

"FACEBOOK CHURCH"

A SERMON BASED ON THE HISTORY OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES (4:32-35) AND PRESENTED FOR ORLEAN UMC ON APRIL 11, 2021----THE FIRST SUNDAY FOLLOWING EASTER SUNDAY

IN 2001, RENOWNED SOCIOLOGIST AND POLITICAL SCIENTIST ROBERT PUTNAM WROTE HIS INFLUENTIAL THESIS ABOUT THE DECLINE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN AMERICA.....

***BOWLING ALONE: THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY* DESCRIBED THE CULTURE'S RETREAT FROM TRADITIONAL IN-PERSON SOCIAL NETWORKS LIKE CIVIC GROUPS, SERVICE CLUBS AND EVEN CHURCHES TOWARD THE MORE ISOLATING KINDS OF ENTERTAINMENT AND INTERACTION MADE POSSIBLE BY TECHNOLOGY.**

ALMOST RIGHT ON CUE, MARK ZUCKERBERG FOUNDED THE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM FACEBOOK WHILE A COLLEGE SOPHOMORE AT HARVARD IN 2004.

ORIGINALLY DESIGNED AS A PLATFORM FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS TO CHECK ONE ANOTHER OUT, FACEBOOK IS NOW A WORLDWIDE NETWORK OF SOME 2 BILLION USERS WHO INTERACT WITH MANY "FRIENDS," SOME OF WHOM THEY HAVE NEVER MET IN PERSON. WHAT WAS ORIGINALLY A CHANCE TO CONNECT AND RECONNECT WITH NEW AND OLD FRIENDS HAS MORPHED INTO A GLOBAL PHENOMENON THAT PURPORTEDLY SHRINKS THE DISTANCE BETWEEN PEOPLE AND GIVES THEM AN OPPORTUNITY TO INTERACT AND SHARE THEMSELVES WITH ONE ANOTHER.

NOW IN ITS SECOND DECADE, FACEBOOK IS ENGAGED IN A NEW MISSION..... WITH A NOD TO ROBERT PUTNAM, ZUCKERBERG NOTED IN A JUNE 2017 SPEECH: "IT'S STRIKING THAT FOR DECADES, MEMBERSHIP IN ALL KINDS OF GROUPS HAS DECLINED BY AS MUCH AS ONE-QUARTER. THAT'S A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO NOW NEED TO FIND A SENSE OF PURPOSE AND SUPPORT SOMEWHERE ELSE."

FOR ZUCKERBERG, THAT SOMEWHERE ELSE IS FACEBOOK, WHICH HE SEES AS A POSTMODERN, POST-TRADITIONAL FORM OF "CHURCH."

"PEOPLE WHO GO TO CHURCH ARE MORE LIKELY TO VOLUNTEER AND GIVE TO CHARITY," SAYS ZUCKERBERG, "NOT JUST BECAUSE THEY'RE RELIGIOUS, BUT BECAUSE THEY'RE PART OF A COMMUNITY."

ZUCKERBERG'S VISION OF FACEBOOK AS A KIND OF CHURCH DOESN'T RULE OUT GOD, BUT IT DOES LIFT UP A KIND OF COMMUNITY FOR COMMUNITY'S SAKE.

IN THE FACEBOOK CHURCH, WHO OR WHAT IS BEING WORSHIPED? WHAT'S THE COMMUNITY'S PURPOSE? AND WHAT ABOUT ALL THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE YET TO LOG IN?

***AND, PERHAPS EVEN MORE IMPORTANTLY,
WHAT DO ALL THOSE CAT VIDEOS PEOPLE POST
EVERY DAY HAVE TO DO WITH ANY OF THIS?***

**COMPARING A VIRTUAL CHURCH OF BILLIONS
OF ISOLATED INDIVIDUALS TAPPING ON
KEYBOARDS TO THE REAL THING ----ESPECIALLY
IN THESE TIMES OF GLOBAL PANDEMIC ----WILL
CAUSE MOST CHURCH FOLK TO SMILE AND
PERHAPS LAUGH.**

BUT WE HAVE TO ASK THE QUESTION: WHAT IS THE CHURCH MISSING THAT WOULD ALLOW ZUCKERBERG AND MILLIONS OF OTHERS TO WANT TO SUBSTITUTE WADING THROUGH POLITICAL RANTS AND VACATION SELFIES FOR REAL INTERACTION WITH A LIVING, BREATHING, WORSHIPING COMMUNITY?

HOW HAS THE CHURCH ALLOWED THE *BOWLING ALONE* THEORY TO BECOME A REALITY?

FOR THE ANSWER, WE NEED TO REACH BACK TO THE CHURCH'S ROOTS, AND THERE'S NO BETTER PLACE TO DO THAT THAN BY READING THE BOOK OF ACTS.

**ALMOST NOBODY WORSHIPS, EVANGELIZES OR
BOWLS ALONE IN THAT BOOK AND ALL THE
INTERACTION IS FACE TO FACE.**

THIS IS WHAT THE CHURCH DOES.

**WHILE FACEBOOK'S INNOVATION HAS HAD AN
AMAZING IMPACT IN THE WORLD BY BRINGING
US FACES (OF FRIENDS AND FAMILY) RIGHT TO
OUR SCREEN, *THE CHURCH ALLOWS US TO
EXPERIENCE FACES* -- THE FACES AND LIVES OF
PEOPLE IN A COMMUNITY OF FAITH, A
COMMUNITY IN WHICH WE ACT, SERVE AND
WORK TOGETHER FOR THE GLORY OF GOD.**

**FROM THE VERY BEGINNING OF THE BOOK WE
LEARN THAT GOD, VIA THE HOLY SPIRIT,
CREATED THIS COMMUNITY CALLED CHURCH
NOT FOR THE PURPOSE OF PEOPLE MERELY
CHECKING ONE ANOTHER OUT, BUT FOR
INTRODUCING PEOPLE TO THE GOOD NEWS OF
WHAT GOD HAD DONE THROUGH THE LIFE,
DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST.
THE VERY PREMISE OF THE COMMUNITY WAS
THAT GOD HAD COME IN PERSON IN JESUS AND
HADN'T SETTLED FOR SHARING A MEME OR
POSTING A MANIFESTO.**

JESUS WOULD FORM A REAL COMMUNITY OF DISCIPLES, COMPLETE WITH THEIR OWN QUIRKS AND FLAWS, AND TRAIN THEM HOW TO INTERACT WITH OTHERS IN ORDER TO BRING THEM INTO GOD'S KINGDOM. THE SPIRIT EMPOWERED THEM FOR THIS WORK AND, AS A RESULT, THE COMMUNITY PLATFORM GREW BY LEAPS AND BOUNDS.

IMMEDIATELY, THIS COMMUNITY BEGAN CONNECTING IN PERSON AROUND TABLES IN THEIR HOMES, IN THE TEMPLE AND THROUGH SHARING THEIR GOODS WITH ONE ANOTHER

**IN OUR TEXT, WE GET A MORE DETAILED
WINDOW INTO HOW THE COMMUNITY
FUNCTIONED, AND IT WAS A LOT MORE ABOUT
SELFLESS SERVICE THAN SELFIES!**

**WHEN ZUCKERBERG CREATED FACEBOOK, IT
WAS AN EVOLUTION OF THE ORIGINAL VERSION
HE CALLED "FACEMASH," WHICH ALLOWED
COLLEGE COEDS TO COMPARE PHOTOS OF
FELLOW STUDENTS AND DETERMINE WHETHER
THEY WERE "HOT OR NOT."**

**IT'S THE KIND OF HUMAN COMPARISON WE'VE
BEEN DOING EVER SINCE ADAM AND EVE
DISCOVERED THEY WERE NAKED, SO IT'S LITTLE
WONDER THAT AS FACEBOOK MORPHED INTO A
REALITY, IT CAUSED USERS TO WANT TO PUT
FORWARD THEIR BEST SELF BY MANAGING THE
IMPRESSIONS OTHERS MIGHT HAVE ABOUT
THEM.**

**WHAT WE SEE IN SOMEONE'S FACEBOOK
PROFILE IS PRECISELY WHAT THEY WANT US TO
SEE AND NO MORE.**

THOSE VACATION PHOTOS, PICS OF NEW CARS AND BEAUTIFUL SELFIES ARE ALL DESIGNED IN SOME WAY TO SHOW EVERYONE ELSE THAT WE'RE DOING QUITE WELL, THANK YOU VERY MUCH. FOR SOME PEOPLE, THE GOAL IS TO ATTRACT MORE "FRIENDS" AND RECEIVE MORE "LIKES," WHICH CAN MAKE EVEN THE MOST MATURE ADULT BEGIN ACTING LIKE AN INSECURE AND SELF-OBSSESSED SEVENTH-GRADER. THERE'S EVEN EVIDENCE THAT USING FACEBOOK CAN CAUSE DEPRESSION IN SOME WHO SEE THE LIVES THEIR "FRIENDS" PRESENT ONLINE AS BEING MUCH BETTER THAN THEIR OWN.

THE CHURCH, ON THE OTHER HAND, WAS DESIGNED AS A COMMUNITY WHERE PEOPLE FOCUS ON OTHERS MORE THAN THEMSELVES. IT WAS CREATED AS A GROUP CENTERED ON BELIEF IN THE GOD WHO HAD SAVED THEM BECAUSE THEY WERE ALL IN THE SAME SITUATION -- THEY WERE ALL SINNERS IN NEED OF GRACE. THEY HAD NO IMPRESSION TO MANAGE BECAUSE THEY WERE ALL OUTSIDERS TO THEIR CULTURE. INSTEAD, THEY WERE "OF ONE HEART AND SOUL," COMPLETELY FOCUSED ON WHAT GOD HAD DONE FOR THEM IN JESUS (V. 32).

THEY MODELED THEIR LIVES AFTER HIM BY VOLUNTARILY AND SACRIFICIALLY CARING FOR OTHERS TO THE POINT OF SEEING THEIR OWN PERSONAL POSSESSIONS AS BEING AVAILABLE TO EVERYONE ELSE IN THE COMMUNITY (V. 32).

AT THIS POINT, SOMEONE MIGHT POST A RANT THAT THIS WAS AN EARLY FORM OF "COMMUNISM," BUT RATHER THAN BEING COMPELLED BY AN EXTERNAL FORCE, THE EARLY CHURCH GAVE OUT OF THE INTERNAL RESOURCES OF COMPASSION MADE POSSIBLE BY THE INDWELLING HOLY SPIRIT.

**COUPLED WITH THAT DEEP SENSE OF
COMMUNITY WAS A CENTRAL NARRATIVE THAT
DROVE THE CHURCH'S ACTION AND MISSION.
THE CHURCH WAS CENTERED ON THE STORY OF
THE APOSTLES' TESTIMONY THAT JESUS HAD
RISEN FROM THE DEAD, WHICH HAD ENABLED
THEM TO RECEIVE GOD'S GRACE IN ITS
FULLNESS AND COMPELLED THEM TO SHARE
THAT GOOD NEWS WITH THE WORLD (V. 33). THE
STORY BECAME THE MOTIVATING AND UNITING
FACTOR IN THE CHURCH'S LIFE AND WORK --
INDEED, IT'S WHAT MADE THEM A "CHURCH" IN
THE FIRST PLACE.**

FACEBOOK, ON THE OTHER HAND, HAS NO OVERARCHING NARRATIVE OTHER THAN THE COLLECTIVE STORIES OF ITS USERS AND NO AUTHORITATIVE TESTIMONY OTHER THAN THE INDIVIDUAL'S OPINION AND WORLDVIEW.

ZUCKERBERG'S VISION OF COMMUNITY DOESN'T INCLUDE A CENTRAL FOCUS OTHER THAN THE HUMAN DESIRE FOR SELF-ELEVATION, WHICH ULTIMATELY LEADS US BACK TO WHAT THE BIBLE CALLS "SIN." INSTEAD OF A CENTRAL NARRATIVE, THE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM OFTEN PRESENTS A CONSTANT MISHMASH OF PERSONAL STORIES, SILLY VIDEOS, AND ANGRY SCREEDS THAT ARE DESIGNED TO DRAW LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE TO ONE'S PAGE.

**AFTER ALL, NOBODY HAS LIKELY EVER SAID,
"YOUR RECENT FACEBOOK POST CAUSED ME
TO TOTALLY CHANGE MY MIND ON THAT ISSUE."
GRANTED, MANY FACEBOOK USERS ENJOY THE
ABILITY TO STAY IN TOUCH WITH FAMILY
MEMBERS WHO ARE ELSEWHERE IN THE
COUNTRY, AND IF FRIENDS ARE POSTING ANGRY
POLITICAL POSTS OR OTHER OFFENSIVE IDEAS,
THEY CAN BE EASILY UNFRIENDED. IF YOU ARE
A FACEBOOK PERSON --- THE LAST FOUR YEARS
CERTAINLY EXEMPLIFY THE POINTS MADE HERE
---OUR ANGER---DISTRUST---AND DIVISION AS A
PEOPLE IS NOWHERE MORE EVIDENT THAN ON
FACEBOOK**

**BUT IT WAS THIS NEED FOR COMMUNITY THAT
LED THE EARLY CHURCH TO BE GENEROUS
WITH ONE ANOTHER. AS GOD HAD BEEN
GENEROUS WITH HIS GRACE IN JESUS, SO THEY
WOULD BE GENEROUS WITH ONE ANOTHER,
BELIEVING THAT THEIR LIVES WERE PART OF
SOMETHING MUCH BIGGER THAN THEMSELVES.
LUKE SAYS THAT THERE WAS "NOT A NEEDY
PERSON AMONG THEM" AND THAT MEMBERS OF
THE CHURCH COMMUNITY SOLD PROPERTY AND
GAVE THE PROCEEDS TO THE APOSTLES TO
DISTRIBUTE TO THOSE WHO WERE IN NEED**

**THAT'S A LOT DIFFERENT FROM THE SORT OF
"CHARITY" ENVISIONED BY ZUCKERBERG,
WHICH USUALLY INVOLVES NOTHING MORE
THAN A COUPLE OF CLICKS TO MAKE A
DONATION OR SHARING A SUPPORTIVE EMOJI
ON SOMEONE'S TIMELINE. THE EARLY CHURCH'S
SOCIAL PLATFORM WAS DRIVEN BY
GENEROSITY DEVELOPED OUT OF A SENSE OF
GRATITUDE TO GOD. PEOPLE GAVE OUT OF
THEIR SCARCITY SO THAT OTHERS COULD HAVE
ENOUGH.**

FACEBOOK IS DRIVEN BY ADVERTISING, AND GIVES PEOPLE THE OPPORTUNITY TO MAYBE GIVE A LITTLE THEY MIGHT HAVE LEFT OVER AFTER THAT EXPENSIVE VACATION.

IT'S INTERESTING THAT LUKE LIFTS OUT ONE NAME AS AN EXAMPLE FROM HIS DESCRIPTION OF THE EARLY CHURCH. A LEVITE FROM THE ISLAND OF CYPRUS (FROM THE PRIESTLY TRIBE) WAS NAMED JOSEPH, BUT HE RECEIVED THE NICKNAME "BARNABAS" FROM THE APOSTLES BECAUSE HE WAS CONSTANTLY ENCOURAGING OTHERS IN THE COMMUNITY (V. 36).

THIS "SON OF ENCOURAGEMENT" HAD SOLD A FIELD AND GIVEN THE PROCEEDS TO THE APOSTLES, AND WE WILL LATER LEARN WHY. HE DIDN'T NEED THE REAL ESTATE ANYMORE BECAUSE HE WAS ABOUT TO JOIN ANOTHER CONVERT WHO UNDERWENT A NAME CHANGE --- --FROM SAUL TO PAUL----- AND HEAD OUT ON A MISSION TO SPREAD THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT JESUS CHRIST. THE CHURCH VIEWED BARNABAS' GIFT AS ENCOURAGEMENT, WHICH IS SOMETHING THAT IS OFTEN IN SHORT SUPPLY IN SOCIAL MEDIA, WHERE CYBERBULLYING IS MORE OF AN ISSUE THAN CYBER-ENCOURAGING....

**WHILE FACEBOOK HAS LAUNCHED A
REVOLUTION IN THE WAY PEOPLE RELATE TO
ONE ANOTHER IN A TECHNOLOGICAL AGE, IT
CAN NEVER REPLACE THE CHURCH AND ITS
REAL LIFE IMPACT.**

**THIS ASSUMES, OF COURSE, THAT THE CHURCH
GETS BACK TO ITS PRIMARY MESSAGE AND
"BUSINESS" MODEL! IT'S INTERESTING TO NOTE
THAT WHEN LUKE WROTE THIS SECTION OF
ACTS, MANY OF THE VERBS ARE WRITTEN IN
THE "ITERATIVE IMPERFECT" MOOD, WHICH
MEANS THEY SHOULD READ SOMETHING LIKE,**

**"THE CHURCH USED TO HOLD ALL THINGS IN
COMMON, ETC." -----*EVEN AT THE TIME OF
LUKE'S WRITING, HE SEEMED TO BE PINING FOR
A REVIVAL OF REAL COMMUNITY IN THE
CHURCH.***

***PERHAPS IF WE TOOK SERIOUSLY THE WAY OF
COMMUNITY IN THE EARLY CHURCH WE
WOULDN'T BE COMPETING WITH A VIRTUAL
SUBSTITUTE. WE CAN ONCE AGAIN BE PEOPLE
OF THE BOOK WHO SHARE WITH OTHERS FACE
TO FACE!***

**PRAISE GOD AND MAY IT BE SO FOR YOU AND
FOR ME.....AMEN**