

Is Facebook a help or is it a hindrance? Is Twitter a good thing or does it dumb us down? Do computers help to connect us or separate us? How can technology be an avenue to advance the will of God?

In the class I was taking a few weeks ago in Atlanta, we got into a discussion about whether or not Facebook and other social media sites are helpful for ministry. Facebook, for those of us who have better things to do than spend time chatting with friends on the internet, is a site on the internet where you can connect with others who ask to be your “friend.” There are ways to have conversations, share pictures and video, and play various games.

Some participants in my class shared about how Facebook was a tool to help them stay connected to folks in their congregation. Others said it was a distraction that led them to spend wasted hours tending their virtual farm or participating in virtual combat.

In preparing for this morning, I came across the book entitled *Fractured Hope: On Having Cancer, Talking Faith and Accepting Grace*. The author, Deanna Thompson, describes her experience of being diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. One of the blessings she encountered, she says, is the community of love and support she received from people of faith. She writes:

“I've often heard it said that when the church is really being the church it is especially present with those who suffer, and as the daughter of a pastor, I've witnessed local churches time and again embody the hands and feet of Christ in their ministries to those in pain.”

Thompson then shares her own experience after her diagnosis when she slowly made her way back to Sunday morning worship at her church where she encountered “gentle hugs and warm hands” that made her family “aware in tactile ways of God's embrace during this time of despair.” The church reassured her that she was not walking alone but that they were all touched by “the hands

and feet of a healing Christ.” Physical touch and physical conversations with other human beings became a very important part of her healing experience.

But then Thompson shares how Christ’s community became larger to her than her local congregation. She reflects how, through this cancer journey, she became “awakened to a new – indeed, almost mystical – understanding of the universal body of Christ and of the healing effects it has had on her and her family. The body of Christ was no longer an abstract, intangible concept glossed over during the reciting of the creed.”

Thompson says she has “been surprised and humbled by the way in which, as the author of Colossians says, the fullness of God dwells bodily in Christ. The church, as the embodiment of Christ, has become a tangible agent of grace in her life, a gift of support that has accompanied her through the valley of the shadow of cancer.”

And what particularly surprised her, she states, “is that the experience of the church universal has been mediated through what she calls *the virtual body of Christ*; that is, the body of Christ incarnated in, with, and through the power of Internet sites like Caring Bridge.”

Thompson then shares how the website Caring Bridge has facilitated communication with her loved ones, friends, acquaintances and even those she had never met from across the country and beyond. She says she was upheld by a vast network of support.

Not only were members of her own church kept up-to-date through Caring Bridge, but the website made her story and the updates available to many other communities of faith, from the church where she grew up to the church where she and her husband joined during graduate school in Nashville to her in-laws' church and to a friend's church outside Chicago.

As readership of the Caring Bridge site grew, prayer shawls from other churches

were delivered to their home. They now have six shawls, more than one for each member of the family. These shawls confirm for them again and again the mysterious support and power of the church universal.

She had Mass dedicated to her in India, Sri Lanka, California and Minnesota. She received hundreds of cards from one California parish where Sunday School classes prayed for her weekly; and she was given a medallion blessed and sent to her by a priest friend. These traditions of dedicating, blessing, and honoring – traditions that make rare appearances in the Protestant expressions of church with which she is most familiar – have made their mark on her soul.

After reading these words from Deanna Thompson and reflecting upon my own use of internet sites, I have begun to wonder, how can we here use the power of the internet and technology so that more people come to experience the love and support of Christian community? I know that some of you never touch a computer. Don't change your behavior. My 80 year old parents only recently learned how to use email and I'm not sure it has done much to improve their lifestyle.

But I know that others of you spend quite a bit of your time at work and at home on the internet. Some of you would not know what to do if you could not go on certain social networking sites like Facebook. Others of you could not do your job if you did not have internet accessibility.

But I want to throw it out to you to ponder how you think we can use the internet, social networking sites, you tube, and other forms of technology to spread Christian community.

Paul says in his letter to the church in Colossae that they are not to be deceived by elemental spirits of the universe. The internet, social networking sites, and other forms of technology can be destructive places. They can lead you into places that bring destruction upon you. Like anything, there is a dark side to modern technology.

Computers and the internet can break community. Just ask any couple whose spouse ignores them while they work, play games, or delve into things like day trading or pornography on the internet.

But I guess I am wondering if in the course of our conversations on Facebook, or email, or when you are out with friends, I am wondering what God's Holy Spirit may help us to see if in the course of those conversations we asked, "how could we use this particular technology in such a way that people grow closer to God and to one another as the people of God?"

I wonder if we began to ask these questions if this might lead us into connecting to people who have no use of the church. People who think that people in the church have nothing in common with them. I wonder if questions about using technology in good ways to build Christian community would light a spark in some young people who think that church is an antiquated dinosaur that has no connection to their life.

If we began to ask some questions and pray about how we can use technology to spread Christian community we might discover some new ministry possibilities that we have never thought of before. AMEN.

- Thompson, Deanna, **"The Fullness of God Dwells Bodily – Even in the Virtual Body of Christ"**
http://www.workingpreacher.org/chartingculture.aspx?article_id=378

-Text: Colossians 2

-Given: August 8, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)