

Opening: Facebook is born

- In 2003 a new and different kind of community, known as Facebook was born.
 - Facebook was an online community that would bring people together.
 - It was a community where people who shared common interests and beliefs, could connect with one another in a virtual online community, that would transcend the distance between them.
 - Originally designed for college and high school students living in the U.S., Facebook would quickly gained a tremendous following from people in all walks of life, in all corners of the world.
 - By 2010- 7 years later- the community had grown to 500 million users, worldwide.
 - And just last year, Facebook boasted over 2.3 Billion users.
- A huge part of its popularity comes from the ability for you or for me to place any message we want out in public and it can be seen instantly by our family, our friends and anyone else we want to see it.
 - I can put a picture out there with the words “Ooh, look at me eating this huge pizza” and all of my 1,037 friends can see it.
 - For all practical purposes, we have complete freedom of expression.
 - We can express a feeling, an attitude, an opinion, a picture- literally anything.
 - And our friends have the ability to acknowledge what we post with a smile, or perhaps tears, a heart or a thumbs up or with their own words.
 - It is their way of sharing your life experience.
 - The success of Facebook has spawned a plethora of other online communities, including Twitter, Instagram, Myspace, LinkedIn and Snapchat, to name just a few.
- So, it would appear that things in the online community are going rather well.
 - Everyone is getting connected.

- We are connecting with “friends” of all sorts- from our past and from distances afar.
 - We’re making all sorts of new friends from around the world.
- And we are able to share anything we want with them
 - Anything, at any time, from any place.
- Its beyond amazing.
- Yet appearances can be deceiving and not all is well in the online community.
 - You see, what was originally designed to bring people together- to unite people in community with one another- has become a tool of community destruction.
 - People use this community to propagate falsehoods.
 - Some in the community insensitively use words that offend others.
 - People are using callous words that incite anger, frustration and hatred.
 - People use words to push their own theological or political agenda, without regard to the feelings of others.
 - People by their words create division.
 - And it’s gotten to the point where the people for whom the community was initially created to bring together, have become so disheartened, that they’ve chosen to leave the community.

Paul Builds a community

- And as we examine today’s scripture readings, it’s like after two thousand years, Christians haven’t learned much.
 - And history is repeating itself, just a little bit.
 - You see, in the early first century the Apostle Paul journeyed to Ephesus and while there, he built up a community.
 - Paul made two trips there to build a church, that would continue the ministry he was doing.
 - And during his time in Ephesus, there was tremendous growth in the faith community.
 - Paul built a community of people who shared common beliefs about salvation through Jesus Christ.
 - And people from different faith traditions, joined this community and made the decision to follow Jesus.

- And then Paul left <PAUSE>
 - He left the community, traveling onward in his journeys.
 - And with his absence, members of the community began to revert back to their pre-Christian moral standards and these lesser standards began to define their conduct.
 - And people in the community called out this behavior in harsh ways.
 - There was arguing and fighting among themselves.
 - In this letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul makes a dramatic appeal, summoning the reader to rouse from their moral laziness.
 - He calls on the community to once again be transformed by the Holy Spirit and to live in the light of holy living.
 - Paul exhorts them to speak truthfully and carefully.
 - Don't speak maliciously- keep your words to what is useful for building up those around you.
 - And use words that give grace to those who will hear them.

Today's bulletin cover- a recipe for online harmony

- If you look at the front cover of the bulletin, you'll see an image that I think captures the sentiment of today's scriptures.
 - And it raises an important question "Does my online behavior accurately reflect my desire to love God, love my neighbor and live with purpose?"
 - Because frankly, if what I'm about to say or do online doesn't achieve at least one of those, then I need to stop and do as the front cover suggests
 - I need to "THINK" before I act.
- Social Media is a great thing- it's a great way to share our lives with our friends and family.
 - And it is a great way to this church with our neighbors.
 - Social media presents and excellent opportunity to inform about the events which are happening here.
 - It's a great way to share the Gospel.
 - It's a great way to INVITE PEOPLE TO JOIN US!
 - And whether or not you realize it, your personal behavior online has a lot to do with whether or not other people want to join us in our mission.
 - I mean let's get real for a moment.

- Our online friends who know us well, know that we are Christians and they know belong to First Presbyterian Church.
- And that means that everything we do online, in plain view of the public, is more than a personal statement.
 - It is also a reflection of Jesus whom we profess to follow and the church to which we belong.
- And if any one of us posts something harshly that could be controversial, or might offend the feelings of someone online, will that succeed in bringing them closer to God?
- Will that encourage them to participate in the life of Christ's church?
- So, when you post something online, you might want to ask yourself "Am I thinking specially about how I feel in this moment?"
 - Am I considering how it will be received and whether it will add any value to the furtherance of God's kingdom?
 - Is what I'm about to post, consistent with who I am as a person of faith?
 - Words matter- a lot, my friends.

Anyone is vulnerable to falling into this trap

- Now, I have to admit, I am learning to practice my own teaching in this regard.
- A couple of weeks ago, Sandra asked a question: "has anyone ever read something on Facebook, which went against what you believe and said to themselves 'well, that's all I needed- that changed my mind'?"
 - Of course, the answer is obvious- and really laughable- "no".
 - Yet, I must admit that I have had my share of attempts to change the online world's thinking through my use of copious and persuasive words.
 - During less mature moments, I have used words to show people just how knowledgeable I am and how foolish they are.
 - I have used words that I knew would create in the recipient, an anger that mirrored what I was feeling inside as I wrote those words.
 - And I have only succeeded in turning people off- from me and from the point I am trying to make.
 - Sometimes people get the idea that preachers don't fall victim to such things, but I'm here to tell you that if you put me on that pedestal, I will surely knock myself off.

- The truth is that when a person reads words which in their view are controversial, or hurtful or dishonorable, they retreat to their original position and become further entrenched.
 - And then we've achieved nothing for the community.
 - But when we express thoughts and ideas, enveloped in love, understanding, acceptance and kindness, we have a greater sphere of influence and our point might be heard.
 - I'm stubborn, but my mind can be changed.
 - For example, over the past 30 years, my perspective of alternative lifestyles has been shaped in profound ways I never thought possible.
 - I was raised in an era when LGBTQ people were expected to remain hidden.
 - LGBTQ people were given labels and not allowed to talk openly about who they are and who they love.
 - But my perspective has evolved and it continues to be shaped- not by hurtful words, or personal attacks, or words which anger me.
 - Not by people making me feel inferior because of how smart they are.
 - And not by people pushing me to seeing their perspective.
 - My thinking has been changed by people I love, trust and care about.
 - It is my most trusted friends and spiritual leaders who have shaped my thinking.

M.E

- Nearly 20 years ago, I received an email from a young man who had been part of my church youth group.
 - After his youth group days were over, like many young men from Topeka, he went off to college, graduated and found a good job in the Kansas City area.
 - We had stayed in contact a little, over those years- occasionally catching a Royals game.
 - And one day, he sent me a note to tell me that he was moving to San Diego, to attend law school.
 - But that wasn't the real reason he wrote to me.
 - In truth his email was his way of telling me he was coming out as a gay man.

- As I read his note, my heart just broke when I got to the part about how for so long, he had lived in fear of being who he is.
 - And about the hurt he felt from the attitudes of small-minded middle-America.
 - Sitting there reading his note, I wracked my conscious mind, hoping, praying that I would not recall an insensitive comment or joke- at his expense- which had come from my lips.
- Concluding his email, he said simply “So I write to you because your friendship has meant a lot to me in the past, and I hope this doesn't change anything for you. I haven't changed, but I might have changed in your eyes. So, I finish up this email with hope that our friendship continues, but with understanding that our friendship might not ever be able to be the same.
- I’m going to tell you- in that moment, feeling the closeness, the love- the trust- the relationship that he and I had shared over those years-
- And hearing these words from him- words of complete openness, honesty and truthfulness - my perspective was shaped in ways like never before.
- And the best I could come up with was to tell him that he was my dear friend- and that this didn’t change a thing about him, in my mind- except to say that he was now the bravest person I know.
- I concluded my note, telling him that I loved him and that I was proud of him.
- Do you see? It is through love and understanding and acceptance, when we are able to let down our guard, to listen and understand where another person is coming from.
 - The words of my friend gave grace to me.
 - And it is in those moments when our perspective can be shaped.

Wrap it up

- We enjoy the freedom of expression like nowhere else in the world.
 - And with freedom, comes responsibility.
 - And in expressing ourselves- online, or anywhere- if what we’re about to say, won’t pass through filters of love, understanding and acceptance- then perhaps it’s best if we just say nothing at all.

- If we really want to make a difference in a positive way- if our goal is to invite others to join with us on our mission to love God, love our neighbor and live with purpose, then we need to think carefully.
- May all that we say, be an invitation to others and an offering to God. Amen.