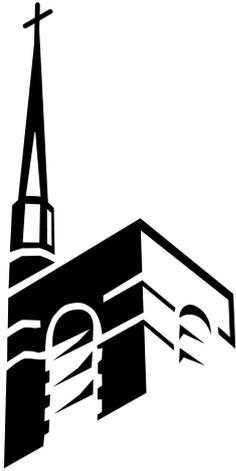


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## “GOD, GADGETS AND CONNECTIONS”

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Scripture: Psalm 135:15-18 and 1 John 5:21

I have read the traditional translation of this passage from the Psalms. Now I would like to read you a more up-to-date translation:

The idols of the nations are smart phones, the work of human hands. They have screens but they do not speak; they have cameras front and back but do not see, they have speakers but do not hear, there is no breath in their mouths unless we put it there. Those who make them and all who trust them shall become like them.

What does it mean to become like them? Inanimate animate objects activated by us. I think in some cases we have come to worship gadgets. Just last week I was passing an outdoor table of four young people who were enjoying the mild weather and a soft drink together, or so it seemed. What caught my attention was the fact that that all four of them were looking down at their smart phones, seemingly not engaging the others who were present. If you attend a movie at the Palladium 12 on a Friday or Saturday, you will feel like you are in the house of blue lights with a significant number of persons engaging their smart phones rather than the movie on the screen—although I suppose you could say it was multi-tasking. Have you ever felt that some people seem to care more for what is on their phone than those present at a meeting or presentation? So do gadgets disengage us or connect us? Somewhat like money, we can make them idols or we can see them for what they are: vehicles for communication and connection, not to be worshiped but used.

Where do gadgets intersect with faith? I suspect there is even a God App. I know there is at least a prayer app, a devotional app, a Bible app. The question is, do they help us connect to God or isolate ourselves from God? This weekend our delegates and Methodist clergy are in Adrian at The Detroit Annual Conference, celebrating a fundamental tenet of Methodism: connectionalism. We at FUMC are connected to the church down the street, an example being the AIDS Memorial Service this evening at the Presbyterian church, or across town like at Baldwin or Cass. Out of the country, just think of our Methodist mission connections in Costa Rica, Zambia, Prague, Estonia and Vietnam.

Think about how we used to connect for centuries and millennia. It was by oral story telling passed from one generation to another. Then it was writing. If you attended the funeral for Jack Harnish’s mother-in-law, Marge Stone, you learned the power of connection in written letters which carried the family story forward and backward. Will we have the same memory trail from

e-mail or texts? Think of Paul's letters which transmitted the faith through the ages from the particular to the universal. Then in the 20<sup>th</sup> century we had the telegraph, the party line phone, and a return to oral communications though the ubiquitous cell phone where we are expected to be in connection 24/7. Texting seems to have replaced oral communications. Modern technology, whether by Face Time or Skype, has enabled us to return to face-to-face communications. All this invites me to ask, How do we use these gadgets to connect with God, God's people and God's creation?

When in Tokyo, I remember being a slave to the telex machine, and the same in the Navy when instant response was expected. E-mail can still drive our priorities as though everyone was the most important, requiring instant response. I resemble that remark! Today you have the gadgets but the medium is the message, be it Twitter, Facebook, or Linked-In, the so-called social media. All these avenues help us stay connected with friends and family far and near. Is there a high tech God connection? We can use these media to proclaim God's Word. I have in all my Facebook friends, except for my clergy friends, noted very little faith sharing. Are we missing an opportunity here to use modern social media to proclaim the Good News on a personal, not just an institutional, level?

Will these modern conveniences be used to offer God praise and worship? I vividly remember the day Jeff Nelson's cell phone went off with a call from God while he was giving his internship valedictory. It was a memorable use of this new technology. I have watched preachers and eulogizers use their iPads to deliver their remarks. How far away are we from a live dialogue sermon with Twitter feed?

How does one stay in touch with God? What are your options in this gadget-filled world? Can your iPad, Twitter account, and Facebook account help you connect? They can help you connect to what God's people are doing for encouragement and prayer. But the old standards still prevail: turning off our gadgets and entering the silence to hear the still small voice of God. We need to find that place and time where we will not be interrupted by our cell phone. Attending a Taize service? Going on a retreat, meaning getting away from all our daily connections to spend time with God? Give some thought this year about how you will stay connected to God?

What is idolatry and do you know when you have crossed the line? The New Testament has tended to spiritualize idolatry, referring it not to the literal worship of images of gods but to the giving of priority to interests other than God. Idolatry has often been called spiritual adultery. Webster's definition is: "immoderate attachment or devotion to something." Even for those who do not bow physically before a statue, idolatry is a matter of the heart—pride, self-centeredness, greed, gluttony, a love for possessions, and ultimately, rebellion against God.

Scott Chrostek, in his book *Pursuit* which the Arbon Dennis men's group is currently reading, talks about the notion that "the missional life is about altering our vision. It demands that we adjust our vision to the divine rhythms of the God in whom and through whom we 'live and have our being.'"(Acts 17:28)

It's about shifting the way we see things. Pursuing God requires that we look for evidence of God's presence wherever we are and wherever we go, and let me

assure you that God is working everywhere. God's presence, God's surprising and transforming power even lives in you God calls us through all kinds of mediums (vocations, locations, personalities and talents) to join in God's mission." (*Pursuit*, page 45)

Our communication gadgets can either enhance our ability to see and hear God in the world through the connections of social media or they can be a distraction, diverting our eyes from God's presence around us as we stare at our screens. "We are called to encounter God and discover God's mission wherever we are, just as we are. It is our pursuit of God in all of life's dimensions that constitutes the bedrock of the missional life." (page 27)

Which leads me not to condemn our gadgets, but ask you to reflect on how these gadgets help you make connections. As a cure for smart phone and tablet distractions, I am suggesting a gadget Sabbath with your connectors turned off, whether for an hour, a day, or whatever suits you. An example in our automobile society might be to take a walk each day.

Walking has a surprising number of parallels with the spiritual life. At an initial glance, walking seems rather unproductive, similar in many ways to spending time in prayer. There are usually faster modes of transportation. In our type A, active lifestyles, walking can put you in a more relaxed or contemplative state. Prayer, in much the same way, while not as productive as doing something, might in fact sustain us in our doing.

Walking, like prayer, can make us feel more like human beings rather than human doings. We could all travel in a faster way than walking or spend time being more productive, or be connected 24/7. However, you might feel liberated when you don't have to produce more every minute, you don't have to be connected every minute, you don't have to rush to every place. You can slow down and smell the roses with a simple walk if only for a few minutes each day.

(adapted from *Walking Cure* by Michael Rossmann, S.J.  
in the May 13, 2013 edition of *America*)

Have you ever had that sinking feeling that "Oh my God, I left me smart phone at home and I feel naked"? What is it about that piece of hardware/software that can cause such anxiety? Is it an object we worship and are therefore distracted from God? Or do we surround ourselves with these communication gadgets not because we are hopeless idolaters, although that can be very possible, but because they convey meanings for us. For example, they tether us to loved ones and friends, especially those we do not see face to face on a regular basis. They connect us to communities that help us create a sense of identity. Our attachments to technology can and often do become disordered if our souls are not submitted to our first and final love, who is God. As one reflects on our technology, I hear the admonition in Matthew's gospel 6:21: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." For where your smart phone is in importance to your life, there will your heart be also. (Adapted from *My Phone. My Friend* by Katelyn Beatty in the *Living Church*, March 3, 2013)

Reflect then on Psalm 135:15-18 in contemporary idiom:

The idols of the nations are smart phones, the work of human hands. They have screens but they do not speak; they have cameras front and back but do not see; they have speakers but do not hear; there is no breath in their mouths unless we put it there. Those who make them and all who trust them shall become like them.

Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.