage you to turn off your phone. Everything that it tells you whenever it buzzes will still be there when you are done. Your computer can easily turn off and on. You may not get to something immediately, that is true. But you may miss the voice of God if you do not remove the distractions.

## Silence

This does not have to be long. If setting a timer is good for you, then you can do that. Try it for at least 5 minutes as you enter into prayer.

## Reading of Scripture (Week 4, Acts 10:1-11:18)

### Internal Conversation about the scripture

What stood out to you in the reading? What have you not noticed before? What have you heard about it in the past? What does it have to do with your fasting? (Write this down! Your insights are wonderful and can be shared with your group!)

### Prayer/Journaling

What has happened to you today that gives you particular insight into this scripture? What is a concrete example in your past of when social media distracted you from something important? When can you name a time when you heard the voice of God, and what were you doing when that happened? Did God break in or were you in a position to listen?

### Closing Prayer

## **Group Conversation about Week 4 insights**

Week 5

*Psalm 63*

O God, you are my God, I seek you,  
*my soul thirsts for you;*  
*my flesh faints for you,*  
*as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*  
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,  
*beholding your power and glory.*  
Because your steadfast love is better than life,  
*my lips will praise you.*  
So I will bless you as long as I live;  
*I will lift up my hands and call on your name.*  
My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,[a]  
*and my mouth praises you with joyful lips*  
*when I think of you on my bed,*  
*and meditate on you in the watches of the night;*  
*for you have been my help,*  
*and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.*  
My soul clings to you;  
*your right hand upholds me.*  
But those who seek to destroy my life  
*shall go down into the depths of the earth;*  
*they shall be given over to the power of the sword,*  
*they shall be prey for jackals.*  
But the king shall rejoice in God;  
*all who swear by him shall exult,*  
*for the mouths of liars will be stopped.*

There are only a few movies that make me cry every time. One of them, and I'm not kidding at all, is Toy Story 3. I watched it again the other day for what seems like the twenty-third time, and I tear up at the same two spots every time. At the end where Andy gives his toys to Bonnie and plays with them one last time crushes me. The other part that makes me cry takes place when they are in the dump. (If you haven't seen the movie, I highly recommend it. Also, I'm about to

give you some spoilers!) The toys have been doing everything they can to escape from Sunny-side Daycare. They hatch an elaborate escape plan, but they end up getting caught. In a last-ditch effort to escape down a trash chute, they end up in a truck that takes them to the dump. At the dump they are put on a conveyor belt taking the trash to the incinerator. While on the conveyor belt, they are doing everything they can to make sure ALL of them escape. There are multiple opportunities for individual toys to free themselves, but they don't leave because they are concerned about one another. They even pass up an opportunity to escape to save their enemy Lotso. While they are traveling with the bits of trash going toward the incinerator, everyone looks to their leader, Woody, and asks what they should do, because he always has a plan and a way out. But he simply looks at them, takes the hand of his friends, and they resign themselves to their fate in the fire. It gets me every time!

The makers of the film in that moment have tapped into my emotional psyche and faith in a very real way. Because there are times in my life where I am also in the wilderness, and I have tried everything I know to do. It is a different wilderness than the locales often described in the Bible; it is a place where all of my skills and training will not help me. Everything I know to do to survive will not help me. I think particularly of the time when we had to take my daughter, Anna, to the hospital. My little 3 month old was lying on a stretcher in the ambulance with a breathing mask on as she gasped for every breath of air. Then, when we went into the emergency room, they snaked a tube down her throat and suctioned out her lungs. She continued to struggle, and they put us in ICU, where she still had not opened her eyes.

I come to those moments, and I know you all do as well, where there is nothing you know to do. It makes me think of the disciples in their last few moments with Jesus. All week long, the disciples are going to do everything they know to do. They are going to exert their power in any way they know how. Judas is going to abandon Jesus and align himself with who he thinks are going to be the winners. Peter is going to draw a sword and swing desperately. Pilate is going to



wash his hands. The disciples are going to sit together, wring their hands, and strategize about their next move. It is only Jesus who is going to pray, which is really the only place to go when you reach the middle of the wilderness.

I do not know if your time away from social media has given you a deeper understanding of prayer. I hope it has, because the giving up of social networking helps us give up the illusion of control, which is one of the most important steps in a life of prayer. To recognize that God is God and you are not. Despite new technology giving us "god-like" ability to reach across time and space, we are not God. We still will wander our way into the wilderness, and sometimes we are brought into the wilderness so we can pray.

The scripture for this week is Psalm 63. I encourage you to go read it on your own, and notice the place it was written: "A Psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah." David was in the wilderness a lot in his life. He was in the wilderness tending the sheep as a boy. He was in the wilderness facing the giant, Goliath, and when he was being pursued by a murderous King Saul, and when he committed adultery and murder with Bathsheba and Uriah. David is very familiar with the wilderness. But he was also familiar with prayer, so read these words with a new understanding of where he was when they were written.

I want to close with a poem by Wendell Berry:

A man is lying on a bed  
in a small room in the dark.  
Weary and afraid, he prays  
for courage to sleep,  
to wake and work again;  
he doubts that waking when he wakes  
will recompense his sleep.

His prayers lean upward  
on the dark and fall  
like flares from a catastrophe.  
He is a man breathing the fear  
of hopeless prayer, prayed in hope.  
He breathes the prayer  
of his fear that gives a light  
by which he sees only himself lying  
in the dark,  
a low mound asking almost nothing at all.

And then, long yet before dawn,  
comes what he had not thought:  
love that causes him to stir  
like the dead in the grave,  
being remembered—his own love or  
Heaven's, he does not know.

But now it is all around him;  
it comes down upon him  
like a summer rain falling  
slowly, quietly in the dark.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Wendell Berry, "A man is lying in a bed," *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997* (New York, Counterpoint, 1998) 181.

## Silence

This does not have to be long. If setting a timer is good for you, then you can do that. Try it for at least 5 minutes as you enter into prayer.

## Reading of Scripture (Week 5, Psalm 63)

### Internal Conversation about the scripture

What stood out to you in the reading? What have you not noticed before? What have you heard about it in the past? What does it have to do with your fasting? (Write this down! Your insights are wonderful and can be shared with your group!)

### Prayer/Journaling

What has happened to you today that gives you particular insight into this scripture? Think back to one of your “wilderness times.” What was the substance of your prayer? How does your social media keep you from the wilderness or force you into the wilderness?

### Closing Prayer

## **Group Conversation about Week 5 insights**

## Week 6

### *Mark 2:18-22*

*Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."*

This scripture, which seems to do away with the discipline of fasting has a lot to do with the purpose of fasting. Consistently throughout the Gospels Jesus is questioned about matters of practice. He is asked about plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath, what people must do to inherit eternal life, what the most important law is. Jesus' point in saying that the wedding guests cannot fast while they are with the bridegroom is saying that the practice of fasting for the sake of the practice itself is not the purpose. The purpose of fasting is to restore right balance and connection with God.

Part of the problem Jesus has with the religious establishment of his day is that their rituals had no life in them. Sacrifices were made because people were supposed to make sacrifices. Sabbath was observed because that is what they were supposed to do. Jesus asks them and us, "why are you doing these things?" They are good things to do as long as you know why.

There has been a revival of sorts in the modern church with liturgy. Older practices that were deemed too stuffy during the contemporary worship boom are now receiving new attention.

The old adage that absence makes the heart grow fonder must be true, because when ancient practices of liturgy were removed from the church their meaning and measure were missed.

When Jesus came, he came preaching life back into faith. It was not something you did because the priest or your parents told you to do, but because they give life! It is in these practices that the grace of God is conveyed.

This grace that God gives has so much life to it that it will burst from old wineskins and pull away from the cloth. When Jesus is with the disciples, he is their number one priority. But when things get out of balance, they will fast so their priorities will be back in their proper place. I think constant connectivity warps our priorities if we use it all of time. If your primary relationships are experienced in an online environment, then you are not giving or receiving everything that is possible in that relationship. I am full of remorse for all the times that my daughters have been talking to me and I have been scrolling through Facebook or Twitter. My distraction, while I have convinced myself I can both talk to her and scroll at the same time, tells her that what is happening on the screen is more important than what she is saying. We are constantly being distracted in our world, chasing what comes across our screens as something more important. Our online communities are filtered and our only interaction with many people, which says that the online relationship is more important than the actual.

Life from fasting comes from the new life we receive when things are put back into their proper place. Prayer and worship become the air that we breathe, and relationships grow and develop as we live in the grace made available to us. We were just too distracted to see it before.

My grandmother was a dear woman, quirky as many people are, but wise and kind. Something she said all of the time that constantly brings insights into my life. She used to say, "People are going to do what people want to do." If something is truly important, people will find a way to make it happen. If it is not important, then they will not put energy toward it. If my daughter telling me about her day is the most important thing in that moment, then I need to pay

attention. If love of God and love of neighbor are truly important to us, then we should put away the distractions that are keeping us from it. If we find ourselves distracted, we need to get our priorities back where they need to be.

### Silence

This does not have to be long. If setting a timer is good for you, then you can do that. Try it for at least 5 minutes as you enter into prayer.

### Reading of Scripture (Week 6, Mark 2:18-22)

#### Internal Conversation about the scripture

What stood out to you in the reading? What have you not noticed before? What have you heard about it in the past? What does it have to do with your fasting? (Write this down! Your insights are wonderful and can be shared with your group!)

#### Prayer/Journaling

What has happened to you today that gives you particular insight into this scripture? What practices in your life seem like they have no energy in them? When did that happen? What will help you have energy and joy again in your relationships? Take a map of your time spent during the day. What does that say about what is important to you? Is everything in the right place?

#### Closing Prayer

### **Group Conversation about Week 6 insights**

Closing

You have made it.

I like to run races. I run OCRs (Obstacle Course Races) like the Tough Mudder, Spartan Race, etc. My wife and others think I am absolutely insane for participating in these activities, but I really enjoy it. Preparing for a race like that is important. Not only do I have to be ready to be able to run long distances, I also have to do strength training. While getting ready for one such race, I would run a trail that went by an elementary school, where I would stop and do monkey bars, balance on the see-saw, and climb the outside of the playscape. I would run the race on race day, and then, basking in my accomplishment, would stop running for a long time, until the next race came. I would lose all that training in a short period of time, making it even harder to get back into shape.

When talking about fasting from food, Richard Foster has this to say: "An extended fast should be broken with fruit or vegetable juice, with small amounts taken at first. Remember that the stomach has shrunk considerably and the entire digestive system has gone into a kind of hibernation. By the second day you should be able to eat fruit and then milk or yogurt. Next, you can eat fresh salads and cooked vegetables. Avoid all the salad dressing, grease, and starch. Extreme care should be taken not to overeat. *It is good during this time to be more disciplined and in control of your appetite.*"

I don't think fasting from social media causes the same kind of physical effects as abstaining from food, but I do think this fast causes changes to our brain chemistry for the better. We have left the mindset of a world where the only things that actually happen are the things that are shared. I think a modern proverb would be, "If you went to a concert and didn't tweet about it, did it happen?"

The social media world will soon open back up to you, but I hope you are now more intentional about its use. You have loosened its grip on your attention and life; make sure you do

not let it take hold once again, because then the whole purpose of this would be lost. To reorient your life and attention to God and to keep social media and constant connection in its proper arena. One suggestion I have is to practice Sabbath. There are multiple books out there on how to do this, but one of my favorites is from Barbara Brown Taylor's *Altar in the World*. Here is an excerpt:

"One of my favorite prayers in Gates of Prayer, the New Union Prayer Book, is called 'Welcoming Sabbath' and it goes like this:

Our noisy day has one descended with the sun beyond our sight.

In the silence of our praying place we close the door upon the hectic joys and fears, the accomplishments and anguish of the week we have left behind.

What was but moments ago the substance of our life has become memory; what we did must now be woven into what we are.

*On this day we shall not do, but be.*

We are to walk the path of our humanity, no longer ride unseeing through a world we do not touch and only vaguely sense.

*No longer can we tear the world apart to make our fire.*

On this day heat and warmth and light must come from deep within ourselves.<sup>40</sup>

You are going to come out of your fast. But do not be like me after a race, stay in shape! Practice moments or days to keep it up. Some people even apply Sabbath thinking into their technology use by turning off the phone on Saturdays or Sundays. Because as Taylor asks, "Once you have turned off the computer and hung up the car keys, once you have decided to take the

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<sup>40</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (New York, HarperOne, 2009), 135.



whole day off from earning your own salvation, are you ready to wrestle with the brawny angels who show up?"<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 135.