

“It Is Not for You to Know”

Acts 1:6-14

7th Sunday of Easter

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Westminster Presbyterian Church

Ben Dorr

How many of you have heard a story or two or twenty about AI in recent months?

In the deluge of news coverage about AI, I was fascinated to read how it’s already changed the experience of getting a college education.

There’s software out there that professors can use to try to determine whether a student has actually written the paper that they turned in, or whether it was AI that wrote the paper.

But according to the article, it’s not that simple.

What does it mean if the software says that a paper is 100% AI?

Or 50% AI?

Or 18% AI?

And how does a professor determine the difference between using AI to cheat, and using it in a helpful way?

For example, one student cited in the article was making an argument in his paper, and he asked AI to make the counter-argument. The AI response raised a couple points that the student had not considered, and so he addressed those counter-arguments in his paper...

That sounds like a clever and creative use of AI.

But of course, many students won’t take that approach, and it’s taking a toll. Not just on what students learn.

It’s taking a toll on their teachers.

As one professor put it:

“AI has already changed the classroom into something I no longer recognize...I fell in love with teaching, and I have loved my time in the classroom, but with ChatGPT, everything feels pointless.”¹

What will college education look like during the next 5-10 years?

No one knows.

We don't know what it will mean.

We don't know at this moment what AI will change...

about schools, about science, about national security...

or even about church.

Do you think AI will change anything about church?

I got a little curious, so this week, I pulled up ChatGPT
and I asked it to write a sermon on Acts 1:6-14.

IF THIS REALLY WORKS, I've got a free Friday & Saturday!

Just to be clear, the sermon that you are hearing today was NOT
written in any way by ChatGPT!

What came up was a pretty generic sermon, nothing offensive, but
nothing close to what ANY of your pastors here would write. But I
wonder if the day will come what ChatGPT could do it?

I wonder if the day will arrive when I could instruct ChatGPT to
write a sermon in the style of the Rev. Ben Dorr from Greenville, and it
will produce a sermon that not only sounds like me but is one that I
WISH I had come up with on my own....

¹ Ian Bogost, “The First Year of AI College Ends in Ruin,” *The Atlantic*, May 16, 2023, [AI ‘Cheating’ Is More Bewildering Than Professors Imagined - The Atlantic](#)

THAT is a scary thought.
 What is all this AI stuff going to mean?
 We don't know...

I raise the question because the UNKNOWN is such a big part—
 not just of AI, but of our text for today.

An unknown time that the disciples are facing.

Our text is the ascension of Jesus.
 In our text, the disciples ask Jesus:
 “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to
 Israel?”

And Jesus responds:
 “It is not for you to know
 the times or periods that the Father has set
 by his own authority...”

It is not for you to know.

That's a hard pill to swallow, right?
 Because the disciples WANT to know.
 They want to know what all this is going to mean.

Jesus was crucified, Jesus was raised.
 Jesus says the Holy Spirit is on its way.
 What does all that mean?

They have a pre-determined idea of what it's supposed to mean in
 their minds.

Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?

See, that's what they were hoping for.
 That's what they wanted the future to hold.
 They were hoping the Jesus would throw out the Romans, that he
 would be a king like David of old.

But they have no idea what God is doing with their future.
 They have no clue that they will speak other languages on
 Pentecost.

No clue about where the Holy Spirit will take them.
 No clue about what the Holy Spirit will do through them.

Which is, I think, no different than you and me...

In his autobiography, *Breaking Barriers*, the late newspaper
 columnist Carl Rowan tells about a teacher who greatly influenced his
 life.

The teacher's name was Frances Thompson.

One day, when he was a student, she read a quote:

*"Make no little plans;
 they have no magic to stir men's blood
 and probably themselves will not be realized.
 "Make big plans; aim high in hope and work..."*

In a speech some thirty years later, Rowan recounted that event,
 and HOW THAT ONE LITTLE QUOTE FROM ONE TEACHER
 shaped and influenced his life.

Well, a newspaper printed the story, and someone mailed the
 clipping to the teacher—to Frances Thompson.

She was astonished.
And she wrote back to Carl Rowan:

“You have no idea what that newspaper story meant to me, so long in retirement. For a lot of years I endured my brother’s arguments that I had wasted my life.

“When I read that you gave me credit for helping to launch a marvelous career, I put the clipping in front of my brother.

*When he had read it, I said,
‘You see, I didn’t really waste my life, did I?’”²*

It is, I think, what all of us want.
We all want our lives to make a difference in God’s great world.

And here’s the catch.
According to Scripture, we don’t get the final say about what that difference is going to be.

We don’t know how God will use us.
We don’t know what God will do with us.

Do you remember what happens just a few chapters later in Acts?

A Pharisee named Saul, the one who is persecuting the church, is going to become the Apostle Paul, one of the greatest missionaries of God’s church.

Whose idea was that??!!
It wasn’t Paul’s.

² Carl T. Rowan, *Breaking Barriers: A Memoir*, Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1991.

It wasn't Peter's.
It was God's.

According to our text, we are not the ones who give meaning to our lives. We are not our own idea—we are God's idea!

According to our text, God in God's freedom can turn any life upside down, to shape us and mold us and give our lives direction and meaning that none of us would ever have dreamed up on our own...

I'm reminded of a story about the day that Mother Teresa went to visit Edward Bennett Williams, the legendary Washington criminal lawyer.

Williams, some of you may recall, represented people like Jimmy Hoffa, Senator Joe McCarthy, Frank Costello (the head of the mob). Williams was used to having people without the cleanest track records pay him a visit in his office.

So when Mother Teresa called, there was all sorts of speculation—what did she want from Edward Bennett Williams?

It turns out that she was raising money for her charities in Calcutta. And Williams was in charge of a foundation called the Knights of Malta, which gave large sums of money to many different charities.

So Mother Teresa went to Williams.
She went with a request for a few million dollars for her charities in Calcutta.

The problem was that Williams had already distributed the funds. There was no money to give away for the next two years.

Mother Teresa did not know this.

She just showed up, and made her appeal.
And Williams politely said no.

No, to Mother Teresa???

Well, instead of heading out the door, Mother Teresa took the hand of Edward Bennett Williams, and said, “Let us pray.”

And she prayed.

And Mother Teresa said Amen and opened her eyes and made her appeal again.

Again, Williams politely said no.
So Mother Teresa said, “Let us pray.”

And she prayed.

And when Mother Teresa opened her eyes this time, Williams could see which way the wind was blowing, and he said, “All right, all right, you’ve got the money!”³

It was a good day for Mother Teresa.

But as everyone now knows, Mother Teresa had plenty of days in her faith journey that weren’t so good.

I want you to imagine Mother Teresa, not when she’s known throughout the world, not when she’s wrangling millions of dollars out of Edward Bennett Williams ...but years earlier.

Imagine her as a relatively unknown nun who, on August 17, 1948, “walks away from her religious order and into the streets of Calcutta in a newly independent India.”⁴

³ The original source for this story about Edward Bennett Williams and Mother Teresa is lost, but a version of the story is told by Williams’ son, Tony, on YouTube.

⁴ Richard Lischer, *Our Hearts are Restless: The Art of Spiritual Memoir*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.

She has a total of 5 rupees with her.

And she is “determined to create a new order”—

she is going to spend her life with the poorest of the poor,
to show them the love of God.

As one scholar describes it:

“Only months after embarking on her new mission...darkness descends upon her spirit...”

Shortly thereafter, she writes a letter to Jesus describing [the effects of her depression] and gives it to her confessor.”

One portion of the letter goes like this:

*In my heart there is no faith—no love—no trust...I no longer pray. My soul is not one with You...The work holds no joy, no attraction, no zeal.*⁵

I want you to picture Mother Teresa at that moment.

Do you think she had ANY idea, in 1949, in the midst of the poverty around her and the depression enveloping her, what God would end up doing with her life?

It is not for you to know.

That’s what Jesus said to his disciples, and it sounds like discouraging news.

But I submit to you that it’s powerful good news.

It means that even on our worst days,

⁵ Ibid.

God is still shaping us, molding us,
setting us on a course that we cannot see ahead of time...

Which doesn't mean that God has PLANNED everything that's difficult or devastating in this life. It does mean that if some difficult or devastating thing happens to you, God's power is not done.

God will improvise, sending the Holy Spirit to take us on a course that we can not plan or predict or control...

For example, if you didn't get into your first choice of a college this spring, and it's got you down because your life isn't going on the path you hoped it would, don't worry—you have NO IDEA what God is going to do with you.

Or if you find yourself sad because your marriage has ended, or terrified because your job has disappeared, or you just received a diagnosis that has pulled the rug out from under you, don't despair!

You have no clue what the goodness and grace of God is going to do through you.

Getting back to that sermon that I asked ChatGPT to write this week—one of the many signs that it wasn't anything like a sermon I would preach is that it contained absolutely no stories about baseball.

But I can tell that you're hungry for another one, so let me share with you a story—not about a baseball player, but about a journalist.

Someone sent me a story recently about a journalist named Sarah Langs.

Sarah Langs is a 29-year-old.

She's beloved in the baseball broadcasting world because of her tremendous research abilities and her memory with interesting facts and statistics.

Very quickly in her career, she's gained the respect and admiration of colleagues at ESPN, mlb.com, as well as countless players and managers.

The joy that she brings to what she does seems to infect everyone who knows her.

But three years ago, right when Ms. Langs' career was really starting to take off, she received a devastating diagnosis: she has ALS.

The response was overwhelming support—as well as tremendous frustration and grief and anger from her colleagues and friends...why did Sarah become afflicted with this awful and deadly disease?

But Langs' response has been far from self-pity.

Her enthusiasm hasn't waned.

In fact, when she was interviewed for the article I read, she said this:

“We should be telling people who *aren't* dying how much we appreciate them,” she says.

“I appreciate every single word, every single punctuation mark from every single person [who has reached out to me], but I look at people who I work with who are healthy and fine, and...no one's telling them. I would love for us to have a way to tell those people

[that they are respected, that they are cherished,
that they are loved.]

That's my next project.”⁶

Now...it strikes me that you and I don't have to wait for Sarah Langs to embark on a project like that.

We could start today.

Expressing gratitude for someone we owe our life to...
 Showing kindness to a person who's unknown to you...
 Offering forgiveness and grace to someone who has deeply
 wounded you...you could start on those projects today.

And don't worry about what any of it is going to mean.

You see, Peter and John, James and Andrew, and Mary the mother of Jesus as well as certain other women...they weren't perfect people or successful people or high-achieving people.

But they were God's people.
 They were God's idea—just like you.

And they devoted their lives to the message that God is the One who gives our lives meaning, that God is the One whose love and grace gets the final word.

We may live in an age of artificial intelligence,
 but it strikes me that the job of those first apostles—
 it's no different than the job of these apostles...

Amen.

⁶ Zach Buchanan, “Faced with an ALS diagnosis, Sarah Langs—MLB’s research star—keeps going,” December 14, 2022, found at [Faced with an ALS diagnosis, Sarah Langs — MLB’s research star — keeps going - The Athletic](#). I am indebted to Mike Buchanan for calling my attention to the story.