

Twittering the Time Away August 30, 2009

The David Letterman segments this morning really point to the lively debate that is going on around us about social media and its impact on the need for human touch. Some claim we're going to become a society of isolated people, never really connecting with one another in authentic, meaningful ways, precisely because of things like Twitter, Facebook and others. I guess I see pluses and minuses both ways, and that's what I'd like us to explore together a bit today.

I still recall a moment a number of years ago now when the power of human touch was healing to me. It occurred about the time our daughter was 13 or 14, and she was acting out the way many teenagers did and continue to do. I was in a quandary, not knowing exactly how to handle her or how to get through to her, and I was really down about the whole thing.

It so happened that I was meeting a pastor friend for lunch. He arrived ahead of me, and was sitting near the door waiting for me to get there. I walked in, saw him, and headed his direction, but he didn't seem to see me at all, at least not until I got right in front of him. Then he said to me, "Linda, I didn't recognize you! You look shorter than usual; it's like you're the bent-over woman!

He was referring to the story in the Bible passage that we have for this morning—one I've appreciated since that time. Now the teller of this story was a non-Jewish physician, Luke. Our version tells it this way:

It happened that Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues the Sabbath day. In the congregations was a woman who for eighteen years had been ill; she was bent double and was quite unable to straighten herself up.

When Jesus noticed her, he called her and said, "You are set free from your illness!" And he put his hands upon her, and at once she stood upright and praised God.

The woman, we're told, was bent over, but we don't exactly know the cause. Depending on which translation of the story we read, it is attributed to evil spirits, arthritis, or to psychological issues. I actually removed the various causes the different translations give, and left it unclear deliberately, because it opens it up a little bit more, and allows me to wonder if this woman didn't also have a teenager who was

weighing heavily on her heart. Maybe she was just manifesting her concern physically, as I had apparently been.

However, that's not really the point here. It really doesn't matter the ailment; what matters is what happened. Jesus noticed her; he touched her; and she was healed. What caused the healing? Was his touch magical? Did he, in some way, lighten her load just by noticing her? Did his physical and emotional touch transform the way she experienced whatever she was experiencing? We don't have a way to know, but we're told that things changed because of the touch of the one known as Jesus. All I know is that, if her experience was anything like mine, the caring touch of a friend certainly lightened my load considerably, and had healing power.

We all know the importance of physical touch; it seems to be a need we all have that begins when we're infants. I'm sure we've all heard the stories of babies who are not held and touched in loving ways. We're told they lose weight, and often become ill. It seems that their development is, in one way or another, impaired by the lack of touch.

Experts tell us that the human touch is as basic a need for us as food and shelter. Babies crave being touched from the moment they're born; they learn through the sense of touch; touch helps them develop the feelings of attachment and self-esteem. Touching is important because it helps babies feel safe and comforted, and it's one of the ways we experience love.

We've certainly seen the importance of a loving touch with our almost 5-month-old granddaughter. She loves to be held, and touching her cheek or rubbing her head seems to soothe her and help her sleep. When she's a little fussy—which doesn't happen very often, holding her can provide a calming effect, and make all the difference in the world.

We all seem to have what is referred to as "skin hunger"—the need to be touched in good and loving ways. James W. Angell said this: **"To touch a child's face, a dog's smooth coat, a petaled flower, the rough surface of a rock is to set up a new order of brain motion. To touch is to communicate."**

However, today's social media causes us to consider this whole issue in a different way. We have to ask ourselves, "Is touching, physically touching, the only way we can connect in meaningful ways?" What about the phenomenon of the social media, like Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, along with others?

The critics of social media are able cite all kinds of studies to support their claims. They name, for example, one sociological study that was completed not long ago. It says that, between 1985 and 2004, the average American's number of close confidants declined from three to two. At the same time, the same study disclosed that those who reported no close confidants jumped from 10-25%. They say this is a "remarkable drop" in the number and quality of friendships.

Furthermore, those who criticize things like Facebook and Twitter maintain that that is the last place people would go when a loved one is dying, or when a relationship ends, or when we're struggling with some important decisions. How do we go to Facebook, they ask, when we need a hug to comfort us?

Those on the other side of the conversation say just the opposite, and they back up their claims with some of their own experiences. Take, for instance, a class of students at the University of Texas. Well, rather than my telling you, just take a look at the screens.

Some believe that the accusation that Facebook is shallow and inauthentic is simply not true to the experiences that many people have. They even rebut the claim that we don't go to places like Facebook when we need comforting. In fact, one writer said that he shared on Facebook that a long term relationship had just ended, and within hours, he had been contacted by several friends who wanted to comfort him. He stated that they wouldn't have had any way to know to be there for him in that difficult moment without social media. They were given an opportunity for caring, and they cared.

Another stance supporting social networking is that things like Facebook are good tools to reinforce social bonds that already exist outside of it. In fact, when I was preparing to work on this message, I put a query on my Facebook page, and got several responses. They ranged anywhere from someone saying it was a good way to connect with friends when we are a great distance apart, to the importance of being able to stay in touch with what's going on in their lives. Some said that knowing more about the daily lives of those to whom they're connected makes the gaps between them seem less significant, and the ability to put photos and videos on make the connections even more personal.

Another person who answered my comments to "What's on your mind?" said this: "All these tools have the ability to accelerate our relationships with people all around the world, people we would have never connected with, if not for social media. When people actually engage and converse on social media, layers of relationships are peeled away, allowing for friendships and sharing that are extremely valuable, touching and sometimes amazing."

Frankly, I do not believe it's an "either/or" kind of thing, but rather a "both/and." Certainly, there are dangers with anything if taken to the extreme; Facebook and others can become addictive, and that probably could stunt our friendships and connections. The key with social media and anything else is always balance, and the need to find the good and positive aspects, and stay away from the habits and situations that are not loving, healthy and good.

The importance of social networking, especially among those under 30, is one of the reasons The Garden is committed to creating a vibrant virtual faith community. What we have called "virtual church" has been a part of our strategic plan since 2000, and yet, during those first years, we kept getting stuck when it came to ways of connecting people. We could only see the possibility of physically gathering together, but today's social networking has changed all that.

Yes, we can and many of us prefer to get gather together physically, but not everyone can or wants to do that. If we really want to be the church for a new day, then I believe strongly that we need to connect virtually with those who are hungry for a higher sense of purpose and a connection with that which is greater than we are.

Now, thanks to the Center for Congregations, we are taking the first steps to turn this dream/idea/hope into reality. Some of you are aware that we have received a \$15,000 matching grant from the Center for Congregations to put our Spiritual Statement workshop in a virtual format that allows anyone to come to the site, work their way through the process and create their own spiritual statement. If they wish, that statement can then be shared with others, and online conversations about faith, life, meaning and purpose can take place in deep significant ways.

You may have noticed that I said a matching grant has been given to The Garden. We have begun raising the other \$15,000 to

match this grant, but we're not there yet. If you are able and would like to, you'll find an envelope in your program to make a contribution. We would certainly appreciate your joining our effort to further the vision of The Garden that people experience God wherever they are. It's a way we can help those who cannot or would not be able to attend The Garden in person actually be a part of a faith community.

You know, Jesus was a master at using the medium of his day to share the good news of God's love, and I really believe he would have been on Facebook and other such media if he were here in person today. He wanted to reach out and touch people, and this is one of the ways that could happen.

One of the articles I read advocated this as another way of being church, and shared what I found to be an interesting story. Lenora Rand wrote in a recent edition of Christian Century, outlining why we need virtual community. She shared that she and her husband were having dinner when he told her that one of his staff members had mentioned to him that she was praying for his wife.

"Why is she praying for me?" Lenora asked. "She saw your Facebook status message," was his response. He went on to explain that his staff member had said that it sounded as though Lenora was having a rough week, and it turns out that the coworker had started using her Facebook news feed as her daily prayer list. The information she found there helped her see what was going on with the people in her life, and it served as a reminder to pray for them. "It helps her know what to pray for," he concluded.

A blogger by the name of Leisa Reichelt has named this kind of experience "ambient intimacy." She said, "Ambient intimacy is about being able to keep in touch with people with a level of regularity and intimacy that you wouldn't usually have access to, because time and space conspire to make it impossible. Ambient intimacy allows us to hear confessions and make our own, and it also helps us become a community of caring and support."

I don't know about you, but I think that sounds a lot like what the church ought to be. Maybe we can make it so.

Closing:

Cathy Morancy said this: "Love is not measured by how many times you touch each other, but by how many times you reach each

other." Regardless of the way we choose to reach out—Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, email or in person, it's the reaching out itself that determines how we touch one another.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace.
Amen.