Choosing the Inefficiency of Relationships: Preaching Easter Hope in a World Augmented by Artificial Intelligence

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A Wing and Prayer: Encountering AI

Nearly a year ago, I read an online article about a candlelight vigil being planned for the demolition of a beloved Hooters restaurant in Charleston, West Virginia (Brice-Saddler 2024). As a pastor, I've attended and even led prayers at many candlelight vigils in the wake of tragedy or moments of solidarity and support, but never in a Hooters parking lot. The gathering struck me as odd and I sent the article to a few church colleagues for a good laugh but, after some thought, I found myself wondering how one might lead a prayer at such a gathering. If leading vigils for casual chicken restaurants was an elective in seminary, I missed it, and when my creativity wavered, the idea entered into my thoughts, "maybe this is something AI could do."

I had heard of generative AI tools like ChatGPT but had not used one before so I pulled up ChatGPT's website, logged in, and typed, "Could you please write a prayer for a candlelight vigil mourning the closure of a Hooters restaurant?" I sent the prompt and, as the letters cascaded down my screen, the subtle rumble of my phone's haptic feedback added an oddly profound, even mystical sensation to the moment. What started as a joke quickly became something more, shaping for me when the letters formed words and danced down my screen, creating a prayer from this scenario that I lacked the creativity to accomplish. ChatGPT had crafted a prayer that was not only tactful but also chicken wing-themed (incorporating "boneless," no less). It was a decent (albeit silly) prayer for an absurd scenario (apologies to Charleston, West Virginia), but the tool's capabilities were staggering. This experience was profoundly novel and left me with a mixture of delight at the novelty very quickly followed by concern and even dread.

I was and am not alone in my experience with AI, as AI does, for many, feel disruptively "new" and that can indeed, be both scary and hopeful. But, as a 2023 Barna report on "How U.S. Christians Feel About AI & the Church" illumines, Christians lean a bit more into the fear than hopeful end of the spectrum as they are less optimistic than non-Christians about AI's potential to do positive things in the world (28% to 38% respectively; Barna). As we prepare to preach this Easter season, a time and season brimming with newness—new life, new purpose, new direction, new hope—we would do well to recognize that we are preaching into a context of anxious "newness" of rapidly advancing and increasingly befuddling technologies like generative AI that leave some in our faith communities eager to explore possibilities and

others fraught with fear of what this new technology might mean for their economic or even existential realities. In both cases, and other possibilities along the spectrum, the preacher has a unique opportunity to speak hopeful direction to the presence of a third way. It could project neither paralyzing fear nor unbridled reverence, but rather faithful discernment whereby the church might provide a non-anxious presence as well as a demonstrative example to, like Christ, guide our usage and co-existence with AI with our faith. Indeed, this might pave the way for a celebration of the beautiful and life-giving possibilities of "inefficient" relationships and community even in world shaped by AI.

Fear or Awe?: The Need for a Third Way in Response to Generative AI

As I stared at my screen during my initial encounter with Generative AI, I experienced what Kate Ott, referencing Samuel Arbesman in *Christian Ethics for a Digital Society*, describes as two common reactions to complex new technologies: "fear and awe." Arbesman suggests that we may either fear these technologies' impacts on economic systems, power structures, or even our sense of identity, leaving us feeling powerless. On the other, the combination of complexity and simplicity can make certain technologies feel "magical"—a term Apple often uses to describe its products—inviting near-unquestioning reverence (Ott, 6). Such a binary response has often guided the church's own adoption or rejection of technology. Ott writes, "In many cases, Christian communities respond to technological advances in an either/or manner—rejecting technology as a distraction from God's plan or embracing technology as a new avenue to do God's will" (Ott, 15).

Only two options, full rejection or acceptance, seems both irresponsible and unrealistic for the church and its members in an increasingly tech-enmeshed world. Fortunately, Ott notes that there is a third option, an option to which I believe faith leaders are called to lead, a path of critical ethical engagement that asks, "what does God require of each of us to be and act in a way that promotes Christian values in all we do, including the digital technologies we develop and use" (Ott 2019, 3)? Whether we feel ready or even capable of speaking into this new paradigm, AI is already present in our lives and becoming increasingly ubiquitous whether we like it or not. As faith leaders called and equipped to preach, it's important to remember that the hearers of the sermon are likely wondering about the ways in which their faith meets and even informs this society-shifting technology, and the preaching moment might be an excellent place to explore "what God requires of us" in a way that may direct the church to this third way of faithful discernment that considers what is essential about our faith in Christ as a directive in responding to new paradigms.

Efficiency as a Double-Edged Sword: Alone in a Crowded (digital) Room

Generative AI shifts how we gather information by offering hyper-personalized responses instead of simply pointing us to pre-existing content. Unlike the traditional search engines we're used to which connect us with others' work, generative AI

gives us original, tailored content crafted in response to our exact prompts. This feels efficient, almost like consulting a knowledgeable friend who's always available. But efficiency can be a double-edged sword. This is paradigm-shifting for users because, in many ways, when we think about gathering information by utilizing technology, we have largely done so by accessing the content of others. Technology is the means through which we access information by connecting our query with indexed content—this is how search engines like Google work.

But what if our query is so contextually specific (such as how to conduct a prayer vigil in a Hooters parking lot) that the retrieved content does not directly address it? Our options have been to either research and render our own opinion on the matter or, if we have access to one, simply ask an expert in the field or an acquaintance who is informed. The latter of these options requires a bit of time, some clarifying questions, and actually communicating with another person. Information-seeking this way may feel time-consuming and "inefficient" by most metrics, but it is relational and it draws us together, giving us the opportunity to not only explore our queries but also have our assumptions challenged and our worldview expanded by the views and insights of others.

Generative AI, however, presents us with a new route to gather information. No longer do we need to accommodate the intellectual property or content of others or even make a phone call or wait for an email response to find the very specific information we seek. The generative nature of the tool will produce original content/responses to any query asked by the user in a matter of seconds with no need to interface with a person.

In practice, it *feels* like texting a friend who is an expert in whatever field your question demands. Nutrition? Your generative AI buddy can serve as a nutritionist. Civil War history? You can chat with an informed historian. Need a prayer for a Hooters closure? You can chat with, well, an expert whose prayer is crispier than a fresh batch of boneless wings. This aspect of generative AI is very helpful in workflow to clarify, gather thematic unity, and even simply chat through an idea with an informed partner. This is especially helpful for professionals who serve in highly specific roles with few colleagues, people who serve on small staffs or are solo in their roles, or even people who are physically isolated in their work.

These benefits, however, are not without potential snares. While this method of information gathering is highly efficient—there's no need to wait a day for an email or even have a colleague judge your request for a chicken-tinged prayer—we risk severing our connection to one another at the expense of convenience.

In her article *AI Will Shape Your Soul*, Kate Lucky explores the complex relationships humans may develop with AI and warns, "But with ChatGPT, there's no social component. That's the danger. When you're talking to a bot, you're actually alone" (Lucky, 15). Lucky highlights the isolation that can occur when we rely on AI interactions over human connections. Sure, the information is quick, but it draws us away from learning and knowing in our complex web of relationships, relationships

that expand our horizons, challenge us, and help us grow into the relational beings we were created and called to be. Biblical scholar William Dubrell notes in *Encountering Artificial Intelligence*, "Humanity finds its individual fullness in the blessedness of personal relationships (50). The further we physically isolate ourselves by going deeper into a digital space, particularly for the sake of efficiency, the further we tread from the path we were created to walk, hand in hand with our neighbors.

At the risk of sounding hyperbolic, I do not think we have ever had access to a tool that makes it easier and more enticing to turn away from our neighbors and isolate ourselves in a digital space as we gather information and learn about the world. It is for this reason that the church's voice and indeed your voice, preacher, is crucial in this moment.

The Church's Time to Speak

Since my first encounter with AI, I began to use generative AI in both personal and professional ways, seeking to use the tools in ways that uphold vocational integrity and are grounded in a faith-focused ethic. This informed workflow led to webinar teaching to groups around the United States, leading to a small amount of recognition that I am "the ai guy," a very nerdy super hero name indeed. In August of 2024, I attended the AI and the Church Summit in Seattle, Washington, the first gathering of Protestant churches to solely discuss AI in North America. As I sat around table with colleagues from my own denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and those of the Episcopal and Lutheran (ELCA) churches, we discussed the important voice the church has in this important moment by imagining that we could go back in time and speak about how to best understand and utilize social media, another incredibly shaping and disruptive technology. If we would have engaged that topic meaningfully, we wondered, would the church and her members have avoided feeling that their worth depends on the likes and validation of others rather than from the love and claim of God? Would the members of Christ's body have avoided the curated lives that we project and instead used the platform to be honest and vulnerable about their own humanity through the boldness of God's assured grace?

We will never know the answer to these musings, we concluded, but we are at the precipice of yet another, possibly more shaping, technology, and the church has both the responsibility and wisdom to speak into such a complex moment if we simply remember one of the most provocative teachings of God through Jesus, relational love is inefficient and it's what we were created to do.

Celebrating the "Inefficiency" of Relationships: Preparing to Preach this Easter

If this is the church's opportunity to speak into this great moment of disruptive "newness," what do we say? Many pastors, even after reading a really great article like this one, may feel they lack the technical acumen to speak with confidence in response to AI but, the good news is that the church already is rooted in the message

that is so crucial to proclaim in this moment. At our core, human beings were created for relationships and drawn into community. We know this because we are claimed by a God who humanity first knew in the context of covenantal relationship; we are redeemed by Jesus who dwelt with humanity and who will come again; and we are sustained by the Holy Spirit who calls and equips us to relate to one another as members of Christ body. In short, preacher, we were made for relationships and it is through relationships that love can be known and shown. Faith calls us together not apart, and we well know that sometimes (most times) being together is messy, difficult, and consuming of our time, energy, and patience. Relationships are far from efficient uses of our time.

Isn't this what God shows us through Christ? The life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ is a witness that reminds us that God chose perhaps the most "inefficient" means by which to reconcile humanity by living, laughing, crying, dying, and returning to his relationships after his resurrection. Perhaps God could have chosen a more efficient method to reconcile humanity, but God chose the inefficiency of human relationships because, even if relational life in community feels time consuming, painful, or frustrating, it is still how we come to know and share love.

God didn't zap a message of change into the hearts of God's people, God became flesh and bone through Jesus and walked with people, shared meals, touched lives, and embraced the inefficiency of relationships and human connection, knowing and showing love all the while. We, as followers of Christ, are to go and do likewise and embrace the danger and beauty of love that can only be shown between our fellow humans. Relationships can feel inefficient because they take time, challenge us, and may be awkward or hurtful, but Christ chose this and so should we.

While I do not believe it's the role of the church to stand in opposition to AI (or any other technology) simply because it's new, I do believe the church is called and equipped to celebrate the inefficiency of human relationships when technology like AI will make it so easy to turn away from our neighbors for the sake of efficiency. While the lure of hyper-efficiency is strong, we can't fully know or share the love that we are called to know and share if we are alone in our digital silos. We are not called to be alone, we are called to know and share embodied love. As Kate Lucky writes, "An AI chatbot can't give us hugs, go for a walk, or share meals at our tables. For Christians who believe in a Word that became flesh, relating to AI means missing out on a key aspect of our human identity: embodiment"(11). One of the most powerful aspects of the Easter story is how Jesus's life and ministry were beautifully inefficient, yet profoundly impactful. The love embodied in his relationships continues to shape us today. This message of love, known and shown through inefficient embodied relationships, is exactly what we need to proclaim now, a truth we know because we know Christ.

In the presence of such a societal-shifting technology that leaves so many feeling a sense of reverent awe or debilitating fear, we have an opportunity to present this third way that recognizes the power and potential of such a technology—as well

as the dangers—while proclaiming that utilizing such a technology should not come at the expense of our call to know and show love in relationships. The value of what our thirst for efficiency might cost us is simply too great, the sacredness of human presence and the challenge, growth, grace, and love we can experience within these inefficient relationships is what we were created for.

Preaching Inefficiency Inefficiently

As you prepare your Easter sermon, preacher, I wonder how you might embody this celebration of inefficiency by considering the ways in which your own preparation might either draw you closer to relationships or isolate you. I wonder if, instead of allowing the lure of efficient technology (and prep time) to lure you into a digital silo, you might have coffee with members of your faith community and discuss the preaching text together? That sounds terribly inefficient doesn't it? Exactly. Your own demonstrative preparation for the preaching moment and the stories of real conversations and embodied relationships that you might share could serve as a powerful witness to the centrality of relationships to who we are as God's children living in this ever-changing world.

On Easter, we can be reminded that Jesus didn't send messages of love from afar; he walked with people, shared meals, and invited them into relationships. I can't imagine a more inefficient way of redeeming humanity; I also can't imagine a way that better connects with our human need for connection and relationship. As we reflect on Christ's resurrection, we are called to boldly proclaim that the power of transformation and love comes not through efficiency of perfectly shaped words, quick solutions, or treating people like tasks to complete, but through the "inefficiency" of presence, compassion, and walking alongside one another, just as Christ walks with us.

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