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Matthew 16:13-20
1st in a series

“AI: Can it Replace Us?”

I’m beginning a new series today on AI, or Artificial Intelligence. The idea came to me while I was on study leave in June and the subject of AI kept popping up around me. 60 Minutes had just devoted an entire show to AI, and it both intrigued me and scared me. Around the same time, I was talking with some friends about AI – one of whom is a college professor and the other one a CFO of a bank. My professor friend was bemoaning ChatGPT, which is an (AI) you can ask a question, and it will give you an answer. You see, some students are using ChatGPT to write their papers. My banker friend felt that ChatGPT is a good thing, and can equal the playing field. For example, ChatGPT provides information and assistance to a wide range of people, regardless of their background, education, or language proficiency. ChatGPT can help bridge gaps in knowledge and communication, making information and resources more accessible to a broader audience.

ChatGPT can help break down language barriers by offering translation services.

And, ChatGPT can be used to create inclusive and accessible content, such as generating alt text for images, providing audio descriptions, or offering text-to-speech capabilities. This promotes inclusivity for people with disabilities.

By the way and full disclaimer, what I just said about ChatGPT being an equalizer was written by ChatGPT in about 5 seconds. It’s really an AI incredible tool. But like many technologies, we need to use them wisely and cautiously. Which is why, I’m doing this series. Because whether we like it or not, AI is here to stay, and we – people of faith – need to be a part of the conversation for how it’s used and who gets to decide how it’s used. As technology advances, the use of A.I. will only become increasingly widespread. The church will not be exempt from this. As a result, the question for the church becomes not whether we will embrace A.I., but how we will embrace A.I. And what does faith have to do with it?

To get at that question, we're going to hear from the gospel according to Matthew, chapter 16:13-20, in which Jesus poses the pivotal question to the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" While AI can answer the question "Who is Jesus?" in a nano-second, does that tell the whole story?

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came to the area of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Human One^[a] is?"

¹⁴ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the other prophets."

¹⁵ He said, "And what about you? Who do you say that I am?"

¹⁶ Simon Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

¹⁷ Then Jesus replied, "Happy are you, Simon son of Jonah, because no human has shown this to you. Rather my Father who is in heaven has shown you. ¹⁸ I tell you that you are Peter.^[b] And I'll build my church on this rock. The gates of the underworld won't be able to stand against it. ¹⁹ I'll give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Anything you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. Anything you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven." ²⁰ Then he ordered the disciples not to tell anybody that he was the Christ.

So a quick definition of what AI, or artificial intelligence is: Artificial intelligence – known in short as AI, refers to the ability of a machine or computer program to think, learn, and make decisions like a human, often using data and algorithms to achieve tasks or solve problems. According to ChatGPT, AI is like giving a computer a brain. It's a way to make machines do things that usually need human intelligence, like thinking, learning, and making decisions. AI helps computers understand and solve problems on their own – and therein lies the fear. You've probably interacted with AI even if you didn't realize it—Siri and Alexa are founded on AI technology, as are some customer service chatbots that pop up to help you navigate websites. If you use Google Maps or Apple Maps, you're using AI. If you have facial recognition on your phone, you're using AI. The same goes for a writing tool like Grammarly, or even virtual banking. That's all powered by AI. So it's not all bad; not by any means.

But take note as to what's on the cover of your bulletin; it's a screenshot from the app Text With Jesus that was launched in July. Characters available on the app include the Holy Family, the apostles, the prophets, Ruth, Job and Abraham's nephew, Lot. Stéphane Peter, the app's developer and the company's CEO, said: "We stir the AI and tell it: You are Jesus, or you are Moses, or whoever, and knowing what you already have in your database, you respond to the questions based on their characters." Let that sink in. They told the AI "You are Jesus."

There are few limits to what users can ask the app's characters. Whether the topic is personal relationship advice or complex theological matters, they formulate elaborate responses, incorporating at least one Bible verse.

Peter, who said he didn't work with any theological advisers on this project, explained that he trained the AI to "try to stick to the biblical tradition as hard as possible."

This is a problem! Like, who's Biblical tradition? And since when is an app developer qualified to give spiritual advice? I mean, he's as qualified to produce an app that dispenses spiritual advice as I am to give advice on computer engineering.

It's this sort of thing that should make us worried – both about what has already been achieved and who is being written out of the program.

And yet the Church (church with a capital C) has been curiously absent from conversations about AI and how it's used. We often seem the last ones to the party, even though historically we've been at the forefront of innovation and cultural development and played a pivotal role when it came to healthcare, the arts, or public education. I mean, if someone is developing an app where Jesus is giving people advice, we should probably be a part of that development. Because who you say Jesus is, and who they say Jesus is, may not always align. Know what I mean? Which leads me to Matthew . . .

Who do you say that I am? Jesus asks the disciples. Who do you say that I am?

The story is pivotal. Jesus' disciples have been following him around Galilee. They were attracted to him because of his unique teaching, his healing, and his personal charisma. It doesn't appear that the question of who he was ever came up. He was Jesus, of Nazareth, a young teacher, an itinerant rabbi. What else is there to know? So it's startling when he wants to know what people were saying about him, who they thought he was, and then turned to question them: "Who do people say that I am?"

But obviously people have been talking about him because the disciples have something to report. "Some say you're John the Baptist, others say you're Elijah, and some say you're a prophet."

But then Jesus moves to the critical question: But who do you say that I am?

Well . . . who do you say Jesus is?

That's not a hypothetical question, by the way. I think how you answer that question says a lot about you. I think your answer to that question is a reflection of what you hold near and dear; what your priorities are; what your values are. I, for example, tend to believe Jesus was revolutionary, and when he talked about building the Kingdom of God, he called us to a new social order, an order that breaks down the structures of racism, classism, ageism, gender inequality, and the like. As such, I believe we're called to pay attention to justice issues.

But when asked about the oddly mild responses Jesus gives to "touchy issues", the Text with Jesus app developer said his characters tend to avoid taking "offensive stances". Well, I find that curious since Jesus offended a lot of people

with his stances. But one would never know that if they relied on this app for spiritual guidance.

I mean, even in today's passage, Jesus' question is offensive to the setting in which he asks it. Matthew makes a point of telling us that Jesus asks the question in Caesarea Philippi. Not in the comfort of one's own home, or a casual conversation over a meal, or a living room hanging out, but in a city that was originally dedicated to the Greek god Pan, and had a shrine built in Pan's honor. For all we know, Jesus was standing next to that shrine when he asked his question. But not only that, Emperor Augustus gave the city to Herod the, and as a gesture of thanks, Herod built a temple to Augustus and re-named the town Caesarea. Then, Herod's son Philip, upon the death of the emperor, added his own name to it. Are you following? So when Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?", he asks it right in the middle of all these competing loyalties that are saying "I'm the savior. I'm the lord. I'm god." So you better not come around here, Jesus, stirring up trouble and getting people to believe you're the Messiah.

So there's all this tension swirling around when Peter answers the question "Who do you say that I am?" All these competing loyalties are demanding his attention. All these religious alternatives are present, all these false narratives whispering in his ear, staring back at him through literal shrines.

And what does Peter declare? "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God," Friends, that was a very counter-cultural statement to make and quite offensive to some.

But it's also not the end of the story, which is why you can't text Jesus, get a scripture verse to help you out, and call it a day.

In just a few short verses Peter will insist that Jesus fit into his watered down version of divinity; he'll try to walk on water, and blabber on about building monuments on a mountaintop; he'll be a coward on the night Jesus needs him to be brave; and he'll deny him 3 times to save his own skin. But he'll also eat fish with Jesus on the beach after all that, and preach to 3000 people on Pentecost, and call clean what others deem unclean. He'll be insulted, beaten, imprisoned, and eventually made a martyr.

That's a lot of learning, growing, and maturing in faith for someone who gave the right answer but often didn't get it right.

So what does that mean for us in our rapidly advancing technological age?

It means that we may get the answer right, but we still won't get it. That we can ask Siri and Alexa who Jesus is, but we still won't know who Jesus is until we start following Jesus. And we can even text with Jesus, or ask ChatGPT to write an affirmation of faith for us, but until we actually live this thing we call discipleship, we won't have the faintest clue what it all means.

And not only this, but discipleship – being a Christian, is not a solo enterprise. You can ask Siri and Alexa all the things you want to, and have a dialogue with ChatGPT, but at the end of the day, you need a community. There will be days when you have the right answers but you won't have faith, and you'll need theirs to hold you up. As someone once said:

You can get away with a one-on-one, personal relationship with God, just God and (you) and no messy institution to complicate things, as long as things are going well. But when trouble comes and sadness, “none of us is strong enough . . . at the bad times, when it feels as if God does not care about our pain. In moments like these, when God is far away and when our faith is weak or non-existent—in moments like these we need the church, all those other lovers of God, who, in tough times keep the faith for (us).”

AI may get the answers right, but it operates on algorithms and data, devoid of faith, spirituality, or moral conscience. And While AI can simulate emotions, it cannot experience genuine emotions or provide the human empathy and compassion that the church community offers.

Even ChatGPT, when I asked it whether it can replace the church, responded with: we must remember that the church is not merely a place or an institution. It is a living, breathing body of believers, united by their faith in Christ. The church's role in proclaiming the Gospel, nurturing faith, and providing spiritual guidance remains irreplaceable.

Richard Dawkins once famously wrote, “We are survival machines – robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes.”

But faith in Jesus says that we were made for more than this. Jesus calls us to be authentically human, to love, give, serve, and rise above our selfish genes.

As we continue to navigate the complexities of our technological age, let us remember that our faith, community, and connection to Christ are what truly define the church. Let us embrace the challenges and opportunities that AI presents while remaining rooted in the unchanging truth of the Gospel, for when we do this the church's enduring role in nurturing faith and fostering genuine human connections will continue to shine as a testament to the power of God's love in our lives.

Amen.

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