Transfiguring Chatbots
Last Epiphany, Year A: Matthew 17.1-9
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Years ago, when Ardelle and I were still testing the waters of the Episcopal church, a visiting priest stepped into the pulpit one Sunday and said, "I'm not going to preach on any of the lectionary readings for today. I'd like to talk about spiritual healing." Now I hadn't been to preaching school yet, but I had been paying enough attention over the years to realize a preacher is at least supposed to pretend that this week's bundle of personal opinions and pet peeves has at least a cursory relationship with a biblical text. I appreciated his honesty, but wasn't so sure that what I was about to hear qualified as a sermon.

Whatever he did say next is lost to me now. And this probably has more to do with the fact that I didn't find anything memorable in his opinions on spiritual healing than it does with the principle that a sermon ought to at least wink at a story from the Bible at some point.

By now you're probably onto me. You're thinking, "He's feeling guilty about the fact that whatever he's about to tell us might not have much to do with today's gospel lesson." If you're feeling generous, you might also be thinking, "I doubt the sermon will be interesting, but it might be fun to watch him squirm for a few minutes." And if you're thinking such things, you're basically right.

But in my defense, we just read the story of the Transfiguration. Again. We read it every year on the Last Sunday of Epiphany and we read it again in August on the Feast of the Transfiguration. That might not seem very often to you, but when you're preaching it seems like it comes up as often as … I don't know. It comes up as often as Poplar does when you're giving someone directions in Memphis. How do you get there from here? Well, you could just take Poplar and then… What's the gospel next Sunday? Well, it's probably the Transfiguration. So, if there's not enough Transfiguration in this sermon, just keep coming. It'll come around again before you know it.

Friday morning, I was reading an email newsletter called "The Convivial Society." It's by Michael Sacasas, an insightful critic who writes about technology and culture. This piece was about AI chatbots, which are essentially, in case you've missed all the fuss about them, computer programs that talk back to you. They've become so sophisticated that English teachers worry that soon the best term paper they receive on Moby Dick will be the one the student who procrastinated the longest turns in, since he would have been the most recent person to ask a chatbot to write the best term paper ever on Moby Dick, which the bot would be obliged to do.

And, no. ChatGPT did not write this sermon for me. Although that's probably just what a chatbot would say if it did. So, who knows?

The first chatbot was actually developed in the 1960s. It was a pretty simple program that used the principles of Rogerian psychotherapy, in which the therapist essentially reframes what the client says in the form of a question. Joseph Weizenbaum, the computer scientist who created it, named the program ELIZA. What unsettled Weizenbaum was not the prospect of human therapists losing their jobs. That hadn't been a serious consideration. What shook him was when his own secretary asked him one day if he would leave the room so she could speak to ELIZA alone. "What I had not realized," he later wrote, "is that extremely short exposures to a relatively simple computer program could induce powerful delusional thinking in quite normal people." He went on to say he was startled to see how quickly people became emotionally involved with ELIZA and how "unequivocally they anthropomorphized it." That tendency to treat computers as human came to be known as the ELIZA effect.

I'm even less qualified to weigh in on the merits and dangers of artificial intelligence than I am about spiritual healing, whatever that is. But what caught my attention was the reason Michael Sacasas was expressing concern. It wasn't because of the power of any particular AI tool or the belief that a computer program might become sentient. His fears are grounded in two far more mundane beliefs. Here's how he puts them: "First, that human beings are fundamentally social creatures, who desire to know and be known in the context of meaningful human relationships, ideally built on trust and mutual respect. Second, that we live in an age of increasing loneliness and isolation in which, for far too many people, this profound human need is not being adequately met."

I believe these two things to be true as well. I also believe they bring us firmly into the realm for which the Church was made, wouldn't you agree?

In light of these two beliefs, Sacasas wanted to reframe slightly what the first chatbot creator called "delusional thinking." He writes, "what if the problem was not that normal people became subject to delusional thinking, but that lonely people found it difficult to resist the illusion that they were being heard and attended to with a measure of care and interest? We anthropomorphize [we treat things as if they are human] because we do not do not want to be alone."

I have no idea whether Michael Sacasas is right about chatbots. I do believe he is absolutely right about us.

Peter is often given a hard time about his performance on the mountain at the Transfiguration. In Mark and Luke, after he proposes the three dwellings, the commentary follows that Peter was terrified and didn't know what else to say. It was all so much nervous chatter. Matthew includes no such commentary. Everybody just ignores Peter's suggestion and God actually begins talking over him, announcing that Jesus is God's son, God's beloved. And what all three versions agree upon is that all that splendor — the shining faces and dazzling clothes, the bright cloud and the voice from heaven, and the presence of the long dead prophets themselves — it all just ends as quickly as it began. And everybody walks back down the mountain and into their lives. Everybody. Jesus included.

Jesus says not to tell anyone about what happened on the mountain. And before they even get to town, a crowd brings him a boy suffering from epilepsy who falls into the fire when the seizures grip him. Jesus heals him. Implores the people to have faith, even if they do live in a world in which children suffer as this boy has suffered. He said a mustard seed of it will do. And then he's talking about taxes and what it means to truly be free and the world's upside-down views of greatness and how we shouldn't put stumbling blocks in front of our children.

They came down from the mountain and walked back into their lives. Into lives that didn't worry about chatbots, but, in so many ways, lives that were just like ours. Magnificent and mysterious as the scene on the mountain was, it didn't provide any quick technological fix to what ailed the world most. Maybe that's what Peter hoped. I sure can't blame him for hoping such a thing.

But Jesus returned to a world in which these two truths were already very old: First, human beings are fundamentally social creatures, who desire to know and be known in the context of meaningful human relationships, ideally built on trust and mutual respect. Second, there is too much loneliness and isolation in which this profound human need is not being adequately met. Jesus didn't come to deploy some flashy and miraculous technological fix to the collection of broken relationships we call sin. He walked back down from the mountain and brought healing to a boy, whose epilepsy not only made him hurt, but must have made him lonely. He didn't say, "You should have seen what we saw up on that mountain!" He went to work, teaching us to be in a more liberating relationship with our money and our things and even our own bodies, teaching us how to introduce forgiveness into our everyday lives, telling us that each of us is like a loved and precious lost sheep, whom the great shepherd goes thrashing madly into the brush to find.

I don't know beans about chatbots. Truly. If you're curious about those, you should at least talk to someone who's typed something into one before, which I haven't. But I do know that looking for healing and wholeness in all the wrong places, and the illusion that we can find healing and wholeness on our own, without the mess and bother of human relationship — these are the oldest of human conditions that take on different forms in different ages. But they all exploit the irreplaceable need each one of us has to be loved, forgiven, accepted. The irreplaceable need each one of us has to matter to someone else.

And I also believe to my core that, for all the horrific bugs in our operating system over the centuries, the Church still bears something sacred and relevant and as desperately needed as ever to this lonely, hurting world of ours. We don't have to be a perfect community. Just one that's humbly faithful to the way of Jesus in our relationships with friend, sinner, and stranger alike. And when we are, our life together here at Calvary can still be a source of miraculous cures.

If someone asks you what the sermon was about on Sunday and you say, "The preacher said to give up something called ChatGPT for Lent and to come to church," you'd be half right. If any technology has an unhealthy level of control over your life — whether a slot machine or an automobile or your phone or your bot — do find someone who can help, especially if you think such things might be increasing your loneliness and

disconnection from other people. But I do know something about the healing power of church when we're being faithful. Then again, I'm hardly objective on the matter. So, I think I'll end with the end of that piece — just to remind you — not written by a pastor or a priest, but by a technology critic named Michael Sacasas.

"I remain foolishly committed to the idea that our best hope lies still in the cultivation of friendship and community through the practice of hospitality. 'If I had to choose one word to which hope can be tied,' the social critic Ivan Illich once explained, 'it is hospitality… A practice of hospitality… recovering threshold, table, patience, listening, and from there generating seedbeds for virtue and friendship on the one hand. On the other hand radiating out for possible community, for rebirth of community.' [Michael Sacasas continues…] I recognize that this seems wholly inadequate as a response to the challenges we face, but I also think it is, in the literal sense of getting at the root (or radix) of things, the most radical solution we can pursue."

Well, there it is, friends. Perhaps the bots are not what's most radical. You are. Or rather, we are, when we are rooted. We are, when we build a little faithful Christian community and practice hospitality as we welcome others to our table. Look around. We're not irrelevant. Jesus's Church may have never had more healing, even lifesaving work in this lonely world to do.