



AI and the Soul
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 7, 2024
Mark 6:1-13
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

I spent several days this past week at the Chautauqua Institution in western New York state, an enclave of Victorian-style houses and oceans of hydrangeas. Each of the nine weeks is organized on a theme, and Week Two was artificial intelligence, with many lectures and talks devoted to the subject. I also attended classes on other subjects. Here is a snapshot from my favorite.

One of the many talks on AI was by Nicholas Carr, who writes on how technologies supposedly designed to connect us are actually making communication more difficult. After each presentation they invite people to submit questions. I tried to write a provocative one, and it was the first they used. My question was, “What is the one defining quality of good human communication?” Nicholas Carr had think for a few moments, and then gave one word: “Listening.”

I loved that. Because when two people are in conversation, what is the one thing they are looking for? To be listened to. And not just for each person to hear the words the other is speaking, but to receive those words as a lens into the landscape of that person’s soul.

The human soul is difficult to define, but it’s something experts agree AI can never acquire. I think this is because the soul is not abstract but relational. It is the sum of who we are -- of all the qualities that God gave us at birth and which the Spirit birthed in us as we moved through life – the soul is all those qualities AS revealed to another human being. The landscape of our soul acquires definition and dimension only in honest, open, vulnerable interaction with another person. That is, in good conversation.

As Nicholas Carr said, listening IS what makes for good human communication -- when each receives the words of the other, and crafts a response in compassion and vulnerability according to the gift that has just been given. Compassion and vulnerability are two things AI can never learn – compassion, because it requires an awareness of human suffering; and vulnerability, because the while machine is perfect according to its programming, we enter into conversations aware of our shortcomings yet trusting that we will still be heard and loved and accepted.

Yet what happens when we aren’t? Every human interaction is fraught with the possibility of rejection, when we realize that the other person isn’t really listening because because their own agendas or ideas or distractions have apparently gotten in the way.

At Chautauqua I was a guest in what is known as the Lutheran House, where a different Lutheran pastor serves as chaplain for each of the nine weeks. On July 4, as everyone was getting ready for the evening’s festivities, the hosts urged me to apply for next year, which would require a full week in residence. I told them that being away from home for that long is difficult because my husband is disabled. The response I was expecting -- “Oh? What is his

situation?” didn’t come. Instead they brightly said, “Then just bring him along!” When I told them that wouldn’t be practical, the conversation was over.

This is a pale example of the rejection Jesus endured in today’s Gospel. By all rights, the people of Nazareth should have rolled out the red carpet. He was fresh from healing the Gerasene demoniac, who then went through the entire 10-city region proclaiming what Jesus had done. Then came the miraculous healings of Jairus’ daughter and the bleeding woman. By this time, wouldn’t you have thought the people of Nazareth would be thrilled and honored to have this same Jesus teaching in their synagogue? Standing room only, maybe?

But they were not, because they were not listening. Their arrogance had become a stumbling block. “Who does Jesus think he is? He’s just the son and brother of locals. He’s only a carpenter, a laborer, no better than any of the rest of us.” So great was their resentment that took offense at him, thereby crushing that signature quality of good human communication – the ability to listen, to receive – and in this case, to believe. Their arrogance had suffocated their souls. Jesus left amazed at their unbelief.

What would be our response at such rejection? Imagine having become famous and returning to your hometown to share the blessings and benefits of your accomplishments, only to find your own people angered and offended by your very presence. Luke’s gospel takes it one step further – he has the people of Nazareth attempt to drive Jesus off a cliff. To try to kill him!

A rejection of this magnitude might cause many of us to rethink, to recalibrate, or perhaps even to retreat. “Maybe they’re right. Maybe what I’m saying is not worthwhile or interesting or compelling. Never mind, then.”

But what does Jesus do? He uses the experience as a springboard to launch his mission into high gear, while at the same time stripping it down to the essentials. He sets himself a bruising schedule, going from village to village with the same teaching his hometown folks had just refused. At the same time he gives his disciples their marching orders with specific instructions: Go out two by two. Take nothing but a staff, your sandals and a single tunic. Trust that God will provide everything you will they need.

But most importantly, he gives the disciples a strategy should they encounter rejection. “If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.”

In ancient Jewish practice, shaking the dust off one’s feet was customarily done when returning from Gentile territory, symbolic for shaking off the impurities of those who did not embrace the Jewish faith. Jesus is telling his disciples to do the same thing with households they visit who refuse the teaching they bring. They are to move on without carrying any of that negativity with them. It was a brilliant prescription: Dust, the humblest substance on earth, rising into the air as a tangible sign of the human refusal to listen – to engage in the signature act of good human communication.

We have so little time on this earth. We have so few opportunities for human connection: Eight billion people on the planet, and how many meaningful conversations do we get to have in our lifetime? Maybe a few hundred? A few thousand if you are a really a good listener?

But as Paul says, God's power is made perfect in our weakness. Wherever sin increases, grace abounds all the more, and here's an example.

I wrote most of this sermon in my small third-floor room in the Lutheran House later on July 4 as everyone, or so I thought, was down at the amphitheater for the pops concert. Finally I decided that I should go and see what was going on.

As I stepped onto the front porch, a soft voice called to me from a far corner, someone who I'd noticed was always off by himself reading. He said, "I heard you say earlier that your husband is disabled." "What?" I said, taken aback. "Oh, thank you so much for mentioning that." He then asked: "What is his situation?" I briefly told him, and he replied, "As the token disabled person here, I wanted to know." He shared that he'd had a massive stroke 18 months before and was still recovering – thus his quiet voice and limited mobility. That opened the door for a long conversation that left filled me with gratitude.

But here was my takeaway. As I got up and thanked him again, he told me he had tried to ask earlier when I had mentioned Bill -- but that I hadn't heard him because of his soft voice. So in fact I had walked away from the very question that I had been longing to hear.

We are the disciples whom Jesus has commissioned, making our way into the world, as we are about to sing. So go out, knowing that you have died and been reborn in Christ. Leave your baggage behind and be that compassionate, vulnerable presence that helps fellow travelers on this earth bring definition and dimension to the landscape of their souls. For this is something artificial intelligence can never accomplish.