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Authentic Relationships Among the Body of Christ: Naming the Obstacles That Hinder Authentic Relationships and Expressing a Gospel-Centered Path Toward Overcoming Them

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AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS AMONG THE BODY OF CHRIST
NAMING THE OBSTACLES THAT HINDER AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND EXPRESSING A GOSPEL-CENTERED PATH TOWARD OVERCOMING THEM

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By
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Approved by:	Dr. Glenn Nielsen	MAP Advisor
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To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24–25)

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When I began this Doctor of Ministry journey, I had no idea how difficult it would be. Throughout the process, my hands picked up the proverbial towel and were ready to throw it in. Many have supported me along the way and enabled me to get to this point.

First, I want to acknowledge my family. My wife, Sarah, has always been my biggest fan. She supports me unflinchingly and does whatever it takes to help me. Whether it be sitting next to me while I read for class or giving me opportunities to get away for a few days to write, she came through over and over again. Even when I doubted whether I could accomplish this, she kept believing in my ability to persevere. My children, Gabriel, Hope, Ezra, and Grace, have also shown me overwhelming support, being patient and understanding with me when my doctoral pursuits distracted or distanced me.

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Finally, I want to acknowledge the Triune God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Without my God, this project would neither have meaning nor substance, nor would it have ever been completed. To Him be the glory, forever and ever!

ABBREVIATIONS

IRB	Institutional Review Board
MAP	Major Applied Project
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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ABSTRACT

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St. Paul Lutheran Church in Grafton, Wisconsin, recently underwent a vision process in which they proposed five values to define their congregational living. One of these values is authentic relationships. Those who crafted this vision, as well as the entire body who adopted it, recognized this value as primarily aspirational in nature. While some relational connectedness existed, all sought to better define this value and more fully express it.

This project, therefore, intends to provide an answer to the question, "How can a sermon series, informed by secular and scriptural wisdom, better enable the people of St. Paul Lutheran Church to articulate the obstacles that hinder authentic relationships and express a Gospel-centered response toward building greater authentic relationships in the congregation?"

In order to answer this question, I researched five major obstacles that hinder authentic relationships: individualism, physical distance, convenience, time, and technology. Additionally, I explored biblical and theology resources to highlight a Gospel-centered solution to these obstacles. Upon compiling this data, I crafted a five-week sermon series and preached it during the 2025 Lenten season. Interviews were then conducted with members of the congregation to provide a response to the project question.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROJECT INTRODUCTION

In Fall 2019, a group of staff members and lay leaders at St. Paul Lutheran Church convened to embark upon a visioning process. It had been nearly two decades since the previous iteration, and the congregational leadership felt the need to reevaluate its mission and values. This group of twelve physically gathered on weekday evenings to discuss the priorities and possibilities of ministry in the context of Grafton, Wisconsin. Some evenings they met in the conference room, pausing the marathon sessions to break bread and eat together. On other nights, they would walk side-by-side down the steps to the lowest level of the building and engage in spirited conversation in the youth room or library. Men and women, young professionals and retired elders, church workers and those employed in the finance and healthcare and education industries, all came together as the body of Christ and found something that the congregation seemed to lack and that they desperately yearned for: authentic relationships.

Three years later, after the interruption of the pandemic and several staffing losses, the congregation voted to adopt the mission and values put forward by the visioning team. Among the five values adopted by St. Paul stood "Authentic Relationships,"[1] a value that the team saw as aspirational rather than descriptive of the current state. These men and women, and the congregation in its voting assembly, looked to the future and envisioned a church that better reflected a genuine fellowship of brothers and sisters coming together in authentic relationships.

In its ideal vision of authentic relationships, the team described the possibilities of this aspirational value, presented to the voters in an "as demonstrated by" list. Authentic relationships

[1] The team defined this value as "Christian community, demonstrated by the transparency of our relationships with God, ourselves and others, by the connecting of people both inside and outside of St. Paul through multi-generational experiences, and by encouraging and mentoring as we provide care for one another."

would be demonstrated as people linked arms with members across the generational spectrum, engaging in mentoring, encouragement, and accountability in all stages of life. Communal characteristics like courage, genuineness, humility, and transparency would accompany relating to one another in this authentic manner. Additionally, these relationships would be seen in St. Paul's work to develop relationships outside of the church walls, not only coming together in worship, but also in community outside of worship. Finally, the goal of living out this value would be to become more like Christ through these close relationships. This is what the visioning team imagined in putting forth the value of authentic relationships, and the congregation heartily adopted it, excited by the possibility of living it out together in blessed harmony.

Research Problem

St. Paul is a large congregation, with about 2,500 members on the membership rolls and around 800 in worship on a weekend. Despite coming into a place where they are greeted by a sea of faces, however, many people speak to feeling disconnected and lament the fact that they know so few of the members they see. As one member put it to me when I reached out to her after a prolonged absence in worship, "I didn't think anyone knew me or would miss me if I stopped going." Too often, a portion of our new member class will be elsewhere within a few years, never finding the lasting relationships that encourage them to keep coming back. Even among those who do find connection, what is found frequently lacks depth, consistency, and longevity. They may know names and faces, but would struggle to identify the joys and burdens which characterize the lives of the people they see. The German heritage of the congregation prides itself on hiding problems and masking vulnerabilities. Sadly, within this large communal gathering of God's people, both a lack of relationships and a lack of authenticity are present.

A few contributing factors to this problem are readily apparent. Because of the size of the

congregation, St. Paul holds five separate worship services over the course of the weekend. While some members come routinely to the same service each week, others switch between services depending on job schedules, sporting events, family plans, and the like. Add in the option to participate virtually, and you might not see the person you just sat behind in worship for another few months, if at all. Additionally, the tight service schedule on Sunday keeps people shuffling in and out at a fairly rapid pace, preventing the opportunity to linger and visit after worship concludes.

Relatedly, St. Paul does not currently have a dedicated fellowship hour or Bible study hour during which people from different services may join together to visit and get to know each other. The narthex and gathering hall spaces are small, particularly for a congregation of its size, giving parishioners even more of a reason to head to their vehicles as soon as possible. The lack of a regular small group program hinders individuals from forming lasting connections, particularly if those individuals are not involved with the adjoining school. These factors can be observed, but many others lie beneath the surface.

The experience of St. Paul is not a new one or an outlier among Christian communities. Over 20 years ago, a political scientist and social researcher by the name of Robert Putnam noted a shift in the way many approach church participation. In his famous work, *Bowling Alone*, Putnam writes of a shift from communal religion to privatized religion, stating:

> Privatized religion may be morally compelling and psychically fulfilling, but it embodies less social capital. More people are "surfing" from congregation to congregation more frequently, so that while they may still be "religious," they are less committed to a particular community of believers… Even for those who remain religiously inclined, privatized religion knows little of communal support, and exists by and large independent of institutionalized religious forms; it may provide meaning to the believer and personal orientation, but it is not a shared faith, and thus not likely to inspire strong group involvement… "Believers" perhaps, but "belongers" not.[2]

[2] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon

These words, prophetic in nature, came before the advent of the online service, religious podcasts, and a global pandemic that cast suspicion on gathering in large group settings. When Putnam speaks of people "surfing" from congregation to congregation, he imagines men and women driving from one physical church building to another, but now this "surfing" takes place from inside one's own home. This week, perhaps, the individual engages with the livestreamed service delivered from the website of St. Paul in Grafton. Next week, the same individual might be participating with Hope Church in St. Louis via their website. As he sits in traffic, alone, during his commute to work the next day, he turns on a Catholic podcast because he enjoys the tone and delivery of the pontificating priest. Two days later, he is listening to a couple of Baptists bantering about the book of Mark. Privatized religion is no longer simply a budding trend; it is the cultural norm. Authentic relationships suffer as a result.

So while the scope of this project is to specifically examine and address the problem of authentic relationships at St. Paul, the general problem at hand is one that is experienced by much of American Christendom. Whether Methodist or Lutheran, megachurch or rural church, many spiritual leaders struggle with the problem of engaging with "believers" who are not "belongers." The cost of this privatized religion, and the lack of authentic relationships which accompany it, is incalculably detrimental to the communal faith of Christ's body.

Narrowing back in on the context of my experience, the lack of authentic relationships at St. Paul brings about a great cost to the people and ministry here. As mentioned above, it seems to be a primary factor in the relatively high turnover we experience among newer members. It also appears to contribute to a considerable amount of families leaving the congregation once their last child has passed through our school. Even among members who do stick around, the

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and Schuster, 2001), 74.

lack of authentic relationships is a detriment to their spiritual health and contentment. And as St. Paul routinely struggles to fill board and volunteer positions, one cannot help but wonder how much a lack of authentic relationships plays a part. Finally, this issue brings about a cost to me personally, as I wrestle with the burden of watching members walk away or be stunted in their spiritual formation due to a lack of authentic relationships.

Speaking of my personal experience, I need to be aware of a few aspects regarding my unique vantage point as I carry out this research. While I desire my project to be meaningful and all-encompassing, certain limitations will be present in my work. To begin with, I was not a member of the visioning team that developed the value of authentic relationships. On one hand, this will prove beneficial, as it places me in the same boat as most of my parishioners, one who did not participate in the legwork but who eagerly voted to adopt the value. On the other hand, not being involved in the visioning process will limit my knowledge of the conversations that led to the promotion of authentic relationships in our congregation. To combat this limitation, I will utilize the meeting notes and minutes and engage in personal conversation with those who were on the team, most of whom are still members at St. Paul (our previous senior pastor is now serving elsewhere and our DCE tragically passed away).

Additionally, there will be limitations as to what I can accomplish with a broad topic in a large congregation. My research will be honing in on major scholarly works that highlight the biggest obstacles to authentic relationships, but it would be naïve and foolish to claim that these works, and my insights from them, cover the full range of all that could be said on the matter. Likewise, this project will gain substantial feedback from laity across key demographics at St. Paul, but these research participants will make up a small percentage of the entire membership.

I assume, however, that these participants will in some fashion speak for the whole and

embody sentiments that are shared by many in the congregation. Aiding this assumption is the reality that our laity have much in common, sharing the same community, the same worship environment, similar racial and ethnic makeup, and, in many cases, even the same family history. I am also assuming that the people of St. Paul genuinely want to embody the value of authentic relationships and will participate with eagerness and the desire to grow and be shaped by the project.

Taking on the dual role of both research and pastor will entail some possible obstacles and distractions. As I interview members of the congregation, they may feel internal pressure to shape their answers in such a way that gives me what they think I want to hear and avoid saying anything that might reflect poorly on me or the other leadership at St. Paul. I will also not be a neutral party in those interviews, but will need to guard myself against taking things personally and trying my best to separate my research interest from my professional and personal interest. Lastly, being a full-time lead pastor of a large congregation, I will encounter plenty of interruptions and necessary distractions as I go about the course of my research. There will be no "pause button" in regards to ministry.

While these distractions, assumptions, and limitations provide some ambiguity, the problem is clear: people want connection, our congregational leaders want connection, I want connection, and yet this connection does not appear to be commonplace at St. Paul. The congregation seemingly has a dearth of authentic relationships. Recognizing this issue is not just at St. Paul's but at other churches in American Christianity today, I propose to preach a sermon series that will help to address this need for authentic relationships.

Research Question

How can a sermon series, informed by secular and scriptural wisdom, better enable the

people of St. Paul Lutheran Church to articulate the obstacles that hinder authentic relationships and express a Gospel-centered response toward building greater authentic relationships in the congregation?

Research Purpose

Collectively, the people of St. Paul acknowledge that a struggle exists to form authentic relationships within the congregation (and likely in other aspects of their lives, too). But do they understand the root causes of this relational impasse? In the paragraphs above, I outlined several observable roadblocks to authentic relationships at St. Paul, ones that others would be able to observe and name as well. But are these observable roadblocks the cause of relational fragility or merely the symptoms? Is the packed worship service schedule, for example, a primary culprit or does it simply point to an underlying issue related to St. Paul's values and prioritization? If the congregation addresses the observable roadblocks, without understanding the cultural and personal tenets that created them, new roadblocks will replace the old ones. The best path forward is digging deeper and examining the core obstacles which impede authentic relationships. Then, after uncovering these culprits, I hope to provide a biblical path forward toward better relational well-being.

For example, much ink has been spilled recently in examining the effects of technology and social media on human relationships. These tools, seemingly designed to draw people together, create numerous obstacles and challenges to our interpersonal connections. This project will take this conversation into account, drawing upon the research and expertise of others, and apply it to the context of the Church and specifically to the context of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Grafton, Wisconsin. To the average reader, the obstacles of technology and social media to relationships might be rather obvious. What might not be so obvious, however, are the other core

obstacles this project will consider, obstacles which are exacerbated by technology and social media, but which are nevertheless distinct from them.

The purpose of this project, therefore, will be to investigate St. Paul's current understanding of these core obstacles, provide a sermon series which both addresses the core obstacles and offers clear insights regarding a path toward creating better authentic relationships, and examine whether this series enabled members to better articulate what the obstacles are and express a Gospel-centered response to living out the congregational value of authentic relationships.

I hope, therefore, to experience several outcomes because of this project. The first outcome I expect is that I will gain greater understanding of my parishioners, their assumptions regarding the obstacles to fellowship within the church, and what the value of authentic relationships means to them. This outcome alone would be a sufficient reason to carry out this project. One of the most significant tasks of a pastor is to know his people. This knowledge aids in sermon preparation, personal counseling, and visitation, as it enables the pastor to take the unchangeable Word of God and apply it incarnationally to the specific attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the people. As pastor, I may have my own idea of what the value of authentic relationships, biblically normed, should look like. But if I do not understand the picture my hearers have, a picture that likely looks different from mine, much will get lost in my communication of this value. This project will enhance my preaching and teaching of authentic relationships at St. Paul by giving me the ability to better see things through the eyes of my parishioners.

In a natural progression, the second anticipated outcome of this project is that this knowledge, combined with the first article wisdom gained through secular research and the insights obtained through Scripture, will empower me to craft a sermon series on authentic

relationships that will be edifying for the congregation. By attending to the people of the congregation, I will be better suited to create sermons that speak to their specific concerns and lived experiences. By attending to first article wisdom, my preaching will be better equipped to offer practical guidance in handling the obstacles to authentic relationships. And by attending to the Word of God, the sermons will better provide a path forward towards embodying this value through the forgiveness and power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Yet creating and delivering this sermon series is only half of the equation. The other half is the congregation's hearing and reception of it. The third and final outcome of the project, therefore, is that the parishioners will learn from the sermon series how to better articulate the obstacles that hinder authentic relationships and express a Gospel-centered response toward building greater authentic relationships in the congregation. It is certainly my desire that the people of St. Paul will form stronger authentic relationships as a result of this sermon series. This outcome, though, is not mine to control. It is up to the Holy Spirit, at work within the hearts and lives of the people, to use my sermon series toward this end. What I can control and research, from a human perspective, is how well my sermons enlightened the people to be able to comprehend and pronounce the truths and wisdom these messages proclaimed. Having clearer and more unified congregational understanding and expression of authentic relationships, the barriers that hinder them, and the Gospel response toward overcoming these obstacles, is the ultimate outcome this project seeks to achieve.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PROJECT IN THE CONTEXT OF RECENT RESEARCH

Originality

The desire for authentic relationships is, in itself, not a novel concept. Endless pages have been written over the centuries to address relational obstacles and to provide solutions for overcoming them. As I began this project, even trying to sift through the literature on relationships within the last quarter century proved to be a daunting task. One could turn to many places to find possible solutions to the challenge of building authentic relationships. Indeed, no shortage exists of professions and resources dedicated towards the end of helping humans achieve better relational wellness. A simple glance through the "self-help" or "personal improvement" aisles of a bookstore or library would offer a buffet of choices to improve one's relationships.

Yet many of these works hone in on one central roadblock, be it convenience or technology or time constraints. The aim of these resources is to equip the reader to combat and counter the effects of one major challenge to authentic relationships. The aim of this project, however, will be to bypass the depth devoted to any one single roadblock for the sake of concisely detailing the breadth of roadblocks that are most prevalent in the culture that shapes the thoughts, values, and attitudes of the membership at St. Paul. Relational wellness is often impaired by a variety of factors working in unison to create barriers within a community. This being the case, my research will seek to determine which combination of factors are most predominant and influential in my congregational context. Some of the originality, therefore, will be this breadth and especially its application to a large congregation such as St. Paul.

Additionally, most literature seeks to solve relational roadblocks within the framework of

family, friendships, the workplace, or dating and marriage. The aim of these works is to empower you to be a better friend, a better coworker, a better parent, a better spouse, and so forth. As a pastor, I am deeply concerned about assisting my parishioners to excel in the various vocations and relationships God has placed them in. Much of my counseling, in fact, is spent trying to help those in my congregation to have greater authentic relationships in their homes and communities.

But that is not what I am attempting to do here. This project, though concerned about these relationships by extension, is primarily concerned with the relationships shared within a congregation, aiming to empower one to be a better brother or sister in Christ. What factors create barriers within the congregation? What challenges keep church members at an arm's length and what can be done to overcome them? This particular relational emphasis, and its foundation on the Gospel, will also contribute to the originality of the project.

Literature Review

In my reading of recent books and articles concerning authentic relationships, two names kept on rising to the surface: Shelly Turkle and Robert Putnam. Putnam, an American political scientist and professor at Harvard University, is widely regarded for his seminal book *Bowling Alone*. Writing at the turn of the century, Putnam offers insightful clarity regarding the American turn away from socialization, particularly as it relates to membership of social and civic clubs. His work is so influential that a Forbes columnist recently tabbed him as one who "practically discovered social isolation."[1] It would be difficult for one to be taken seriously in writing about

[1] Sachin H. Jain, "Robert Putnam Practically Discovered Social Isolation: Here's Why He Says It's Time to 'Join or Die,'" Forbes, 21 July, 2024, https://www.forbes.com/sites/sachinjain/2024/07/21/robert-putnam-practically-discovered-social-isolation-heres-why-he-says-its-time-to-join-or-die/

obstacles to authentic relationships if he had not spent meaningful time in dialogue with the work of Robert Putnam.

Turkle, on the other hand, is a harbinger of secular wisdom regarding relational breakdown in the digital age. Her résumé offers an impressive list of qualifications that gives her an air of authority in the social and relational landscape. Turkle is an MIT professor and researcher of media culture. She received a joint doctorate from Harvard in sociology and personality psychology, and she is a licensed clinical psychologist. With her educational background and vocational expertise, Turkle lends a credible and respected voice to the conversation. Her life's work is dedicated to questions concerning the interplay between technology and human relationships. Consequently, her findings are to be heeded by those who seek to better create authentic relationships in a screen-filled world.[2]

While my literature review will consistently come back to these two prominent voices, many others will be included in the discussion. Two other notable recent voices this work will frequently consult are Andy Crouch and Oliver Burkeman. Crouch studied at Cornell University and received a Master of Divinity at Boston University School of Theology. His insightful writings and reflections have been featured in nationally respected publications like *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal.* While Crouch approaches relational wellness from a Christian perspective, he often does so in a manner that speaks universally to those both inside and outside of the Church.

Burkeman is a British journalist best known for his regular column in *The Guardian*. A graduate of the University of Cambridge, Burkeman has spent the last three decades writing pieces and books designed to improve personal success and happiness, a pursuit that hardly

[2] Some of her most notable works are: *Alone Together*, *Life on the Screen,* and *Reclaiming Conversation*.

makes him unique. What does make him unique, however, is how he approaches this pursuit, embracing the limits of humanity rather than trying to push beyond them. His exploration of time and how it impacts our relationships will be especially beneficial to this MAP. Both Burkeman and Crouch have published influential works in the aftermath of the social isolation caused by COVID-19, lending some much-needed recency to the conversation of authentic relationships in a post-pandemic world.

While these four respected names will be heard from throughout this section, the following chapter will not be arranged according to each author and their unique contributions. Rather than moving from one scholarly voice to the next, examining the works of each of these four individuals and the many others I consulted one by one, this section will instead highlight consistent hurdles to authentic relationships that these authors observed. The specific obstacles to authentic relationships, rather than the authors exploring them, will therefore provide the framework for the rest of this chapter. Dozens of obstacles could be explored, but my writing and sermons will focus on the following five which most stood out to me in my reading of the respected literature in the field of relational wellness and which, I believe, best pinpoint the obstacles that hinder authentic relationships within the community of believers at St. Paul.

Individualism

By the very nature of being in relationship, one must step outside of himself and encounter another. Yet our societal push toward individualism undermines this very thing, promising us all that we need without ever having to step outside of ourselves. Instead of defining ourselves within the confines of a collective, be it our religious institution or workplace or societal club, the cultural push has been to eschew this communal identity for the sake of individual freedom, pursuits, and happiness.

"Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country," John F. Kennedy famously said. Yet today's mantra appears to be, "Ask not what you can do for anyone or anything else, ask what the world can do for you." Our apps and technology, our food places and retailers, the music and television we consume, it all reinforces the idea that our individualistic pursuit of happiness is the highest good, the reason for our existence. All of it feeds our ego and diminishes our sense of community.

In his book *The Life We're Looking For*, Andy Crouch makes the distinction between that which is personal (embodying a human and relational touch) and that which is personalized (coldly catered to the individual's desires). Viewing the landscape of our modern world, he sees how that which is personalized is rapidly replacing that which is personal, perhaps most readily apparent in how our social media markets to the individual in a frighteningly specific manner, with ads displaying the exact car you told your spouse you wanted or the exact vacation you told your coworkers you would like to take. Crouch captures the effects of this rise in personalization when he states:

> These personalized encounters can be thrilling in their transactional simplicity. Because there is no actual person on the other side of them, the only person who has to be taken into account is me—glorious me! My interests, my priorities, my preferences, my agenda—all are being processed and presented to me in a cascade of reflections far more captivating than Narcissus's pool. And all this is happening without the complication, frustration, perplexity, unpredictability, and vulnerability of encountering another person with their own needs, expectations, anxieties, and desires.[3]

It is the latter half of this quote that is of particular interest to this project. Individualism discourages connection among people by highlighting how messy and difficult it can be to have your needs and desires met when you are contending with the needs and desires of somebody

[3] Andy Crouch, *The Life We're Looking For* (New York: Convergent, 2022), 10.

else. If relationships are only useful to the end that they give me what I want and technology can now achieve that objective instantly and easily, without demanding anything back from me, it is easy to see why people would retreat from community and relationships and wall up behind a personalized cocoon.

This individualism leads to isolation. Rather than sitting down at a diner to enjoy a communal meal, we go to one of the endless options of drive-thru restaurants and eat alone, or when we do sit down for a communal meal, we often retreat into the individual world of our cell phones. Rather than sitting in a theatre to watch a movie with others and hear their shrieks or laughter, we can stream our favorite movies from the isolated comfort of our bedroom or living room (indeed, now members of a family can each watch their own show in the same room, thanks to the smart phone, not to mention the presence of a screen in many different rooms and bedrooms). Rather than going to a retail store and shopping amidst the crowds of fellow consumers, we can scroll through Amazon and get everything delivered right to our doorstep. I can get whatever I want, according to my specifications, delivered directly to me without ever having to interact with another human being. This limits my exposure significantly to any relationship outside of the relationship I have to myself.

Even when outside relationships are necessitated by nature of the activity participated in, the focus seems to have shifted from highlighting the identity of the collective to highlighting the identity of the individual. This is becoming increasingly prevalent in the realm of sports. Growing up in Minnesota, near the Wisconsin border, my classmates had one of two different possible football jerseys: Vikings or Packers. Occasionally there was a transplant decked out in another team's garb, but most everyone had the apparel of one of these two teams, because we grew up cheering for specific teams, a collection of athletes united under the banner of one

franchise. But now, I walk into my children's classrooms at St. Paul School after a Sunday of football and notice a rainbow of colorful jerseys comprised of a whole host of different NFL teams. Is it because the class is full of transplants from different states? Not at all. Instead, I am starting to learn that these classmates root for specific players, rather than the teams they play for. This should come as little surprise, since the leagues now market the individual players with much more vigor and enthusiasm than they market the communal teams. The individual has supplanted the collective. And this has a trickle-down effect into the way these same kids approach their own teams, often pouring their energy into playing on as many teams as possible for the sake of their own personal growth and accolades, rather than seeing themselves as part of a group trying to achieve a common goal.

The implications of this individualism for the church are manifold. The idea of church membership is becoming increasingly strange and foreign. As one regular visitor recently said to me, "Why would I join? I can still come to worship when I want. I can sit in on Bible classes. And if I got sick, you would probably still come to see me. What's the point?" Notice, membership for her is all about the individual. Nothing in her response is about the benefits of being part of a community or how the community benefits from her membership. As Putnam states, "Privatized religion may be morally compelling and psychically fulfilling, but it embodies less social capital. More people are 'surfing' from congregation to congregation more frequently so that while they still may be 'religious,' they are less committed to a particular community of believers."[4] This is just one example and more will be explored regarding individualism in the Church in the next chapter.

This individualism also combats authenticity. By focusing on ourselves and our needs and

[4] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 74.

desires, individualism frequently obscures any kind of authentic sharing, especially as it concerns our hurts and our flaws. Our culture steers us toward marketing ourselves in the best possible light, seemingly for the sake of a better job or a better relationship or better self-esteem. Pictures are taken in the best light with our best smiles. Filters remove all undesirable characteristics. The "likes" and responses of others give us the emotional high we are looking for. And yet, something important is lost in this process—namely, authenticity. As Crouch explains,

> A different kind of silence occurs when we only share an image of ourselves—in those cases, the other can't see or know who we really are, including the parts that are most interesting. Even if we are successful in selling our image, this is a hollow victory. It just confirms that the real me is undesirable…. Just as bad, once we've come to be known a certain way, we often feel bound to behave consistently, becoming less and less truly known. The cost is more isolation…. Hiding one part can lead to hiding much more, resulting in progressive impoverishment of what we show and, ultimately, of our relationships.[5]

Individualism, therefore, creates an obstacle for us achieving relationships specifically of an authentic nature and leads to an isolation that hurts both the community and the individual.

Physical Distancing

It is difficult to have meaningful relationships with individuals from a distance, but many pretend like it is possible. The pursuit of individual happiness often brings with it a privatization that increases the distance between people. One element of this that hits home to a community like Grafton is the physical proximity that has been lost due to suburbanization. Our work lives, social lives, and family lives no longer exist in the same geographical area. In the aforementioned book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam explains it this way, "One inevitable consequence of how we have come to organize our lives spatially is that we spend measurably

[5] Crouch, *Life We're Looking For*, 45.

more of every day shuttling alone in metal boxes among the vertices of our private triangles."[6] And then, when we get home, we retreat to our locked doors, back porches, and fenced-in backyards. We have lost a sense of physical closeness to those around us.

Perhaps the greatest relational connectedness I witness at St. Paul are among those older generations who grew up in the same neighborhood, walked together to school, saw each other at church, and stood shoulder to shoulder during harvest time on the local farms. These people knew each other not just for one hour a week, but for multiple hours of each and every day. That spatial closeness naturally led to relational closeness, so that now when they see each other for that one hour on Sunday mornings, they are carrying into their pleasantries a lifetime of memories and shared experiences.

By contrast, consider the typical younger adult member at St. Paul. He lives in a suburban neighborhood with large picket fences and a cursory knowledge of the people living next to him, who seldom intersect in any other circle in his life. He drives thirty minutes into the Milwaukee area to his place of employment, working alongside individuals who have their own neighborhoods, schools, and churches. He drives forty minutes to pick up his kids from school and waves at the fellow parents he only sees at school functions and sporting events. And on Sunday morning, he comes to worship with a host of strangers and a few familiar faces that he at most bumps into for an hour or two during the remainder of the week. Physical distance has robbed him of something significant—authentic relationships. Our relationships are one-dimensional (we have "work relationships" and "neighbor relationships" and "church relationships"), which hinder the opportunity to see one another in totality. This is what Putnam is referring to in the quote above.

[6] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 212.

And even decades ago, he observed the effect that this had on communal involvement and engagement. Because the distance between people who shared common goals and interests increased, the ability and desire to meet together in person decreased. There became a rise in organizations that required you to only participate from a distance, while groups that asked for a commitment toward a physical meeting saw their membership decline. Putnam captures it this way:

> From the point of view of social connectedness, however, the new organizations are sufficiently different from the classic 'secondary associations' that we need to invent a new label—perhaps 'tertiary organizations.' For the vast majority of their members, the only act of membership consists in writing a check for dues or perhaps occasionally reading a newsletter. Few ever attend any meetings of such organization—many never have meetings at all—and most members are unlikely to ever knowingly encounter any other member.[7]

Years later, the impact of this phenomenon is readily apparent in the Church. While previous generations speak about Board of Elder meetings with cigars lasting until midnight in the basement of the pastor's home, today it is increasingly difficult to get people to join a board, precisely because of the difficulty in committing to an in-person meeting. Some have worked around this by having the ability to engage with the meeting virtually via Zoom or Google Meet or another medium. Of course, it was easier to justify a physical meeting that lasted for hours when the participant could walk down the block to his home afterwards. It is much harder to justify when the participant has a twenty-minute commute and then must worry about waking up and driving another half hour to get to work.

If this was true before the pandemic, think of how much the post-COVID world has firmly etched this truth in stone. COVID was a time when we *had* to meet virtually. All workplace meetings, all church meetings, all social meetings took place via a cold and impersonal screen.

[7] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 52.

We had no other choice. But now that we have the choice again, we tend to gravitate toward the ease and efficiency that the virtual meeting offers. I can stay in my comfortable clothes. I can stay in my house. I can save time by not travelling. Why would I want to go to another in-person meeting?

Yet lost in the ease and efficiency of virtual meetings are the natural connections that come with a physical meeting. The greetings shared in the parking lot. The catching up that occurs before the meeting officially begins. The whispered comments and jokes that make the mundane affair much more bearable. The physical handshakes, pats on the back, and the close shoulder-to-shoulder proximity that reinforces the idea that you are not alone and that you are involved in something that extends beyond yourself toward the welfare of others.

Even when we do gather together, the pandemic pushed us further apart and caused us to be suspicious of any kind of physical contact and closeness. We all remember the days of "social distancing." Some of that has fortunately gone away. And yet, as I lead the congregation in worship, I look out and see a host of scattered clusters, people who have chosen to sit apart rather than in a pew with a fellow parishioner. Additionally, the sharing of the peace or the handshake line is approached with timidity or refrained from altogether for fear of contamination and illness spreading. While I do not want to discredit proactive health procedures or shame people erring on the side of caution, I cannot help but wonder if we are risking more—spiritually, emotionally, and particularly, for the purposes of this project, relationally—by avoiding these physical touches.

Convenience

One of the most significant obstacles to authentic relationships is the truth about their nature. Authentic relationships are messy. Authentic relationships place burdens and

responsibility on us. Authentic relationships can be painful and inconvenient. A "relationship tax" exists, a cost that is involved with having a meaningful relationship with someone.

I think of some of this "relationship tax" that I see among the brethren at St. Paul. A handful of members provide rides for their fellow parishioners each weekend for worship, leading them to rearrange their schedules, spend additional money on gas, and sacrifice their normal routines for preparing to enter God's house. Others do the same during the week for hospital visits and other appointments. As they seek to listen and participate in the service, members can easily be distracted by the noise of crying babies, oxygen tanks in operation, and sniffles and coughs from those around them. In the Gathering Hall afterwards, members may be cornered into hearing a draining sob story or an oft-repeated anecdote or joke. People who serve on boards give up family and personal time to work around the calendar of others. Additionally, countless other examples of inconveniency related to their personal relationships could be added—the mother waking up at 3am to feed her newborn, the woman leaving work early to visit a suddenly hospitalized friend, the man shoveling the sidewalk of his elderly neighbor—and all these instances may at times make us question the worth of forming bonds with those around us.

Some try to navigate around this reality by proposing a fair trade system for our inconveniences. Sure, relationships bring about inconveniences, they say, but they also benefit you by inconveniencing others. As long as you are benefitted as much as you are inconvenienced, the relationship is worth it. In the book *Connect: Building Exceptional Relationships with Family, Friends, and Colleagues*, authors David Bradford and Carole Robin advocate for this balance in our relationships:

> At the core of functional relationships is a rough equity between two people, which produces a sense of what feels "fair." Eventually, you will feel exploited, even if your

> benefits exceed your costs, if you believe the other is getting an even better deal. You don't have to constantly run cost/benefit analyses, or be perfectly in balance at every moment. What matters is that, over time, both people see a rough equivalence.[8]

Striving solely for these "functional relationships" sounds reasonable on the surface, but how many of our relationships actually exist in this kind of balance? What of the completely dependent child, who offers nothing but diaper changes, sleepless nights, and a complete overhaul to your routine? What of the aging parent, whose sole purpose in life seems to be to nag you about not calling enough and to cause you anxiety regarding their health and financial challenges? It would seem difficult to maintain many relationships in life if we demanded an equity of inconvenience.

But with our modern world, perhaps we do not need many relationships. While some advocate for balance, others ponder how our modern world might eliminate the drudgery of inconvenience altogether. In her book *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle well explains how the convenience of our technological world fights against the inconvenience of authentic relationships. She discusses the rise in robotic relationships and the manner in which they can offer the benefits of a relationship, without any of the burdens or inconvenience. She writes,

> People seem comforted by the belief that if we alienate or fail each other, robots will be there, programmed to provide simulations of love. Our population is aging; there will be robots to take care of us. Our children are neglected; robots will tend to them. We are too exhausted to deal with each other in adversity; robots will have the energy. Robots won't be judgmental. We will be accommodated.[9]

The answer, therefore, might be to turn away from people and their problems and to turn toward technology and its ease and comfort.

Many voices recognize that convenience might not be the ideal value worth striving for.

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[8] David Bradford and Carole Robin, *Connect: Building Exceptional Relationships with Family, Friends, and Colleagues* (New York: Currency, 2021), 73.

[9] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 10.

These voices understand the beauty in an authentic human relationship, flaws and inconveniences and all. Among them is Oliver Burkeman, who offers up these pointed words in his writing:

> Convenience, in other words, makes things easy, but without regard to whether easiness is truly what's most valuable in any given context. Take those services—on which I've relied too much in recent years—that let you design and then remotely mail a birthday card, so you never see or touch the physical item yourself. Better than nothing, perhaps. But sender and recipient both know that it's a poor substitute for purchasing a card in a shop, writing on it by hand, and then walking to a mailbox to mail it, because contrary to the cliché, it isn't really the thought that counts, but the effort—which is to say, the inconvenience.[10]

Inconvenience is seemingly a necessary ingredient to sharing an authentic relationship with someone.

To choose convenience, therefore, hinders authentic relationships. And this is the exact choice many in our world make. People avoid relationships because of the burdens and responsibility they carry. They text so that they can converse on their terms. They spend more time relating to their screens than to their parents or kids or friends—those that could demand something from them. We have sacrificed real relationships in the name of convenience.

Time

In some ways, this obstacle appears to be nothing more than a hollow excuse. After all, we have the same amount of time in our day as every generation before us. In theory, we should have plenty of time to devote to conversation and relationship building.

But in practice, this is not the case. The same devices that promise to shorten the length of time to accomplish the tasks of life create a host of demands on our schedules. We can work from anywhere, answering emails and attending virtual meetings, and find it nearly impossible to

[10] Oliver Burkeman, *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 52.

be "off the clock." We do not miss out on television events or record them for later viewing, we can watch them right where we are at. Our contacts demand to hear back from us immediately after they text us. Our devices crowd our time. Not only that, "we get lost in the virtual world and become oblivious to the flesh-and-blood world around us, and we lose our sense of time."[11]

All we need to do is take a step back, evaluate the time we have, and come up with a plan to make the most of it, right? We simply need to master our time, right? The aforementioned Oliver Burkeman is skeptical of this approach, writing in his book *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals* these discerning words:

> The fundamental problem is that this attitude toward time sets up a rigged game in which it's impossible ever to feel as though you're doing well enough. Instead of simply living our lives as they unfold in time—instead of just *being* time, you might say—it becomes difficult not to value each moment primarily according to its usefulness for some future goal, or for some future oasis of relaxation you hope to reach once your tasks are finally 'out of the way.'[12]

When time is used in this instrumental way, as a means to a greater end, a vehicle to get you to a day yet to arrive, it is easy to see how it can lead us to devaluing the relationships we have in the present, especially if they do not serve that same end of getting us to our blissful future. Burkeman goes on to share how this thirst to master time (and truthfully, to master our human limitations) is a recipe for a life without fellowship with others.

> Most of us seek a specifically individualistic kind of mastery over time—our culture's ideal that you alone should control your schedule, doing whatever you prefer, whenever you want—because it's scary to confront the truth that almost everything worth doing, from marriage and parenting to business or politics, depends on cooperating with others, and therefore on exposing yourself to the emotional uncertainties of relationships… The more you hurry, the more frustrating it is to encounter tasks (or toddlers) that won't be hurried; the more compulsively you plan for the future, the more anxious you feel about any remaining uncertainties, of which

[11] Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 180.

[12] Burkeman, *Four Thousand Weeks*, 25.

> there will always be plenty. And the more individual sovereignty you achieve over your time, the lonelier you get.[13]

Here we see two of the obstacles explored in this chapter—individualism and time—working in tandem to push us away from authentic relationships. At the heart of it all is a desire to surpass our limitations and be more than what we were created to be, a path that leads us into loneliness. More will be said about this in the next chapter, but it is significant to note that Burkeman's solution is to intentionally let go of our desire for control, embrace our limitations, and go back to the community. "Freedom, sometimes, is to be found not in achieving greater sovereignty over your own schedule but in allowing yourself to be constrained by the rhythms of community—participating in forms of social life where you don't get to decide exactly what you do or when you do it."[14]

Of course, this goal can be achieved in a variety of communities. Many ways to use time exist that do not in fact isolate us, but connect us to others. Another problem to consider, though, is that these relational connections that combat the loneliness and individualism Burkeman is concerned about are increasingly happening outside of the Church. For example, take the rise in youth sports that has overcrowded the calendar of the modern family. Whereas a child once participated in a sport during a specific "season" and then had reprieve, now that same child participates in club teams all year long, encouraging parents to run around nonstop to catch all the games and tournaments. No slot on the calendar is sacred. This obviously creates a sense of hectic tension for the life of the family.

But does it rob the family of authentic relationships? In many ways, no, it does not. In fact, it gives the family the kind of community that Burkeman says we need in order to combat our

[13] Burkeman, *Four Thousand Weeks*, 31.

[14] Burkeman, *Four Thousand Weeks*, 33.

individualism and need for control and mastery over time. It offers a community full of relationships characterized by a fair degree of authenticity. After all, you get to know someone pretty well when you are all collectively waking up at 5am, driving two hours to an event, sitting side-by-side for the entire day, and enduring the joys and frustrations of competition. Such an occasion certainly presents an opportunity to see someone at their best and their worst and everything in between.

Other communities, therefore, can provide authentic relationships. Yet these very communities, with the increasing amounts of time they demand, also frequently remove us from forming authentic relationships within the Church. In fact, one might argue that these communities are a more dangerous obstacle than isolation, because they give a taste of the benefits of Christian community without the full substance. It can be challenging to see why one should prioritize the authentic relationships in the Church over these other authentic relationships that occur elsewhere, especially when only so much time one is available to dedicate to each. This prioritization of time, then, is a hurdle that must be considered.

Technology

Technology has been saved for last intentionally. I see technology as the supreme obstacle that hinders authentic relationships, one that creates numerous barriers and one that fortifies every other obstacle listed above. It reinforces our inward turn and gives us the world at our fingertips. It drives us away from physical proximity to others, fulfilling us with the illusion that we are more connected now than ever, even if this connection is rarely ever in the same space. As Putnam quips, “Connecting with Grandma via Zoom is not the same thing as hugging

Grandma."[15] It enables us to have fellowship with others on our terms and avoid the messiness and vulnerability of authentic relationships. It promises us more time, yet seems to deliver less of it. Simply put, technology takes each obstacle in the path of our relationships and supersizes it.

Pausing here for a moment to examine the effects of technology on each previous obstacle will further illustrate the point. First, consider how technology enables our tendency toward individualism. To some degree, innovations have almost always ended up pulling us away from community, whether or not that is the intended purpose. Farming machines, for example, have made it much more manageable to complete tasks by yourself or with a few others that centuries ago would have taken a host of family members, workers, or servants. What is striking and problematic about our more recent technology, though, is that individualism seems to be the goal, rather than the byproduct, of its design. Couch captures this well, noting:

> My feeds from Twitter and Instagram, along with the well-timed ads from merchants whose sites I recently browsed, are finely calibrated to my interests, my need for novelty and stimulation, even my peculiar insecurities and fantasies … the more advanced forms of personalization sometimes seem to know me better than I know myself, recommending entertainment, news, and music that perfectly tickle my own particular taste buds.[16]

Today's technology gives us individualistic pleasure without us even having to ask for it. Rather than us programming the technology, the technology now tends to program us. "We begin by creating the technologies or tools, but after the technologies are implemented, these same creations begin to create or recreate us … technology begins to expect and demand things from us."[17] As technology recreates us, it often does so in ways that promote individualism, all in the name of capitalistic and financial success. For if technology can prevent us from fulfilling certain

[15] Jain, "Robert Putnam Practically Discovered Social Isolation."

[16] Crouch, *Life We're Looking For*, 9–10.

[17] Bernard Bull, *Digitized: Spiritual Implications of Technology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2018), 29.

individual needs in the context of community, who else will we be able to turn to in order to have these needs met? Technology. Our technology, therefore, programs us to look inward and focus on our unique desires, and then it exploits it. The cycle is seemingly never-ending.

This cycle creates a double-edge sword that slashes away at authentic relationships. Thanks to technology's programming, we not only have an inflated longing to pursue individual happiness, we also begin to harbor negative feelings toward community. When we do bump into community online, by means of social media and other communal apps, we tend to see the individualistic success and happiness of others, the very best of their lives, and it leads us down an emotional path that can destroy relationship. "Research has found that ambling through social media posts can increase our feelings of envy… malicious envy is often behind internet trolling, comment section slander, and hateful thoughts toward others."[18] A life that is all about me, the very life that technology is after, is a life that begins to despise and alienate others.

In addition to reinforcing individualism, technology also strengthens the obstacle of physical distance. If you were to speak of a friend in 1925, certain givens would have been understood as part of that designation. A friend was someone you physically interacted with, someone you shared life with, someone you saw on a regular basis and talked to face-to-face. But in 2025, the word "friend" need not include any of that. I can pull up my Facebook profile and see that I have 819 friends, yet many of these friends are people I have not physically interacted with in years. "Today's online social networks are congeries of mostly weak ties—no one who lists thousands of 'friends' on (social media sites) thinks of those people in the same way as he does his flesh-and-blood acquaintances."[19] The same holds true for the concept of

[18] A. Trevor Sutton and Brian Smith, *Redeeming Technology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2021), 76.

[19] Christine Rosen, "Virtual Friendships and the New Narcissism," in *The Digital Divide*, ed. Mark Bauerlein (New York: Penguin Group, 2011), 179–80.

"followers." In previous years, to be a "follower" meant you literally followed someone around, maintaining a close proximity to him or her. But now, you can have thousands of online "followers" who have never set eyes on you in person. Technology enables a variety of relationships in which physical closeness is not a requirement.

Moreover, technology creates distance even when physical closeness is present. Consider these all-too-common examples:

> A couple is out to dinner in a restaurant; both are physically together but miles away from each other on their phones. Their bodies may be in the same room, but their eyes and minds are miles away from each other. Similarly, a parent may be physically present with his or her child in the front yard or the park. And yet a news alert or email notification can instantly transport the mind halfway across the globe. Students walk across a college campus while engaged in a group text with friends from several different colleges. Our physical bodies may be in one place, but digital media cause us to be all over the place.[20]

As we become more involved with these digital connections, what happens to our physical connections? For one thing, our conversations begin to suffer. Turkle, commenting on the same phenomenon described in the quote above, reveals how technology has shifted the depth of our in-person dialogue. She writes,

> During the dinner hour, the typical American family is managing six or seven simultaneous streams of information. Scattered about are laptops, tablets, phones, a desktop, and of course, in the background, a television, perhaps two. College students who are using any form of media are likely to be using four at a time. If students are on Facebook, they are also on Netflix, a music blog, and their class reading. What happens to conversation here? We want it to be something to which we can pay attention in the same way that we pay attention to other things—that is, we want it to be something that we can drop in and out of. Something like the "crawl" on the bottom of a cable news screen.[21]

[20] Sutton and Smith, *Redeeming Technology*, 105.

[21] Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 42.

The Church is not immune to this. Worship at St. Paul and you may find parishioners distracted by their cell phones. Greet someone in the Gathering Hall and notice the gaze shift from you to the screen behind you, running through a list of announcements. Attend a board meeting and see an abundance of screens—televisions, laptops, cell phones, and so forth. What Turkle describes is not just "out there," but also within the walls of St. Paul.

Technology removes the spatial parameters of what it means to be a friend or follower. Technology impedes the closeness of those who remaining spatially connected, throwing a variety of distractions into the equation and hindering the opportunity to converse. And when conversations do occur, technology shapes these conversations in a manner that removes attentive interest and obstructs genuine sharing. Clearly technology has contributed to a greater physical distancing in our relationships.

Furthermore, technology encourages us to seek the convenient over the inconvenient, adding to the potency of this third obstacle. Ponder first the way in which technology gives us the convenience of control in our relationships. In an illustration on prayer, Jesus talks about a man who goes to a friend at midnight and starts knocking at the door to ask for help. The man on the inside cannot ignore this interruption and eventually gets up to meet the demands of his friend. Such an interruption has been virtually eliminated by technology, beginning with the phone, then voicemail machines and caller ID, then cell phones and emails and text messaging. Messaging is the preferred method of communication today, precisely because it allows you the convenience and control of determining when you want to be intruded upon.

> In corporations, among friends, and within academic departments, people readily admit that they would rather leave a voicemail or send an email than talk face-to-face

> … avoiding the "real-time" commitment of a phone call. The new technologies allow us to "dial down" human contact, to titrate its nature and extent.[22]

In other words, technology offers the convenience to relate to people on our terms.

Conversely, what happens when others ignore our attempts at communication and use the convenience of technology to dictate the terms of our relationship with them? Where do we turn? We could attempt to solve the tension in the relationship, but doing so might demand much of us. We may need to call the individual or arrange a face-to-face meeting. During this conversation, we will need to open up and be honest about our hurts and frustrations. Such frank feedback could, in turn, cause the other to lash out at us and attack our habits and actions. Working through such a process could very well lead to a richer relationship, but it will take time and it will be messy. In a word, it will be inconvenient.

Another option for dealing with the stinging silence of a friend is to turn to our convenient friend, the one who is always there for us, technology. Linking the obstacles of physical distancing, time, and convenience, Turkle again offers a wise word of observation:

> To those who have lost a sense of physical connection, connectivity suggests that you make your own page, your own place. When you are there, you are by definition where you belong, among officially friended friends. To those who feel they have no time, connectivity, like robotics, tempts by proposing substitutions through which you can have companionship with convenience. A robot will always be there, amusing and compliant, On the Net, you can always find someone…Today, our machine dream is to be never alone but always in control. This can't happen when one is face-to-face with a person.[23]

Companionship with convenience. Never alone but always in control. These are the characteristics of a technologically-aided relationship. Inconvenience has been taken out of the

[22] Turkle, *Alone Together*, 15.

[23] Turkle, *Alone Together*, 157.

equation, and with it, the strong possibility of an authentic relationship, with all its messiness and burdensome flaws.

Lastly, technology intensifies the obstacle of time. As anyone living with a device will readily acknowledge, a decent portion of each day is spent tied to technology, limiting the amount of time we have for non-virtual encounters with others. According to a recent study, Americans now spend over seven hours a day looking at a screen, with daily screen time increasing by roughly thirty minutes a year in the last decade.[24] Shared walks, front porch conversations, and tea time gatherings have been largely replaced by binge-watching, social media scrolling, and online gaming. Living in the digital age, we simply have less time for face-to-face interactions. How much time will I give my fellow parishioner who engages with me after worship about a present crisis when I hear my phone dinging, I have fantasy football to check, the new season of my favorite show just dropped, and I am curious to see how people are reacting to my latest social media post?

Conversations take time. Meaningful conversations that empower authentic relationships *really* take time. "Human communication is timeful, it requires time," Brad Kallenberg writes in his book *God and Gadgets*. "Technology threatens the timefulness of communicating."[25] Technology aims at efficiency: fewer time, fewer words, less effort. Instead of spending the time to read a book, I can locate a cliff notes version online or listen to someone provide a summary on YouTube. Rather than talking to a friend or going to the library to track down the information I need, I have the ability to Google it and find what I am looking for in seconds. Technology has

[24] Fabio Duarte, "Alarming Average Screen Time Statistics (2024)," Exploding Topics, 22 Jan. 2025, https://explodingtopics.com/blog/screen-time-stats

[25] Brad J. Kallenberg, *God and Gadgets: Following Jesus in a Technological Age* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 28–29.

trained us to think, "I don't have the time for this." This trained mentality cripples authentic relationships, for meaningful bonds are formed over prolonged amounts of time. The same fast-paced mechanics that technology employs to save us time cut against the fabric of the depth of communication which fosters fellowship.

Additionally, our use of technology frequently robs us of present opportunities for shared, communal experience for the sake of future, individual experience. Oliver Burkeman details this phenomenon:

> Psychologist Steve Taylor recalls watching tourists at the British Museum in London who weren't really looking at the Rosetta Stone, the ancient Egyptian artifact on display in front of them, so much as preparing to look at it later, by recording images and videos of it on their phones. So intently were they focused on using their time for a future benefit—for the ability to revisit or share the experience later on—that they were barely experiencing the exhibition itself at all … we treat everything we're doing—life itself, in other words—as valuable insofar as it lays the groundwork for something else.[26]

Technology, therefore, not only limits our time and alters our attitude and expectations regarding time, it can also eliminate the present altogether.

Beyond adding power to these four obstacles, technology does something else: It changes our entire approach to people and relationships. It changes us and those with whom we interact. Andy Crouch brings great clarity to this issue, writing, "What technology wants is really what Mammon wants: a world of context-free, responsibility free, dependence-free power measured out in fungible, storable units of value. And ultimately what Mammon wants is to turn a world made for and stewarded by persons into a world made of and reduced to things."[27] As Crouch wonders, if technology could give us "authentic relationships," would those relationships even be human?

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[26] Burkeman, *Four Thousand Weeks*, 126.

[27] Crouch, *Life We're Looking For,* 78.

Relatedly, technology deprives us from bringing our healthiest authentic self to the table. "Increased screen time is costing us our health … spending our lives staring at screens also means sacrificing face-to-face conversations, physical contact, exercise, family time, spiritual practices, and sleep."[28] In many ways, we become what we interact with. The more time we spend with God, the godlier we become. The more time we spend with humans, the more human we become. And the more time we spend with technology, the more machine-like we become. At best, technology can turn us into rundown humans. At worst, it turns us into something different altogether.

As with any tool, however, technology can be wielded in positive ways also. While its use often detracts from authentic relationships, it could serve them instead. Technology can be redeemed. What might this look like? Once again, Crouch offers an insightful perspective:

> A truly advanced technology should make us more fully persons, not less, the longer we use it. It should connect us ever more deeply to other people, to nature, and to God; should be of special benefit to the vulnerable, not just solving their problems but elevating their dignity; and should have increasing benefits even for those who do not wield it, rather than degrading everyone but the ones who possess it.[29]

Such a use of technology is possible, but not easily implemented. Yet it would be an unfair, simplistic characterization to portray technology solely as an evil affront to authentic relationships. Technology is here to stay. It is up to us to use it well.

Summary

The literature of the last thirty years has noted a decline in communal living and many words have been written to address both the cause and the effects of this decline. Authors and experts weigh in, offering a host of obstacles which hinder authentic relationships. Five of these

[28] Sutton and Smith, *Redeeming Technology,* 21.

[29] Crouch, *Life We're Looking For*, 70.

obstacles appear to be most prevalent and problematic within the context of St. Paul Lutheran Church and School. Individualism is an obstacle which promotes self-actualization at the expense of building fellowship with others. Physical distancing impedes relationships by expanding the space (physically, emotionally, spiritually) between us. The desire for convenience makes authentic relationships, and their necessary inconveniences, undesirable. Time and our prioritization of it limits the opportunities for connecting with the people around us. Technology supersizes these obstacles and produces a host of other challenges on its own. All five of these things work together to hinder authentic relationships. But all five can be redeemed and overcome in Jesus Christ. The problem is clear. Let us turn now to the solution.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PROJECT IN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Biblical and Theological Foundation

"It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gen. 2:18). Quite significantly, the first (and only) thing in His Creation that God deems to be "not good" is that man is alone. Man is created for relationship. This need for relationship is reflected in the Creator, who exists in triune fellowship. "Each person of the Trinity is an individual, and yet at the same time they all interrelate in harmony and unity of function. This gives us a basis for the fact that we are actually to relate to each other and to harmonize our lives with one another."[1] Indeed, "the deep hunger for relationships matches the hunger of God for community … humans in the image of God appear to be profoundly designed to establish Trinity-like intimate communities."[2]

Harmonious, intimate relationships is the original design and intention. Yet tragically, this relational harmony does not last. Man and woman reject their place in their relationship with God and immediately all relationships begin to crumble. Man hides from God. Man and woman pass the blame around for their sin. Woman is cursed to have desires that war with the desires of her husband. The Fall is the biblical cause for the roadblocks we encounter in forming authentic relationships.

The specific obstacles that hinder authentic relationships as presented in the previous chapter stem from this fall into sin and the curse it entails. No matter how hard we try, man can no longer form perfect relationships with one another. We would be hopelessly lost in a state of

[1] Martin Goldsmith, *Jesus and His Relationships* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2000), 12–13.

[2] Donald M. Joy, *Bonding: Relationships in the Image of God* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel, 1985), 15.

isolation and relational brokenness if not for the loving relationship God has with us, a relationship that prompted God to send forth His Son, Jesus Christ, to redeem us and our relationships. And Jesus does so by overcoming the very obstacles that inhibit our fellowship.

Christ selflessly sacrificed his individual needs for the sake of the community (Phil. 2:5–8). He entered into our physical proximity, literally becoming flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:14). And He did not do it to enjoy convenience, but rather bore the full burden of a relationship with us, carrying our relational failures to Calvary's cross. Christ and Christ alone is able to shape us into His body, who can push us toward one another, who can forgive and reconcile when the inconvenience of relational living rears its ugly head, who can redeem even our technology and time for His purposes. Authentic relationships within the Church are foundationally Gospel relationships.

Having reconciled us, Christ and His Gospel place us back into the fellowship for which we were created. Throughout the New Testament, we uncover rich language that speaks to our new relational wellness and identity in Christ. We are called "friends" (John 15:15), "brothers and sisters" (Mark 3:35), "children" (1 John 3:1), "members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19), "fellow heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17), and those belonging to "the fellowship of his Son" (1 Cor. 1:9).

Paul expands on this relational identity by using the analogy of a body, harmonizing the individual with his role in the community. "You are the body of Christ," he says, "and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:27). In giving us this image, Paul makes it clear that "not one of us can function effectively by ourselves; we need each other."[3]

God created us for relationships. Sin corrupted our relationships and drove us toward

[3] Gene A. Getz, *Building Up One Another* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1978), 11–12.

isolation. God's loving relationship with us motivated Him to send His Son to atone for our sin and to redeem our relationships. By the power of the Spirit in the light of the Gospel, Christians are once again called back into a fellowship of authentic relationships. This scriptural arc will provide the theological framework for my research and sermons, and it will be explored through the specific theological lens of the following five biblical accounts, each one correlating to the five obstacles presented in chapter 2.

Luke 19:1–10

Zacchaeus embodies well the pull and dangers of individualism. Like many in our modern world, Zacchaeus likely dreamed of a future of riches and success, with himself at the center of this story. After working hard in his profession as tax collector, a profession that often disregarded the well-being of the community, Zacchaeus had seemingly achieved this dream. His me-centered mission accumulated abundant wealth for himself, granting him the opportunity to revel in all kinds of goods and pleasures. It is a portrait of individualistic triumph, as captured by these words of commentator Richard Lenski:

> Zacchaeus was rich, which must mean that he had considerable wealth. His business was lucrative so that, in spite of the odium that was attached to it among the Jews generally, some Jews were always ready to undertake this work. If not his work then his wealth made him a man of importance in Jericho.[4]

Yet one must wonder how this status of importance actually translated into respect and good graces among the wider community. A small, perhaps overlooked, phrase in the text offers a glimpse into the attitude of the people toward this tax collector. In the Greek, the phrase is "καὶ οὐκ ἠδύνατο ἀπὸ τοῦ ὄχλου," a phrase translated into the ESV as "on account of the crowd he

[4] Richard C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1946), 937.

could not." Zacchaeus could not see Jesus on account of the crowd, a detail further clarified by the fact that he was "small in stature." The crowd is tall. Zacchaeus is not. End of story.

Yet we should not be so hasty to move on from this scene without exploring the implied relational dynamics of this verse. When Zacchaeus runs up against an obstacle of people who are taller than he is, why is his first impulse to run ahead and climb a tree? Why not ask the crowd to let him near the front so that he can get a closer look? If this "man of importance" held the respect and favor of the people, one would think he would be able to find at least one section of the crowd willing to step aside so that he could see Jesus. His unwillingness to attempt this suggests what is confirmed verses later in the crowd's grumbling: the community wants nothing to do with this man. One commentator puts it this way:

> For Zacchaeus to mingle with the crowd at all was a courageous thing to do, for many a man would take the chance to get a nudge, or a kick, or a push at the little tax-collector. It was an opportunity not to be missed. Zacchaeus would be black and blue with bruises that day. He could not see—the crowd took an ill delight in making sure of that.[5]

As is frequently the case with individualism, the self-centered lifestyle of Zacchaeus left him alone and outside of the relational harmony God intended for His creatures.

Enter Jesus. Unlike the crowd who deliberately or unintentionally ignores Zacchaeus, leaving him to his own isolated story, Jesus sees him and summons Zacchaeus into His story. Before doing anything else, Jesus invites Zacchaeus into relationship, into community. "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." The individualism of Zacchaeus had crafted a home of isolation, but the words of Jesus immediately change it into a communal setting. Jesus does not merely wish to pass through his home; He desires to "abide" (μεῖναι) there. This Greek term carries more significant weight in the Gospel of John, but Luke

[5] William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 234.

also utilizes it in the Road to Emmaus account, in which the presence of the resurrected Jesus abiding with the two downtrodden disciples flips their world upside down (or rather, right side up). Here in Luke 19, the abiding presence of Jesus overcomes the individualism of Zacchaeus as He brings the entire family of God past the threshold of Zacchaeus' door.

Jesus highlights this action by saying, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham." Zacchaeus is now a part of something so much greater than himself, included in the lineage of the faithful, a family that stretches back to the covenant of old and stretches forward to the eternal feast to come. In this blessed moment, Luke highlights "the entrance of Zacchaeus into the New Age through the forgiveness and fellowship portrayed here."[6] There is truly never just a "me and Jesus" moment, for included in any encounter with Jesus is the "we" of godly fellowship, a fellowship Zacchaeus may have given up on long ago, a fellowship noticeably absent as he attempted to look over the heads of a crowd disinterested in his stature-induced plight. Jesus overcomes the obstacle of individualism in the life of Zacchaeus and paves the way for authentic relationships, both with Himself and with the community of God's chosen people. Zacchaeus also is a son of Abraham! He is part of the family.

Luke 15:11–32

The Parable of the Prodigal Son presents a variety of authentic relationships to mine: the father and the younger son, the father and the older son, the two sons in their relationship as brothers, the younger son and his fickle friends, the servants, and so forth. For the purposes of this project and the sermon series derived from it, though, the key relationship to hone in on is that of the father and his reckless, wasteful son who squanders everything. Among other things,

[6] E. C. Davis, *The Significance of the Shared Meal in Luke-Acts* (Ann Arbor, MI: Xerox University Microfilms, 1967), 72.

this relationship highlights the obstacle of physical distancing.

The younger son asks his father for his share of the inheritance, an emotional step away from the father, and then packs his things and begins to take literal steps away from his father. "After the inward separation there comes the outward … this son turns his back upon his father, ἀπεδήμησεν, he left home to go elsewhere, away, far away from his people."[7] With every passing step in the opposite direction, the strain in the relationship between these two increases.

The enormity of the gap created by this physical distancing is highlighted in the phrase "far country" (χώραν μακράν). The son does not just leave home; he may be getting as far away as he can. In part, he likely journeys to escape the shame and animosity of the community, demonstrating the damage to the other authentic relationships in this son's life, for in trying to spend his inheritance, "as he goes from one prospective buyer to another, the intensity of the community hatred and disgust mounts. At every turn he is greeted with amazement, horror, and rejection."[8] This disgraced man needed to go where no one knew him. He needed to go to a far country.

This physical distance eats away at the relationship between the prodigal and his father. Although we do not know the exact nature of their relationship while the son was at home, the physical proximity in those days connected them in a tangible way. Waking up and seeing the father hard at work for his good. The "good mornings!" and the waves across the field. Breaking bread next to one another during a shared meal. The facial expressions that conveyed pained disappointment and concern, but also limitless compassion and love. In the far off country, the son no longer had any of these moments to remind him of his father's love, and the absence of

[7] Lenski, *Luke*, 809.

[8] Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 169.

these physical reminders destroys the son's perception of their authentic relationship. "Finally disillusioned by the unpleasant experiences in the 'far' country, (the son) realizes how foolishly he acted in tearing himself away from his father."[9] Having been too far gone from those physical reminders, though, he can no longer imagine having a relationship with his father as a son. However, maybe he could still have one as a servant. Notice what physical distance does, it changes the dynamics of our authentic relationships without us perceptibly realizing what has changed or why.

As the son nears the home he left with plans of becoming a servant, the father sees him and immediately overcomes the physical distance with his loving actions. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." Notice how the verse begins with the distance the son had created ("a long way off") and moves the two closer and closer with each running stride of the father until the two cannot get any closer, the distance collapsing in a fatherly embrace. Any potential shame which may have accompanied such an action ("An Oriental nobleman with flowing robes never runs anywhere. To do so is humiliating."[10]) is overcome by the father's generous mercy. More could be said about the other relationships in the parable and how physical distance affects them (for example, the repeating pattern of the older son who distances himself from the feast and the father who once more overcomes the distance by going out to meet him), but for the younger son and the father, the authentic relationship is restored.

Likewise, our God overcomes the physical distance in our relationship with Him and restores it by drawing near. Indeed, the physical distance in the parable captures well the effect

[9] Barclay, *Gospel of Luke*, 407.

[10] Bailey, *Poet and Peasant,* 181.

of sin in our relationship with God. H. Louis Baugher writes, "How beautifully this far country sets forth the sinner's place, so far as his affections and ways are concerned, in respect to God!"[11] Yet while we were still a long way off ("while we were still sinners"), Christ took on our flesh, dwelt among us, and embraced us eternally through His death and resurrection. This salvific drawing near of Jesus is exemplified in the physical eating and drinking he does with tax collectors and sinners, the very controversial nearness that occasioned the parable in the first place. Jesus overcomes the obstacle of physical distance, moving toward us, embracing us in a redeemed authentic relationship, and pushing us toward one another so that we may enjoy close, authentic relationships with one another as well.

Luke 10:25–37

As stated in the previous chapter, authentic relationships, by nature, are messy and inconvenient. Our world, on the other hand, preaches a life of comfort and convenience. These goals for the ultimate way of living contradict the core essence of an authentic relationship and sadly numerous relationships have ended or been avoided in the name of convenience. This is true both for long-term relationships and for those that are brief and circumstantial.

Perhaps nowhere in Scripture is this truth more evident than in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. A man falls into the hands of robbers and comes away from the altercation beaten within an inch of his life. He needs transportation and medical attention. But in order to get those things, he needs something else: he needs a relationship. It does not necessarily need to be a lifelong friend or family member; it simply needs to be any person willing to enter the inconvenience of a relationship with him. The man needs a person willing to see him not

[11] H. Louis Baugher, *The Lutheran Commentary: St. Luke* (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1896), 289.

transactionally ("What can this person give to me?"), but relationally ("What does it mean to be a neighbor to this man?").

A priest and a Levite refuse to enter into a relationship with him, not wanting to take on the inconvenient burden of being a neighbor to the man. These two men represented stations in life often associated with love of God and love of neighbor, yet Jesus reverses this notion and instead parades them as "models of the indifferent, unmerciful, and loveless."[12] Indifference is the natural outcome of the obstacle of convenience, for frequently the most convenient decision to make in relationship is to detach yourself from the needs and burdens of the other and carry on with a "not my problem" attitude. Yet the indifference that spares an individual from inconvenience also removes the possibility of authentic relationship, for authentic relationships thrive on personal involvement.

The Samaritan, however, scorns indifference and convenience and gets inconveniently involved in a personal manner. He sees a man in need and compassionately chooses to be in an authentic relationship with him.

> All the while, whatever thoughts of his own danger arose in the Samaritan's mind, as he delayed not to dress the man's wounds and then slowly moved on with his charge, he heeded them not, nor made much of the personal discomfort he was thus put to. Self was kept in abeyance; a fellow man's need drew out his pity and help.[13]

This choice comes at a cost to his own comfort. In stopping to help the beaten man, the Samaritan is giving up his time and allowing the encounter to inconvenience his schedule. One can safely assume that he was not an aimless wanderer on that road, but rather someone who had a purposeful journey and a destination to which he planned to arrive, both of which are thrown into flux by his decision to be a neighbor. This is only the beginning.

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[12] Arthur A. Just, Jr., *Luke 9:51-24:53*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 1997), 452.

[13] Baugher, *St. Luke*, 212.

Read verses 34–35 carefully, being especially attentive to the ways in which this new authentic relationship inconvenienced the Samaritan. “He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’” The Samaritan attended to the man’s wounds and used up his own oil and wine, valuable resources that he could have enjoyed or exchanged for other goods and services. Because the beaten man was in no condition to walk, the Samaritan set him on his own animal, risking potential injury to his animal and forcing him to walk the journey instead. Finally, the Samaritan brings the man to an inn and compensates the innkeeper for taking care of his newfound neighbor, promising to return and pay even more if necessary.

> This is the final touch in this illustration of love to our neighbor. Not even now, on leaving, does this Samaritan think that he has done enough, and that the innkeeper or someone else ought to finish the task. This man sees an opportunity in the victim of the robbers and makes use of that opportunity to the full limit.[14]

Jesus concludes this story by exhorting his hearer to “go, and do likewise.” In sharing this encouragement, Jesus indicates the inevitability of inconvenience as we strive to live in authentic relationships with one another. However, Jesus not only urges us toward such an ideal, He Himself models it in His authentic relationship with us. Jesus embraces inconvenience to come to our rescue when we were spiritually left for dead, saying to us, “You cannot act, for you are dead. You need someone to love you, show mercy to you, heal you, pay for you, give you lodging, revive you…. I am your neighbor and will give you the gifts of mercy, healing, life.”[15] All this Jesus accomplishes through His own suffering, willingly subjecting Himself to beatings

[14] Lenski, *Luke*, 607.

[15] Just, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 454.

and mocking and crucifixion. Certainly, the convenient and comfortable thing to do would have been to stay at the Father's right hand and remain far away from our painful humanity. Yet Jesus chooses to be our neighbor. He chooses to be in an authentic relationship with us. He chooses to overcome the obstacle of convenience with the His personal involvement. His personal involvement in our lives shapes and motivates us toward forsaking convenience in the name of building greater authentic relationships with those around us.

Luke 10:38–42

Like most things in life, authentic relationships take time. They require an investment of time in the other, prioritizing that which will draw the two individuals closer together. An improper prioritization of time, therefore, or a perceived lack of time, can be a great hindrance towards building an authentic relationship. Perhaps no Gospel text demonstrates this potential obstacle greater than the account of Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha's home in Luke chapter 10.

In looking over this text, most readers and scholars readily note the frustration and resentment of Martha toward Mary. As one commentator remarks, Martha believes Mary "should have acted as she did. So Martha resented Mary and complained about her to Christ… the fact that she criticized her sister probably even affected Martha's love of Christ himself."[16] Another observes that Martha becomes "sulky towards her sister who sat and listened, and also towards the Lord Himself because He did not tell Mary to go and help with the serving… in this way she disturbed the harmony between herself and her sister and between herself and the Lord."[17] It is evident from these comments that the bond between the sisters is damaged and, as a

[16] Richard Baxter, "Christ's Justification of Mary's Choice" in *Reformation Commentary on Scripture; New Testament III: Luke*, ed. Beth Kreitzer, Timothy George, and Scott M. Manetsch (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 228.

[17] Norval Geldenhuys, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 315–16.

result, the relationship between Martha and her Savior, Jesus, is also suffering. Such is often the case in our authentic relationships: a breakdown in one has broad ripple effects, impairing other earthly relationships and damaging our relationship with God, too.

Yet, while many can observe the breakdown in the relationship between Mary and Martha, few seem to offer a satisfactory answer as to why the breakdown occurred. It can be tempting to miss the forest for the trees and focus in on feelings of resentment and anger by Martha regarding Mary's lack of help without seeing the bigger struggle affecting the relationship: a wrestling with time and prioritization. Both sisters have the same amount of time allotted to them. But while Mary uses the time to focus on the singular "good portion," Martha uses the time to be "anxious and troubled about many things." Rather than prioritizing her authentic relationship with her sister (and, by extension, Jesus), Martha sees Mary primarily as a potential instrument to help her accomplish what she more highly prioritizes—namely, the successful completion of various tasks to ensure a positive dinner party experience.

As Martha struggles to prioritize her time properly, Jesus models a manner of living that utilizes time to invest in others. Undoubtedly, this approach characterizes His entire ministry. Jesus took the time for Zacchaeus, intentionally walking to the foot of the tree he had climbed and demanding that the two have table fellowship. Jesus took the time for the tax collectors and prostitutes who drew near to Him in Luke 15 and takes time for the Pharisees who sneered at Him for doing so, sharing a parable with them in an attempt to soften their hardened hearts. Jesus takes the time for the lawyer in Luke 10 who wishes to justify himself, leading the man to a closer picture of God's mercy and righteousness through the Parable of the Good Samaritan. And here in this text, Jesus once more takes the time to invest in the people around him.

One can quickly identify Jesus taking the time for Mary, extolling her for choosing the

good portion and strengthening His bond with her. Many, however, overlook or undervalue how Jesus takes time for Martha in this text. Rather than leaving Martha to her frantic busyness and overwhelming anxiety, Jesus takes the time to interrupt her stressful situation in love and concern for her, pointing her toward a path of calm and peace. "There is nothing good in Martha's anxious and troubled agitation; the only good thing is her love for Jesus, but this must be cleansed of the mistaken ideas which threaten to spoil it and must be directed into the one correct channel, all will then come out right."[18] Jesus takes the time for this blessed redirection.

The result, relationally speaking, is not only a restored relationship with Jesus, but also a restored relationship with her sister, Mary. The prioritization of Jesus reshapes the approach of Martha, encouraging her to invest time in her authentic relationship with her sister. The fruits of this are evident in a different text, the death of Lazarus, Mary and Martha's brother, which is recorded in John chapter 11. When Jesus arrives following the death of Lazarus, Martha rushes out to meet Him and says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (Κύριε, εἰ ἦς ὧδε οὐκ ἂν ἀπέθανεν ὁ ἀδελφός μου) Eleven verses later, Mary also comes out to meet Jesus and, falling at His feet, cries out, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (Κύριε, εἰ ἦς ὧδε οὐκ ἄν μου ἀπέθανεν ὁ ἀδελφός) The two sisters say the exact same thing to Jesus, hinting at a powerful reality in their relational well-being: the two sisters are taking time for each other and grieving together. Instead of prioritizing funeral arrangements or hosting preparations, Martha, remembering the encouragement of Jesus, invests her time in drawing near to her sister and mourning alongside her. Jesus overcomes the obstacle of time by taking the time for relationships and urging His followers to do the same. Having shared time with the Savior who pauses to invest in us, we also take time to pause and invest in our brothers

[18] Lenski, *Luke*, 619.

and sisters as we grieve together, rejoice together, and serve together.

Luke 16:10–13

In many ways, finding a biblical text that directly addresses the obstacle of technology is a difficult task. As much as many modern American readers might struggle to understand the Middle Eastern agrarian illustrations and other cultural trends from the biblical era, those living and writing in the biblical era could not possibly fathom the technological innovations of the twenty-first century. If one were to show a first century Jew a smartphone, he would likely be convinced that it was some kind of demon-possessed box (a description that often might be more on the nose than we would care to realize). Bottom line, you are not going to find scriptural texts discussing cell phones and televisions and self-driving cars. These devices are utterly foreign to that world.

The overarching issue at heart of the technological obstacle, however, is timeless. It can be summarized in this way—are the resources God gives to us a means or a master? Do we elevate the tools and material goods God puts at our disposal to a godlike level or do we keep them in their proper place and use them to glorify God and serve our neighbor?

Following the Parable of the Dishonest Manager in Luke chapter 16, Jesus offers some words of advice and caution that address these very questions. He tells His hearers that how one stewards the temporal resources (such as technology) God bestows upon him is an indication of his readiness, or lack thereof, to receive eternal resources. Lenski:

> Everything that man possesses on earth belongs primarily to the Creator, who lends it so liberally in order that it may be a blessing to man himself and to his fellow-men and that it should be used to the honour of God. Accordingly, if anyone is unfaithful in connection with these “borrowed goods” how can he expect to receive God’s

> eternal riches, the spiritual gifts given for time and eternity to the redeemed as their own?[19]

As the above quotation highlights, everything that we possess on earth is a gift entrusted to us for the purpose of benefitting our neighbors and ourselves and glorifying God. This exhortation provides a beautiful framework for our use of technology. God lends us the blessing of technology in order that it might be used for our common good. One could point to technological advances in medicine and travel safety as ways in which this objective is satisfied. But what about our authentic relationships? We should also strive to use technology to strengthen our connection with one another. After all, possessions like technology "are not in themselves a sin, but they *are* a great responsibility, and the man who uses them to help his friends has gone far to discharge that responsibility."[20]

After admonishing those near Him to steward faithfully the gifts given them, Jesus then goes on to proclaim, "No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other." In the context of this text, Jesus is specifically referring to money, but it is easy to draw a line of connection to technology as well. We cannot serve two masters; we cannot serve both God and technology.

A sincere examination of the heart for the Christian will likely unearth attempts to do the impossible and serve both God and technology. The previous chapter extensively explored the manner in which technology dictates the lives of those who wield it. A simple scan of any restaurant or waiting room and where the eyes therein are directed will reveal the temptation to look to technology as master. When this occurs, it can dethrone God of His role as ultimate master in our lives. One can claim to serve God in the same loyal manner, but this claim runs

[19] Geldenhuys, *Gospel of Luke*, 417.

[20] Barclay, *Gospel of Luke*, 209.

counter to Christ's statement and human experience. For while one may have every intention of serving both, "in his very heart and by his very thoughts he will make one of the two his real master, give him heart service, and will make the other his sham master, giving him only outward service."[21] A sobering reality check for us all.

Whenever we treat God like a sham master and succumb to serving technology as true master, authentic relationships will suffer, causing all of the issues detailed in chapter 2. Jesus knows this and overcomes the obstacle of technology by making us His own, purchasing us with His precious blood, and empowering us to steward technology for the benefit of increased shared connection with our brothers and sisters. As we take directions from God as master and relegate technology to the role of instrument in service of God, technology becomes another resource to serve our neighbor and draw us closer to one another in fellowship. The Church invites homebound members into new avenues of communal worship and study through online participation. Leaders use apps and social media to locate and communicate with those who have begun to stray from the fold. Authentic relationships flourish when we know who is Master and submit to His leading.

Historical Context

At a most basic level, the early church and the Lutheran tradition would point to one place in describing the obstacles that hinder authentic relationships: sin. As stated within the Lutheran Confessions: "Our churches teach that since the fall of Adam (Rom. 5:12), all who are naturally born are born with sin (Psa. 51:5), that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with the inclination to sin."[22] To work with the term "sin," though, is to cast a wide net that would

[21] Lenski, *Luke*, 836.

[22] AC 2 in Paul McCain, ed. *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, trans. William Hermann, Theodore Dau,

yield countless works to examine and reference.

For the sake of narrowing things down and honing in on a component of sin that relates directly to authentic relationships, my project will specifically trace the historical description of sin summed up in the Latin phrase *homo incurvatus in se* ("man turned in on himself"). This terminology originally shows up in the 5th century church father Augustine. In City of God, Augustine speaks to the fallen love of man which forsook its right relationship with God and turned inward toward himself. He writes, "Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord."[23] In turning away from his Creator, man's self-focused love would forever damage all relationships outside of himself. "Rather than living a life that is rightly aligned toward God and others, human sinfulness directs our life inward, toward self-justification, self-gratification, and self-aggrandizement."[24]

In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther revisits Augustine's thought of "man turned inward" and expands on it. Luther states, "Scripture describes man as so curved in upon himself that he uses not only physical but even spiritual goods for his own purposes and in all things seeks only himself."[25] This condition of man makes the idea of healthy relationships with others impossible, for man turned inward cares nothing for others, other than using them as pawns to achieve his own ends. No one is exempt from this inward inclination.

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and Gerhard Friedrich Bente (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005), 57–58.

[23] Augustine, *City of God*, book XIV, chapter xxviii, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 582.

[24] Sutton and Smith, *Redeeming Technology*. 97.

[25] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works,* vol. 25, trans. W.G. Tillmanns and J.A.O. Preus Jr. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2002), 345.

> Luther instructs—not only the average man who longs for a pat on the back for helping the neighbor, but the monk who goes days without food, years without human contact, all with the hope of being singled out as the best most, religious man who ever walked the earth—is, in other words, a prideful man, a sinful man, a man curved in on his own self-centered desire.[26]

This project draws upon this theological reality and its implications for authentic relationships within the congregation.

Within the history of the Church, there have also been numerous attempts to paint a picture of what a sanctified Christian fellowship can look like. One of the most famous examples in the Lutheran tradition is *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In his book, Bonhoeffer does not present a naïve portrait of a grandiose Christian utopia, but rather faithfully demonstrates what is, and is not, possible concerning authentic relationships in this world marred by sin and the inward turn described by Augustine and Luther. These poignant words capture it well:

> By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even for a brief time in a dream world. He does not abandon us to those rapturous experiences and lofty moods that come over us like a dream…. Only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it … He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community becomes a destroyer of the latter.[27]

Yes, "Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate." [28] Bonhoeffer's work will inject a dose of reality into the project and its ambitions.

Relatedly, as he cautions against works-based attempts to create genuine Christian fellowship, Bonhoeffer paves the way for the true foundation of any authentic relationship in the Church, as well as its telos: Christ and His Gospel: "All we can say, therefore, is: the community

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[26] Heather Choate Davis, *Man Turned in on Himself* (Irvine, CA: Icktank, 2014), 26.

[27] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 27.

[28] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 30.

of Christians springs solely from the Biblical and Reformation message of the justification of man through grace alone; this alone is the basis for the longing of Christians for one another."[29]

These words must be ever before us as we strive for authentic relationships at St. Paul. Without this emphasis, true fellowship is impossible and any attempt to create it will foster only that which is shallow and unsustainable. For this series to be both Lutheran and biblical, for it to accomplish anything that will withstand the test of time and the effects of human sin, the messages must powerfully proclaim the justification of all by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ.

While Augustine, Luther, and Bonhoeffer provide a proper historical grounding for understanding sin and the Gospel, the problem and the solution for authentic relationships, recent scholars have done much to apply this theology to our specific historical context. Of particular interest in the last decade has been the effects of technology on Christian fellowship, and it seems prudent to linger for a moment on this area of scholarship.

The biblical foundation of this project goes back to that problem of isolation from Genesis and God's answer, "I will make a helper fit for him." Today, man usurps the role of God and defiantly declares, "*I* will make a helper fit for him." As Bernard Bull ponders in his book *Digitized: Spiritual Implications of Technology*, "Could there be a time when people seek a technological solution to God's statement, 'It is not good that man should be alone'? This may seem far-fetched to readers, but technology designers and developers are working on such kinds of advanced technologies."[30] Bull wrote these words less than a decade ago, and the rise in AI since then only reinforces his pondering. It is no longer a matter of "if" we try to create authentic

[29] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 23.

[30] Bull, *Digitized*, 31.

relationships through technology, it is a matter of how far we will take this and what we will reap in doing so.

Will we reap more joy and authentic community? Tony Reinke, author of *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You*, highly doubts it, writing, "Joy brings our attention, our minds, and our flesh and blood together into face-to-face fellowship—eyeball-to-eyeball love. The Christian's challenge is to love not in tweets and texts only, but even more in deeds and physical presence."[31] We may easily deceive ourselves into thinking our fellowship is strong because we have "liked" numerous posts from our Christian brethren or texted to check-in, but the lack of physical life together will erode our overall sense of connectedness. Technology may give us a wider snapshot of our congregation, but it will most likely be a shallower one.

It would seem that the technological rise will fight against the depth of our Christian fellowship, but what about our ability to attract new individuals to the fold? Surely, one would expect the manifold social tools technology offers to bring success to our evangelistic efforts. Yet here also recent scholar express pessimism in this regard:

> If each message that humans speak requires a pace that is just right, we should at least ask the question of whether the sheer speed of technology threatens to distort the Gospel message by delivering it at the wrong pace … the just-right pace is the pace that allows a reciprocal flow, a give and take, of words. When communication is instantaneous, we think we have to put the whole thing, the entirety of the Gospel—pearls and all (Matthew 7:6!)—out there in cyberspace for grazers to stumble across. We would not want them to miss anything. But in this dump-truck approach, what is lost is the give and take of evangelism.[32]

Even in our relationships with outsiders, therefore, technology impedes progress by not giving us the time to build authentic relationships with them and, in turn, impeding their ability to be drawn into an authentic relationship with Christ.

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[31] Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You*, 60.

[32] Kallenberg, *God and Gadgets*, 30.

Most concerning, however, is the manner in which technology can become that which is worshipped and served, rather than an instrument to worship the Lord and serve others. Here is but one snapshot of our technological idolatry, one that sadly sounds all too familiar:

> On average, we check our phones nearly 100 times per day. Some sources place it even higher! The average American devotes eleven hours of the day to staring at glowing rectangles and consuming media. Even without a court order, we willingly don electronic monitoring devices for tracking our precise location, movement, and bodily functions We crave the adrenaline that comes from breaking news alerts. Like well-trained Pavlovian dogs, we eagerly await the positive affirmation of a little blue thumbs up or a small pink heart.[33]

If our relationship with technology becomes too consuming, if we become its willful slaves, we will not be free to engage in authentic relationships with our fellow man. While Augustine and Luther pinpointed an idolatry captured by the gaze of the eyes towards one navel, the idolatry of today might more accurately be captured by the gaze of the eyes towards the phone resting slightly above the navel. Technology simply offers another sinful path for man to turn inward and, far too often, we take this path.

As Paul describes powerfully in Phil. 2, however, Christ takes the opposite path. Instead of turning inward and reveling in His own glory, Christ turns outward and focuses on us and our needs, taking on the form of man and becoming obedient to the point of death. In doing so, Christ redeems us. Furthermore, His redemption extends to all aspects of our life, including our technology. Once a means to fuel our inward turn, our use of technology can be redeemed by Christ to model His outward turn, as He empowers us to use our devices to serve others and grow in authentic relationships with them.

No longer slaves to technology, Christ sets us free to serve. Luther, in his work "On the Freedom of the Christian," comments on our redeemed living by means of this profound

[33] Sutton and Smith, *Redeeming Technology*, 19.

paradox: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”[34] In freeing us from sin’s enslavement, Christ redeems us to fulfill our vocations in love and service to the neighbor. To this end, technology can now be used as a gift to help us further carry out our service to all those around us.

Summary

The Word of God, our Lutheran Confessions, and Christians throughout the centuries have much to say regarding both the problem and the promise of human authentic relationships. The fall into sin led us down a path of eschewing relational wellness with others in the name of an inward turn. The Gospel of Luke contains various texts that highlight the obstacles to authentic relationships created by such a turn, as Jesus speaks words corresponding to the roadblocks of individualism, physical distance, convenience, time, and technology. Jesus not only poses the obstacles, however. He also provides the solution. He redeems us from our inward turn, draws us close to Himself and to one another, inconveniences Himself for our sake and encourages us to go and do likewise, takes the time for us, and claims us as His own. Apart from our own work and action, Christ creates community and places us into it. Our sinful nature and the world with its temptations and technology seek to destroy our authentic relationships, but “God created us to be whole and present at one time and place so that we can experience real life, real community, and relationships. By the grace of God, this has all become possible in and through Christ Jesus.[35]

[34] Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, trans. W.A. Lambert and Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 344.

[35] Sutton and Smith, *Redeeming Technology*, 123.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PROJECT DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Population Sampling

After evaluating the different possibilities, I decided to utilize a stratified sampling approach to enlist research participants. Because I wanted my project to reach the entire congregation, it was important to get a fair representation of the different demographics that make up our membership. Therefore, I needed to separate the possible participants into different subgroups to ensure I had a diverse participant list. Yet I also did not want to bias my findings by selecting people from these subgroups that I knew would give me the answers I wanted to hear. With that in mind, a method that employed randomization seemed best in overcoming this potential bias. A stratified sampling approach allowed me to accomplish both goals.

To get the desired wide-ranging representation of the St. Paul congregation, I divided the research participants into the following ten categories:

-Married male, age 26-45
-Married male, age 46-65
-Married male, age 66+
-Married female, age 26-45
-Married female, age 46-65
-Married female, age 66+
-Young adult (male or female), age 18-25
-Single adult (male or female), age 26-45
-Single adult (male or female), age 46-65
-Single adult (male or female), age 66+

I divided the participants into the above subgroups for four significant reasons. First, I wanted to keep my research at a manageable number. While I could gain valuable insights from hundreds of my parishioners, ten is a group that I could realistically work with given my time limitations as a full-time pastor. Second, because St. Paul is a multigenerational congregation, I

divided the groups into different age brackets to gain perspective from young and old alike. Third, I desired to gain feedback from both men and women of the congregation, hence the division between male and female within each age bracket. Finally, while the majority of St. Paul's adult membership is married, we also have many members who are not. And since the project is primarily aimed at authentic relationships within the congregation (and not between husband and wife or parent and child), it is fitting to have both married and single participants included in this study.

Those who wished to participate in the research were asked to commit to the following three things:

1.) Sit down with me for a 45-minute face-to-face interview before my sermon series to gain their initial thoughts and perspectives about authentic relationships, how to build them, and the obstacles that hinder them.
2.) Listen to all five sermons during a series I would preach on authentic relationships in direct correlation to my research question. This series ended up taking place on the Sundays during the Lenten season, from March 9 to April 6, 2025.
3.) Sit down for another 45-minute face-to-face interview after the sermon series to investigate whether the series changed their initial thinking and enabled them to better articulate the obstacles that hinder authentic relationships and express a Gospel-centered response toward building greater authentic relationships in the congregation.

All members of St. Paul who were willing to dedicate themselves to this process and consent to being interviewed were eligible for research selection.

Once a list of all eligible participants was gathered, each participant was divided into a subgroup as outlined above. We had 32 people submit their names for consideration, three of

whom were ineligible due to not being members of the congregation. Fortunately, of the 29 who remained, we had enough in each subgroup to continue the process (a couple of the subgroups had exactly one participant, making the random selection for those subgroups not very random in the end). When all participants were placed into a subgroup, each participant within that subgroup was assigned a number at random. Our largest subgroup, for example, had 7 participants, so each participant received a number starting with 1 and going to 7. After each participant within a subgroup was given a number, I placed the range of numbers into Google's random number generator, had it generate a number three times, and selected the participant that matched the generated number.

When the list of ten individuals was randomly generated, I contacted each one by phone or email and confirmed their willingness and ability to participate in the study. Once they agreed, I passed along a consent form and arranged the first interview. All those who were not chosen received a "Thank You" for their willingness to participate and an acknowledgement that they had not been selected. The parishioners not chosen were understanding of the process and many of them graciously offered to help out if another participant decided to drop out. They were thankful to still be able to listen to the sermons, and I told them that while their feedback would not officially go into this document, it would still be greatly appreciated for my own personal development and growth. Several took the time after the series to contact me and share their thoughts with me.

Implementation

To make the membership aware of the project, and their ability to actively engage in it via research participation, I advertised for it in a number of ways. St. Paul utilizes two primary means of print media, the weekly bulletin and the weekly e-newsletter, "The Grace Gazette."

Beginning the weekend of January 12th, I published the details of my research project in these two publications and asked for members to submit their name for active participation in it. This written announcement ran for three weekends prior to the deadline of January 30th. Additionally, the pastors made verbal announcements at the outset of all of our worship services over those three weekends. Additionally, the written advertisement went out on our Facebook and Instagram pages, and a posted flyer was placed on the bulletin boards in the narthex. The advertising directed members to submit their names by means of a participation form by January 30th. This participation form was available as both a hard copy document, found on the bulletin boards in the narthex and in our main office, and as an electronic document that could be obtained via a link on the homepage of our church's website. This link was also made available on our social media posts and in "The Grace Gazette." Once the deadline date of January 30th passed, the electronic submission was taken down and no more physical forms were collected. All electronic forms were printed and added to the collection of hard copy forms received by the office before the 30th. After checking for eligibility given the stated parameters, the remaining forms were separated into the ten subgroups mentioned in the previous section and the selection process outlined earlier commenced, resulting in ten participants being chosen.

The project proceeded under the guidelines and approval of the IRB, granted to me on January 7, 2025. The ten individuals selected to participate were asked to fill out a consent document, following the guidelines stipulated in the IRB process. These documents were filled out and turned in before the first interview session. Some members brought it to the first session and others submitted it before then, but the formal interview would not begin unless the consent form had been given to me. After collection, all consent forms have been kept in a securely locked file cabinet in my office, and I have the only key to that cabinet.

In order to protect confidentiality, participants were given the option to meet outside of office hours, if they so chose to do so. Interviews took place in our church office conference room or in my pastoral office, with the door closed and the window blinds drawn. At the outset of the interview, participants were read a document approved by the IRB which stated the nature of the research and their involvement in it. Only after the participant heard and acknowledged an understanding of what was being asked of them and agreed to continue did the interview begin. Participants knew that they had the option to end an interview at any time, if needed.

To gather the data from the interviews, I took physical notes and recorded the conversation (with the consent of the participant) on an audio recording device that was not linked with an internet connection. The audio files of the conversation have been stored in the secured file cabinet along with the consent forms. I did not use the services of a transcriptionist. Due to the nature of my project and how I argued for technology as an obstacle that hinders authentic relationships, I desired to create a research environment that was as "low-tech" as possible. Therefore, I took the time to transcribe the audio myself when a verbatim comment was referenced. All physical transcription notes have been placed in the locked file cabinet.

Most identifying characteristics of the participant were removed from any research documentation, apart from those characteristics that were used to separate the individual into their particular subgroup (age, gender, and marital status) and others that allowed a brief introduction in the following chapter. The participants became listed and known according to the label of "Participant 1," Participant 2," "Participant 3" … "Participant 10," in order to keep their names and identities confidential. Seven years after the completion of the project, the consent forms and any physical transcription documents will be shredded and burned and the audio files will be irreparably crushed by a hammer and disposed of immediately thereafter.

Methodological Approach

The project I am undertaking proposed to both study the contextual understanding of authentic relationships and their obstacles and means for growth at St. Paul Lutheran Church, as well as to enact a positive change, one leading to greater understanding, articulation, and expression. The community at St. Paul actively engaged in this endeavor alongside of me, serving as the object to be studied and those among whom I desired to see growth in knowledge and purposeful action. One methodological approach to research, participatory action research, is an approach that involves the members of the community in a study to both examine an issue and to actively work toward its solution. With all that in mind, participatory action research is the methodological approach I took in this project, as my work was not meant simply to convey an issue, but also (at least in part) to solve it and to do so with the active participation of the congregation.

Research Methodology

To carry out this participatory active research, I used qualitative research. The research question this project poses aims at the congregant's ability to "articulate" and "express." These are not actions that lend themselves to quantitative research, as that method gives little room for one to articulate and express anything other than what the researcher has chosen to put in front of him. To better research how well a sermon series enabled someone to articulate and express something, an interview structure was employed to give the room and space for the individual to speak freely. While this qualitative form of research limited the sample size of those participating in the project, it also provided a better tool to directly answer the research question being asked.

Assumptions, Limitations and Role of Researcher

This research was conducted on the basis of several assumptions. To begin with, I assumed that the individuals who participated agreed with St. Paul's value of "Authentic Relationships" and genuinely sought to grow in their understanding of this value and wanted to live it out. In their willingness to participate, I assumed those individuals I interviewed assented to offering up honest and thoughtful answers to the questions I asked. I assumed that the participants had a basic catechetical knowledge of Scripture and the Lutheran confession of faith. I assumed that the sampling approach I have chosen provided a fair representation of the congregation as a whole. Lastly, I assumed that the qualitative methodology would most aptly provide insight into the participants' ability to articulate obstacles that hinder authentic relationships and to express a Gospel-centered response toward building greater authentic relationships in the congregation.

Along with underlying assumptions, the project entailed a set of limitations. In choosing five obstacles that hinder authentic relationships, I limited the scope of the issue and left behind other obstacles that could have been discussed and examined. And while there may be beneficial aspects to some of these obstacles, the project focused especially on the downsides and did not seek to give a fully balanced voice of rebuttal. Additionally, the resources consulted for this project, especially the secular wisdom, were primarily limited to those of the last quarter century, since those resources seemed best equipped to speak to the context of my parishioners.

The manner of research itself also carried with it some limitations. The methodology limited my observations to the responses of ten individuals. While they offered some ability to cast generalizations, these ten could not possibly speak for the entire assembly. The chosen sampling were furthermore limited to adults of the congregation, meaning that the study did not measure the effects of the sermon series on St. Paul's children. The time between the hearing of the sermon and the interview, while deliberately and intentionally kept as short as possible,

limited the individual's ability to recall certain aspects of the messages, though this limitation perhaps actually yielded a more accurate representation of what a sermon can do beyond the fifteen to twenty minutes of its enactment. And the questions asked in the interview skewed the conversation and limited all that might be said in response.

My role as both pastor of the congregation and researcher also offered its share of limitations. By and large, the congregation has been extremely supportive of me and my ministry. It would be unsurprising, therefore, if members who participated gave me responses that would seek to be flattering or ones that fit what they thought I wanted to hear, responses that might very well have been different if the researcher was a neutral observer. On the flipside, I am used to seeing myself as "pastor" and not as "researcher." While I believe I did well in keeping the roles separate, there were moments when I needed to be intentional about guarding myself from the predisposition to be pastor and moments when perhaps the roles became more mixed than would have been preferred for a truly objective research interview.

Timeline

Below was the timeline for the research stage of my MAP:

January 7, 2025: Obtained IRB approval.

January 8, 2025: Sent out publication details to our Director of Communications.

January 9, 2025: First publication of my sermon series and ask for research participation went out in our "Grace Gazette."

January 11–13, 2025: First bulletin announcement was read by congregants; first round of verbal announcements were made by pastors during weekend worship services.

January 30, 2025: Participant forms no longer accepted after this date.

January 31, 2025: Ten participants chosen via random selection process.

February 1–7, 2025: Ten participants contacted, interviews set up.

February 5, 2025: Participants not chosen were contacted and thanked for their willingness to participate.

February 14–28, 2025: First interview with participants conducted.

March 9-April 6, 2025: Preached five-week sermon series on Authentic Relationships.

April 7–12, 2025: Second interview with participants conducted.

May-August 2025: Interview data combed through and transcribed; patterns found and research findings typed up in chapter five of this document.

Fall 2025: Finish the MAP and submit for approval.

CHAPTER FIVE

PRESENTATION AND EVALUATION OF THE DATA

Data Analysis

Participant 1

The first participant is a single man in his twenties, navigating the post-college years and all the growing and transitions that come with it. Coming from a family of church workers, Participant 1 has an excellent grasp of Lutheran theology and the life of the Church. Though he was the youngest of all those who interviewed with me, his answers were perhaps some of the most theologically mature. In both interviews, he repeatedly emphasized our vertical relationship with God as being the source for our ability to have authentic relationships with one another, desiring to make it abundantly clear that any relational good springs forth solely from the love of God and His work through the Spirit and the Means of Grace. Additionally, Participant 1 focused on his own unique struggles with building authentic relationships, given his schedule and place in life within a community that is proportionally lacking when it comes to his age demographic.

Participant 2

Participant 2 is a married woman in her sixties. Having spent time working on the staff at St. Paul, she was able to offer a unique perspective on authentic relationships in the congregation, noting how the dual dynamic gave opportunity for additional relationships in the church, while simultaneously changing the nature of those relationships and potentially draining the desire to create new ones. Having a rich history at St. Paul, she could speak confidently and accurately regarding some of the trends and reoccurring issues the community has been through. This background heavily influenced her responses, as she mentioned how various traditions and patterns in the church do not make it conducive for authentic relationships to naturally form.

Participant 2 also excelled in being self-aware and self-reflective, picking up on the ways in which her own personality and preferences either fortified or resisted the obstacles highlighted throughout the series.

Participant 3

The third participant, a married man in his early nineties, is the oldest member to participate in the research. Because of his age and longevity in the church, Participant 3 could draw from hundreds of authentic relationships he formed over the years and use those experiences to put flesh on the skeleton of my homiletical content. This man grew up in an age where people at St. Paul did not just worship together; they did all of life together. They worked together. They played together. They were neighbors and friends. This frequent contact created a solid bond among the fellow parishioners of that era, one that in many ways continues to provide a relational backbone to the entire congregation. Another facet of Participant 3 that came through in his interviews is his deep knowledge of the Scripture, as he quoted numerous Bible passages in response to the questions asked of him.

Participant 4

Participant 4 is a recently widowed man in his seventies. Understandably so, his life circumstances shaped his answers perhaps more than any other participant. Still working his way through grief and the loneliness that this new reality brought to him, Participant 4 felt a great personal need for the authentic relationships the series aimed to foster. Relatedly, this participant struggled to limit the scope of the series' application to relationships in the church, consistently tying things back to his family life. Relational wellness within his family was of utmost importance to Participant 4 and something he kept coming back to in his responses. Yet while family held a central spot in his answers, he also talked at length about how new relational

opportunities in the congregation had been critical in helping him avoid isolation and keeping him connected to others

Participant 5

Participant 5 is a married man in his late twenties. Like Participant 1, he noted some of the challenges of fostering authentic relationships in the church that come with being in that stage of life, especially now that he has a young child at home, too. This participant regularly referred to his introversion and how it impacted his ability and, at times, willingness to form relationships in the congregation. As someone who enjoys connecting with others via online gaming, Participant 5 gave deep thought and prescient insight particularly in relation to the obstacle of technology. A deep thinker in general, this participant seemed to relish the opportunity to dig into the questions asked of him and ponder aloud various answers to those questions.

Participant 6

The sixth participant in the study is a single woman in her late thirties. The daughter of two parents with deep connections at St. Paul, she had the ability to pull back the curtain on a lot of the relational history in the congregation. Yet her desire to learn and be shaped by the series is what stood out most in the course of her interviews. She readily acknowledged how many of the obstacles applied not just to the people in general, but to her specifically. And after hearing the series, she expressed a thankfulness for how the messages, and the Spirit's work through them, had been able to assist her in taking a healthier approach towards authentic relationships with her brothers and sisters in Christ.

Participant 7

Participant 7 is a married woman in her thirties. Unlike the other nine participants, she is

relatively new to St. Paul and the Christian faith. Because of this, she entered into the study with "fresh eyes," not having the same preconceptions of what church fellowship should look like. Her responses, therefore, offered a unique perspective on what obstacles exist for outsiders and newer members to create authentic relationships within the congregation. Relatedly, Participant 7 came into the study with an incredible thirst for building relationships, as she does not have years of experience to draw upon with any of the people she worships with on a given weekend. In many ways, she feels like a stranger among friends, though she consistently admitted that her own fearful judgments of what other people think of her contribute to this feeling as much as anything else. Her answers helped to reveal some of the deeply held values and assumptions that lifelong Christians carry with them into their congregational fellowship.

Participant 8

A married woman in her seventies, the eighth participant entered with a unique journey when it came to her communal life at St. Paul. Having been a member in a previous time, this woman and her husband recently joined the congregation again after life circumstances brought them to other communities for membership during the intervening years. More than her fellow participants, Participant 8 honed in on the word "authentic" and talked at length about the need for sharing real experiences with others, exhibiting honesty and humble transparency with them, and going through life's ups and downs together. Additionally, she addressed what she sees as a divide between the older generations and the younger ones and commented on the need to bring the two together more often for intergenerational activities.

Participant 9

Participant 9 is a married man in his early sixties. Like Participant 7, he is a newer member to St. Paul. Unlike Participant 7, he transferred from another LCMS congregation and therefore

has a greater familiarity with our worship and theology. In similar fashion to Participant 4, Participant 9 tended to apply the series to relationships outside the congregation, though he usually made connections to his former work as a teacher rather than to his family. This vocation and his time spent with young men and women shaped his responses in a significant way. Perhaps owing to his teaching taking place within the public school system, this participant often pointed to larger relational breakdowns in society that trickled down into the life of the Church, such as a judgmental spirit and an unwillingness to listen to other perspectives. As a result, he viewed the series as not only beneficial to the congregation, but to relationships in all spheres of life.

Participant 10

The final participant, Participant 10, is a single woman in her early fifties. As with Participant 2, she drew upon experiences not only as a lay member of the parish, but also as a member of the staff. Furthermore, she is the only participant I interviewed who was a member of the visioning committee, the very group that proposed "authentic relationships" as one of the core values of our congregation. This being the case, Participant 10 entered the study with a vested interest in seeing the series succeed and take hold in the life of St. Paul. Her time on the committee uniquely qualified her to speak to the nature of the value itself and what it could ideally look like as we live it out together. Her role on the committee did not, however, blind her to making personal application and examining how the five obstacles presented a challenge not only to St. Paul as a whole, but also to herself individually. Her institutional intelligence also offered a valuable perspective concerning additional roadblocks to growing authentic relationships and strategies to overcome them.

Authentic Relationships

Since the series revolved around one of the five core values of St. Paul, authentic relationships, I wanted to see how the participants' understanding of this value changed as a result of hearing the five sermons. Would the series help clarify what this value meant? Would it take on new meaning? Or would their conception of the value remain largely unchanged?

During the first round of interviews, when I asked the participants to define what they think we mean by "authentic relationships," three major themes emerged: getting beyond surface level conversations, sharing ups and downs, and being transparent with each other. In highlighting the need to move past the surface level conversations, Participant 2 stated, "When we do the meet and greet, I say, 'Hi. Good morning.' I know a lot of people's names. But that's maybe as deep as it goes… so I guess an authentic relationship to me would be more of a connection with the people I'm worshipping with." Participant 5 echoed a similar sentiment, saying that authentic relationships are "not just about saying hi after church and that sort of things, but kind of a deeper level of engagement with each other to actually encourage each other. But you have to know what is actually going on in someone's life in order to actually do that." Further reinforcing this, Participant 10 noted that authentic relationships must move beyond "just walking in the door, hearing something, and walking back out, in order to actually create connections."

In addition to getting deeper, many participants shared that authentic relationships are about going through the highs and lows together. For example, Participant 9 said that what makes something an authentic relationship is that "you go through the ups and downs. You're there through thick and thin. It's real life." Participant 6 emphasized that authentic relationships are about "having a group of people to be able to lean on in hard times and then also those same people being there to help celebrate in the good times." Participant 1, meanwhile, highlighted

how authentic relationships promote sharing both blessings and struggles, “like if you recently had a huge blessing—like say you had a kid—or you're really struggling with a sin.”

Finally, the theme of transparency emerged in this initial interview when it came to defining authentic relationships. When I asked Participant 8 what a defining characteristic of authentic relationships is, she immediately answered, “Transparency, for sure. Breaking that mental wall within yourself of like trying to just be structured. Often people give you the specific answer they think you want—I think everybody does that in casual conversation sometimes—and not just giving their true self.” Participant 5 described the need for transparency in this way, “Christians always feel like we have to have everything put together and everything is great because we have Jesus, so everything should be hunky dory all the time, and even if it's not, then we should still look happy… so part of that authentic relationship has to be like an honest communication.” Further adding to this, Participant 6 commented, “I feel an authentic relationship is also built on honesty. A relationship that's built on trust. So knowing that you're able to go to a person in full confidence and either be able to ask for advice or ask for just someone to listen and not receive advice, because sometimes you just need someone to listen. So yeah, having that mutual trust is important.”

In the initial stage, therefore, the participants saw authentic relationships in the light of transparency, a mutual sharing of ups and downs, and diving below the surface level conversations. How did this compare to their definition of authentic relationships after hearing the sermon series?

It is important to acknowledge up front that a couple people did not offer much of a shift in their definition of this term. One participant, for example, when asked how to define authentic relationships after hearing the series responded, “The same way I said before. I think it’s the real

life relationships you have … communication, the ups and downs, making it work, the good with the bad." Another participant quipped, "It's probably similar to what I said the first time: genuine relationships where people just care about each other. Not that I didn't get anything out of your sermons. That sounds bad." It is natural that some of the responses would remain the same and it could be an indication that the individuals came into the series with a decent grasp on the subject already.

Yet while some returned to their previous definitions, new themes emerged in this second round of interviews. One new theme that sprang forth was that of selfless sacrifice. Participant 1 offered this response, "I would define an authentic relationship as one that takes a lot of work and a lot of personal sacrifice, one that requires you to go out of your way." In his answer, Participant 5 said that authentic relationships are "about that selfless, sacrificial giving." Likewise, Participant 10 noted that authentic relationships "are not self-focused, but sacrificial, outwardly looking toward others." As this concept of selfless sacrifice did not appear in the responses to defining authentic relationships during the first round of interviews, it is evident that the sermon series conveyed this theme in a memorable manner.

How was this theme conveyed? While some of the obstacles hinted at it, none of them directly spoke about selfless sacrifice. It seems more probable that this theme emanated from the Gospel proclamation during the sermons, where the selfless sacrifice of Christ in connecting us with Himself and with others was repeatedly highlighted. Not coincidently, therefore, the second change I observed in how people defined authentic relationships after the sermon series is that the participants more frequently referenced Jesus during round two of the interviews.

Participant 3, for example, stated, "For me, an authentic relationship is focusing on Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith and of our authentic relationships." Foundational to an

authentic relationship, according to Participant 6, is "having it be based on Jesus." Participant 7 expressed that "in order for you to have an authentic relationship with people, you need to have an authentic relationship with Christ. That has been a big 'aha' moment as I listened to the series." "There is a greater opportunity for authentic relationship when it is truly centered on Christ," remarked Participant 1. Finally, Participant 5 said, "The whole underpinning and center is Christ… we have that shared belief that Christ died for us. We draw from that and try to help each other, as well." Seeing Christ pop up time and time again in these responses is a strong affirmation to this pastor. The Holy Spirit enabled the Gospel proclamation to stick, the central goal of Lutheran preaching. Praise be to God!

Lastly, the sermons seemed to do well in communicating the five obstacles to authentic relationships that the series presented. Being asked how to define authentic relationships after listening to the series, the participants tended to incorporate the five obstacles into their answers. During the second round of interviews, Participant 2 said, "An authentic relationship is something that is real and personal. It's something you make *time* for. It's something that is messy and *inconvenient* … it's about letting go of *individualism*." Participant 10 noted that an authentic relationship is about "taking *time* for one another … and being *physically present* whenever the situation arises." "An authentic relationship," Participant 5 shared, "is a relationship where there is a willingness to be *inconvenienced*." As the five obstacles provided the framework for the five sermons, it was good to see them referenced in the way these participants now think about authentic relationships. How their understanding of each individual obstacle changed over the course of the series will be detailed in the following sections of this chapter.

Individualism

The concept of "individualism" is difficult to pin down in a universal fashion, as you can find people using the term in a variety of ways. These differing descriptions came through during my first round of interviews, as I received ten very different answers when I asked the participants to define what they saw as characteristic of individualism. For Participant 5, individualism is about "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps … sort of pretending nothing is wrong. Do everything yourself. Like don't ask for help." Participant 6 saw individualism more as "a lack of awareness of what other people might need or what other people's thoughts and ideas might be." Tying the term closely to isolationism, Participant 1 viewed individualism as "individual seclusion … sitting by yourself and ignoring the community around you." Participant 8, on the other hand, linked it to selfishness, stating, "You can't only think about yourself. Like watching TV, sometimes you just got to give in and watch sports instead of the Hallmark channel." Finally, in a rather blunt manner, one participant when asked to define individualism simply stated, "I have no idea."

In addition to the variety of definitions, a notable takeaway from the first round of interviews is that some individuals considered individualism, at least partially, to be a positive thing. According to Participant 9 in the first interview, individualism is "a good thing, because it can help you discover what makes you tick. We're all individuals. No one wants to be a conformist." After describing some of the negative aspects of individualism, Participant 10 went on to say, "from maybe a more positive connotation, individualism is about pursuing freedom and happiness and rights." "Individualism is about knowing yourself and finding yourself," added Participant 7. Evident in all these responses is the lack of a uniform idea concerning individualism going into the sermon series.

After circling back with the participants upon completion of the series, however, the

responses about individualism became much more uniform. The sermon on individualism defined the term in light of an individual living as though he was the center of his story (to the neglect of God and community) and this definition trickled out during the second round of interviews. Participant 2 now shared, "Individualism is seeing that I think too much of myself as the center of the story and not seeing myself as a part of Jesus' story and how He helped others." Similarly, Participant 3 said after the series that "individualism tends to look inward. I'm the most important person in the world. But I'm not. Christ is." "Even when we're sitting next to each other in church," Participant 7 remarked concerning individualism, "you're naturally just focusing on yourself … you're not focusing on others. There's like the view of a tunnel toward yourself."

Having arrived at a more uniform definition of what I meant by individualism, the participants in this second interview now viewed it as a huge obstacle to forming authentic relationships in the Church. Participants no longer emphasized any positive aspect of individualism and instead deemed it a substantial threat. Indeed, of the ten people who were interviewed, eight of them mentioned during round two that individualism was one of the two biggest obstacles to authentic relationships at St. Paul, making it the most frequently named obstacle. Adding to the significance of this statistic is the fact that individualism was the focal point of the very first sermon, meaning that participants were not simply grasping at their most recent memories to provide an answer. The series, therefore, provided clarity to the term and increased awareness of individualism's ability to inhibit the formation and growth of authentic relationships within the congregation.

Physical Distance

Unlike individualism, the obstacle of physical distance did not need to be defined in the

sermon series in order for people to understand it and its impact on authentic relationships. The COVID-19 pandemic communicated this all too well. Indeed, many of the responses during the first interview regarding physical distance went back to the painful lessons that were driven home by the pandemic, lessons about how critically significant close proximity to other people is for human flourishing. As Participant 9 shared, "When the pandemic hit, we were so isolated. But on the other hand, how are we to control something that we didn't know? But look how destructive that became. We need that personal, physical contact." Participant 10 echoed this sentiment, "Five years after COVID and it still hurts, and we've seen it clearly now that we have lived through this. It is difficult to make relationships work when you don't just happen to be in the same space." When asked about this obstacle, Participant 1 chimed in, "I think COVID is a great example of this. Look at what happened. Just look at social development challenges that children have had since that time period when there was so much isolationism and physical distance."

The participants had all, along with the rest of the world, recently experienced a time of traumatic physical distancing and could well articulate how a relationship suffers because of it. Some focused on the absence of body language, eye contact, and facial expressions that accompanies physical distance. "I take a lot of cues from body language," Participant 5 said, "and you can tell when someone wants to say something and when someone doesn't. There's so much stuff that gets lost when you're not around someone." Participant 8 shared, "Facial expressions and eye contact are so important. I mean, you could get on Zoom, but that could be fuzzy. And I think you can read things in a different way when you are in the room rather than when there is a screen between you." "Eye contact from six feet is happenstance," Participant 10 added, "Eye contact from 3 feet is 'Oh, you have something to say to me.'" Others focused on

the importance of physical touch and how that is taken away when we are at a distance. As Participant 7 put it, “When I get happy or excited, I love the physical contact. Like that’s just who I am. And my husband is the same way. And so I think being separated in our world today is not good.” Participant 9 shared, “The first thing we do when we see our kids is that they get a hug. It’s automatic. And, you know, as humans, we need that. We need that physical connection to each other.”

But while the participants could expertly describe the harmful effects of physical distancing even before listening to the series, hearing the sermons did give them a helpful perspective on how other things, beyond the pandemic, create this kind of separation. For Participant 4, in the second interview he reflected upon how life circumstances, including the death of a spouse and the moving of children, created a physical barrier. “Especially since my wife passed, we will get together and then it will be awhile before it happens again. It happens even with family. I’m not in the same spaces as people a lot, anymore. And that’s why I love it here (at church).” Another participant recalled how a tragic event created physical distance, saying, “I shut myself off. No one came to me to see if I was OK. And I did not come to anyone else to let them know I was not OK.” It was good for people to see through the series that physical distance can be caused by more things than a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic.

The biggest takeaways concerning this obstacle, however, tended to correlate with the presentation more than the content. In my sermon focusing on physical distance, I visually communicated the message by getting closer to the people (at one point going right into the middle of the congregation) and getting further away from them (moving all the way to the back wall of the sanctuary). This action stuck with my hearers. “I like the way you did your actual physical distancing yourself in the sermon. That was neat,” Participant 2 said. “I really like when

you stood in the middle of the congregation," added Participant 1. "That was fun. To walk into the middle of the congregation and start preaching, that was powerful." "Walking into the congregation was good," recalled Participant 3. Joining her voice to the others, Participant 10 said, "When you were standing in the middle and then standing way in back, it was super helpful to visualize. When you moved, I actually had to move my head to physically track. You could have understood it without moving, but adding the movement gave it a stronger impact."

In addition to the physical movement powerfully communicating this obstacle (and how Christ overcomes it), participants were also drawn to the change in communion practice for this particular service. Each week during the series, I took one element of our liturgy and modified it to fit the theme. For the physical distance obstacle, I had communicants come to the altar together, kneel together, and get dismissed together (our normal pattern is for people to come up individually as space opens up and leave the rail on their own accord, as we do a public dismissal for everyone at the conclusion of the Sacrament).

Changing the Lord's Supper practice to make it more reflective of our communal closeness in the meal made a huge impact on the participants. Seven of the ten individuals mentioned this change during my second interview with them. As Participant 7 shared, "I thought the different communion was really awesome. Kneeling together felt like—I don't know—like a huddle at a football game or something." Participant 2 remarked, "The communion one really drove home that, you know, we're a family coming to the table at the same time. I like that." "That was really effective," Participant 5 stated, "because you're actually like, 'Hey, we're with other people doing this thing,' which, you know, this is a community thing that you're supposed to do with everyone else." The change was so universally loved among the congregation that the Elders have discussed going back to it on a more permanent basis.

Perhaps the biggest takeaway from this second obstacle, therefore, is that our movement and practices in the Church can communicate messages just as much, if not more so, than our words. And it is rather fitting that this lesson came to light most powerfully during the obstacle of physical distance, an obstacle that deals more with actions and practices than with words.

Convenience

As I asked participants to describe how convenience impacts authentic relationships during the first interview, they struggled to do so. One participant initially responded, "That's a tough one for me. I don't know if I know what to say." Another said, "I have no idea. Can you clarify that?" "That's a great question," stated a third. "I never thought of that." Even those who were able to articulate answers could seemingly not conceive of the obstacle on its own terms, but rather consistently linked it to one of the other obstacles.

Participant 1 connected it to individualism, saying, "I think it ties to the first obstacle. If you're looking for convenience instead of being part of a community, you are again focused on yourself. What's best for me?" Similarly, Participant 10 shared, "It's so closely connected to individualism, because convenience is all about what is easy for me." Others made the connection to the obstacle of physical distance. "You might say the mileage distance from our family is an inconvenience," Participant 3 said. "But we do it." Participant 2 added, "The convenience of watching online keeps us from being close together in worship." For other participants, it was natural to see a link to the obstacle of time. "The inconvenient nature of a relationship is that you have a ton of other things going on and just like having to make the time to continue to cultivate that relationship," stated Participant 6. Picking up on the same theme, Participant 7 shared, "Having an authentic relationship would make me have to rearrange my very, very busy schedule. I would have to maybe sacrifice time." Finally, participants also saw a

connection to the obstacle of technology. “Technology gives us an illusion of convenience in our communication,” Participant 5 said. “I could just text this person or call this person. But we never do. So what became convenient, which is, ‘Oh, I can talk to everybody all the time,’ is that now we don’t talk to anybody at all.” Participant 9 put it this way, “Convenience is ordering through a food app or something. You don’t want to have even a brief relationship with someone or talk to them or have someone wait on you at a table. They can just drop the food off and you don’t need to talk to them.” It was fascinating, therefore, to observe how often those I interviewed immediately reached for another obstacle to aid them in expressing the obstacle of convenience.

When I revisited the conversation about convenience after the sermon series, it was refreshing to see, first of all, that those confused by it initially came to an understanding of it. Initially unsure what to make of the obstacle, one participant remarked during the second interview, “One that got talked about different than what I expected was convenience and I really appreciated it and understand it.” Another noted, “I didn’t know where you were going with it (the obstacle of convenience), but the sermon helped me get it, for sure.”

Beyond the fact that the series brought clarity to the obstacle, two things jumped out during the second round of interviews. The first is that, more than any other obstacle, participants remembered the theme text (The Parable of the Good Samaritan) and articulated well the text’s connection to how convenience can impede an authentic relationship. “The Good Samaritan resonated with me,” shared Participant 2. “Him being inconvenienced. I never thought of it that way. He helped him. He took the time. He was really inconvenienced.” Participant 5 agreed, saying, “I think the Good Samaritan was effective at the convenience one, especially if you read the whole thing. He paid for lodging and did all this stuff and wasn’t even part of the same

country. He did all these things and even came back … how inconvenient was it for the Samaritan to do that?" "The Good Samaritan hit me really hard," Participant 7 remarked. "I'm no longer going to value people for what they do or don't do for me. I am just going to do what I think is good or genuine, even if it is inconvenient."

Secondly, interviewing people after the series brought to light a different kind of relational struggle related to the obstacle of convenience. The majority of my homiletical content for this week centered on how authentic relationships will inconvenience us. During one paragraph, however, I also noted that in order to have an authentic relationship you need to be willing to inconvenience others and be a burden to them. In my second round of interviews, this point, more than the bulk of the sermon, is what participants remembered and took to heart. As Participant 1 declared, "I hate being an inconvenience to others. I don't want to be a burden… the sermon really connected quite a bit to me in that way." "I don't like to be a burden," Participant 6 said, "and I don't want to be seen as an inconvenience. So like honestly that was one of the most convicting discussions for myself." Participant 2 shared, "When you mentioned about like being an inconvenience to others, I don't like that personally. But I also know that it's important to do." Anecdotally, the only time during the series I had someone challenge me after the service was a woman who during the handshake line said, "I think you're wrong. I shouldn't be a burden to others." The biggest takeaway, therefore, regarding this obstacle might be that for our culture *being an inconvenience to others* is more of an obstacle to authentic relationships than *being inconvenienced by others*.

Time

During my first round of interviews, before walking through each individual obstacle, I asked the participants to list two obstacles that get in the way of building authentic relationships.

Even before knowing it would come up as one of the five that my series would focus on, seven of the ten participants mentioned "time" as one of the two biggest obstacles! "I get caught up in too many things," noted Participant 4. "You'd like to spend more time with others, you know, but everybody else has a busy schedule, too." "You're too busy," Participant 8 declared. Participant 10 shared, "One obstacle could be a time issue… even if you're coming to church, you could think you're putting in your time and then heading out the door to something else. You don't have the time to stop and chat." Sharing a personal struggle, Participant 1 stated, "The time frames in my life are constantly changing … I have a very odd schedule that would inhibit me from doing some of the things I want to do at St. Paul. Participating in them is so challenging because of the wide variety in my schedule." It is quite clear, therefore, that my hearers did not need to be told that time can get in the way of authentic relationships. Whereas other obstacles may not have been as initially evident, most people came into the series well aware of the obstacle of time and its dramatic impact on our relational well-being.

But is this seemingly obvious obstacle a result of people actually being busier today or is it an issue of prioritization? I asked this to each participant during the first round of interviews. Of the ten people interviewed, five said that it was a matter of priorities. "You always make time for what is most important," Participant 8 remarked. "So yeah, it's a matter of prioritizing." "I think that our priorities are certainly messed up," Participant 9 added, "We still have 24 hours. You know, it's how you use the time. Are you using that time in a good way? Are you using that time to build relationships?" The other five felt that it was a combination of being busier and having our priorities misplaced. "I think it's both," Participant 3 said. Going a little further, Participant 3 shared, "Both. Yeah, I definitely believe some of both…. Sometimes you get spread pretty thin … but you still have to plan it, you know, and give everybody some of the time that you have."

Of note is that none of the ten believed the obstacle of time was solely related to living in a busier era. All of them could discern that "not having enough time" might actually mean that "this is not important enough to me." Offering up time as an excuse tends to cover up an internal issue of how one prioritizes said time.

In following up with the participants after the series, time still got mentioned as one of the biggest obstacles to having authentic relationships. Indeed, after individualism, it was the next obstacle most mentioned by the participants during the second interviews. For example, when I asked Participant 2 during the second interview what obstacles are most prevalent, she immediately chimed in, "I still think that time is the first one … I still think time gets in the way because there are so many things that take time away." Likewise, Participant 10 answered by saying, "Time is number one. There is a lot happening. There is a lot going on. People are rushed … the time calendar issue is a big thing."

Little changed, therefore, between how people viewed the importance of the obstacle before the series versus how they saw it afterwards. Instead, perhaps the biggest takeaway from round two of interviews concerning the preaching of this obstacle related to my visual object lesson. For the obstacle of time, I set up a tower of giant-sized Jenga blocks on a table near the pulpit. Throughout the sermon, I would remove blocks to demonstrate how a relationship is weakened (and may eventually collapse) by taking away blocks of time from it. In my Gospel proclamation, I placed the blocks back into the tower and talked about how Jesus always has the time for us, empowering us to go out and invest time in others.

The participants remembered this visual. I am not sure, however, that they remembered the point behind it. Instead, the obstacle seemed to be memorable because of the interest in whether or not the tower would fall. "In one of your sermons you had Jenga blocks," one participant

began, “and everybody is waiting for it to fall. Let’s face it, we were.” Another added, “I was wondering with the Jenga tower, wondering if you’re going to make it topple … did you glue it?” “You know,” remarked a third, “I will admit when you were pulling out the Jenga blocks, I was waiting for the tower to collapse, just because I knew it was not supposed to.” “People were baffled with the tower,” joked another, “Like he’s got magic Jenga hands.”

These comments led me to a powerful homiletical lesson: do not let the spectacle of the object overshadow the point that it is making. I am thankful to have learned the lesson, and even more thankful that it happened during the obstacle that seemingly needed the least amount of explanation in order for the hearers to understand its significance. Even if they missed the point communicated by the Jenga tower, they fortunately still came away with a firm grasp on how time and the prioritization of it can impact authentic relationships.

Technology

While the participants certainly had thoughts and opinions related to the first four obstacles during the first round of interviews, it seemed like they really could not wait to unload a host of feelings about technology and how it can create a relational barrier. For many of them, this obstacle appeared to strike a personal chord. According to Participant 9, “75 years from now, 100 years from now, people are going to look back and go, ‘One of the greatest destructive forces on human relationships was how we utilized technology.’ Society is going to look back at us and wonder what happened. It’s such a barrier…. It’s just, it’s unbelievable. It’s like you’ve struck a nerve with this talk.” Another participant opened up and shared, “A lot of the sins that can come from technology are difficult to break because it’s an addiction to a glamorous image without the authenticity needed to form a relationship. It’s one of the reasons I don’t use social media because I find that the only thing it does is give me anxiety and hurt and covetousness to

desire something that the Lord has not blessed me with in this life." With a great degree of emotion, Participant 7 added, "I think it's like a total hindrance. I think it is totally negative. There's nothing good about it…. It distances everybody. I don't want to value a relationship based on a Facebook profile."

In the midst of this highly charged sharing, one of the things that kept popping up among the participants during the first round of interviews was how technology fights against authenticity itself. It can offer you relationships, but it might not be able to offer authentic ones. Participant 10 went on to say that with technology "you can't be transparent, because it's a wall." Participant 6 put it this way, "It is really easy to hide behind a screen. It is really easy to lie behind a text message." "It's not real," Participant 8 lamented. "I mean, what you see on there, it's not always real." "The vast majority of the time it is unchristian," noted Participant 1, "and also people not being authentic."

On top of this, others simply expressed frustrations with how glued to devices people are. "No matter where I go," Participant 3 said, "people are on their phones. For example, this morning I had an appointment to have some service work done on my car. In the waiting room, there's about three people there, and they're all on their phones." Participant 7 voiced a similar concern, saying, "We have friends we haven't seen in a long time and then they come over and sit on my couch and watch TikTok. Like why are we even hanging out?" What the first round of interviews uncovered, therefore, is that many people came into the series with a negatively personal view of technology, irritated by its inauthenticity and the way it distracts us from forming authentic relationships.

People did not need to be confronted with the negative side of technology. What they did need, perhaps, was to see that it could be used in a beneficial way. The sermon series appeared to

accomplish this goal. During the second round of interviews, many of the participants now recounted the positive aspects of technology and how it can be used as a tool to better develop authentic relationships. Previously describing technology as a total negative, Participant 7 stated in the second interview, "I understand how technology can be used for good, but I don't always want to do it. I can see how technology can bring people in … I reached out to somebody and texted her and it opened up a whole new relationship." "The way you wrapped up the technology section was good," Participant 5 said. "You didn't just say, 'Oh, hey, technology is bad.' Technology is a tool. So we can use it to do good things—like actually use it to schedule things—and stay in touch with people over long distance and actually use it to foster relationships…. That was good because I feel like it's just so easy to say we should get rid of everything." "I never thought about how it could be used in a positive way," added Participant 2.

Of particular note regarding the use of technology for good, a few participants commented on how they appreciated the invitation to send in prayers from their phone during the service. Adding to her previous comment, Participant 2 mentioned, "The prayers thing, that was cool. That was a nice idea." Similarly, Participant 10 stated, "I appreciated—and I don't know how successful it was—how with prayer you said that you could send it in right now and we'll pray for it. Even if it wasn't something I did at the moment, I think having that door open and saying that we can do this just makes it more inviting." While Participant 10 did not send in a request that weekend, many of my participants did. In fact, of the seven electronic prayer requests I received that weekend, four of them came from those I interviewed. Overall, therefore, the sermon on technology benefitted the hearers by allowing them to see how even technology can be redeemed for a godly purpose.

Christ the Example and Overcomer

The sections above detail some of the Gospel takeaways shared by the participants. Since Christ is the center of our theology and preaching, though, I did not want to conclude my research findings without detailing a specific change noted in how participants spoke of Christ during the two interviews. As important as it is to my project that the hearers be able to better articulate the obstacles to authentic relationships as a result of the series, it is even more important to me as a pastor that the sermons bolster a proper expression of a Gospel-centered response to those obstacles.

During the initial interviews with the research participants, when I asked about how Christ overcomes the obstacles that hinder authentic relationships, one word kept popping up over and over again—"example." "It's mostly the *example* of how to interact with other people that I think is helpful," Participant 5 responded. "Whenever anybody wanted that connection with Him, He took the time to actually stop and do that thing." "If we look to Jesus and everything He did and follow His *example*, that's all we need to build authentic relationships," stated Participant 6. As Participant 8 said, "He gave us good *examples* in the Bible…. He never felt rushed. He always gave His time." "He's an *example* of showing how to live while putting others first, you know, taking care of the community," added Participant 2. "What better *example* do we have than Him?" asked Participant 9. "He's our greatest *example*."

On the one hand, Christ is our greatest example. Looking to Him and patterning our lives based on His words and actions is not wrong. Paul, for example, encourages us to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). The sermons I proclaimed lifted up Christ as a wonderful example of how to build authentic relationships. He gives us the blueprint and His example is a beautiful vision of what authentic relationships can look like at their best.

On the other hand, if the messaging ends with Christ as example only, then a great

disservice will have been done to the faith of the hearers. After all, we cannot perfectly follow His example. Only seeing Him as example, therefore, will lead to increasing frustration with ourselves and others as we live together in imperfect relationships. Worse still, it will create doubt regarding our salvation and status as children of God. With this concern in mind, I wanted my series to move beyond Christ as mere example and to portray Him also as the one who overcomes our feeble attempts at relationship building, forgives our mistakes, and restores us into a right relationship with Him and His body, the Church.

In returning to the question about Christ overcoming the obstacles in the second round of interviews, therefore, it was reassuring to see some of these other Gospel themes come through. "Christ brings us together," Participant 5 stated. "He died to bring us together … His Supper connects every single person together in worship, so even if you're at a different church, you are in communion with Christ and the rest of the body of Christ at the same time." Participant 3 explained, "I know it's hard to live according to what God wants us to be. Our sinful nature pops up. And so we need that faith in Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and our salvation." "The first way He overcomes is through the good gifts that He gives in the Divine Service," Participant 1 shared. "I mean, the absolution, the Sacrament of the Altar, the continual reminder of our baptism. Reconciliation comes through that and branches out into every aspect of our relationships." "He helps us because He forgives us when we're totally making the wrong decision," Participant 2 remarked. "The sermon on the Prodigal Son really emphasized the total forgiveness Christ gave for us," added Participant 4. Talk of Christ's example appeared again during this round of interviews, but I was pleased to see those comments balanced out with a more comprehensive view of all Christ does to overcome the obstacles, including our own sinfulness, that hinder authentic relationships.

Potential Shortcomings or Future Additions

No one would be so bold as to claim that five weeks is enough time to cover everything concerning building authentic relationships in the Church. In seeking to address the five biggest obstacles that hinder authentic relationships, other obstacles got left on the cutting room floor, obstacles that perhaps are even more prominent at St. Paul. In my interviews, therefore, I wanted to see what shortcomings existed and what could be added to a future series on this topic.

Before the series started, one potential obstacle that kept on surfacing during the interviews was a resistance to change. When asked about barriers to authentic relationships during the first interview, Participant 9 shared, "I guess the first thing that pops in my mind is the 'we've always done it that way' mindset. Let's be honest, it doesn't matter if it is church or anywhere else, change scares the bejeebers out of people. I think that makes it really difficult for relationships." Echoing this sentiment, Participant 6 said, "One obstacle could be like the fear of change. Things have to be able to change a little bit in order for relationships to grow…. 'We've always done it this way.' But just because it was done one way in the past doesn't necessarily mean it's what needs to be done now." "People get stuck in their ways," added Participant 7. For better or worse, our spiritual and cultural heritage does not readily embrace change and many people noted it as a potential roadblock to authentic relationships.

Yet when I returned to the participants after the series, this concern was noticeably absent from their responses, indicating that either the series addressed it adequately or it faded into the background as a lesser obstacle. When asked if there was anything lacking from the series during the second round of interviews, only a few threads emerged (none of them revolving around resistance to change). One participant wished there would have been a sixth sermon dedicated solely to our relationship with the Triune God. "I would have loved a sixth week that would have been about the relationship we have with God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Because I

think, especially in our culture, the relationship between us and Christ becomes very individualistic. I made a decision for Christ. It's my faith. I don't need a church. I don't need religion… But you don't do anything. God gives you Christ. God gives you Baptism and the regeneration it brings. God gives you the Eucharist. God gives you relationship … you did address this in every sermon, but a full sermon on that would have been really powerful."

For others, there was a desire for the series to go beyond the walls of the church and into other vocational spheres. "How is it tied to everyday life as well?" one participant commented, when asked what could have been explored in the series. "Maybe you could have talked about different kinds of relationships," another shared. "Like parental relationships, spousal relationships, friendships, and so on." "Selfishly, I wish there was more as far as the family relationships," suggested another.

Finally, there were a couple comments regarding personality styles, particularly the struggle some face in building relationships due to their introversion. "The only thing I would add is the introvert side of things," one participant stated. "Like for me, I'm more introverted. And especially after dealing with people all day, my social meter is low." "I don't know if it's fair to call it an obstacle," said another, "but some people will be hindered because they are not outgoing." "I think personally there is an introverted side of me that is an issue," shared a third. Another sermon on how to deal with obstacles related to your own personality habits, therefore, may have been appreciated.

Overall, though, it was encouraging to hear that the participants thought the series sufficiently covered the topic. "I feel like with these main five obstacles, it kind of includes everything," Participant 6 said. "I feel like anything else could fall into one of these five categories." "I'm sure you could go further," commented Participant 8, "but you only had 20

minutes. I thought you did good with the time you had." Participant 10 added, "I feel like these fit as the top five. I'm sure we could brainstorm and come up with more, but in our time and space and community, these hit home." While the series left room for expanded thought and conversation, it also seemed that no participant finished feeling as though there was an obvious shortcoming. Instead, most agreed that the series offered a well-rounded and complete presentation on the subject, a result that was refreshing to unearth.

Impact at St. Paul

The interviews conducted offer a glimpse into the impact the series had on ten specific individuals. But what of the congregation as a whole? Did the participants notice any observable outcomes within the larger community?

When I sat down with the participants prior to the sermon series, I asked them what they thought St. Paul currently did well in terms of fostering authentic relationships. In answering this question, many highlighted the amount of opportunities for fellowship the congregation offers. Participant 9, for example, stated, "I think you have a ton of activities that you give people the opportunity to take part in." "I do think there's a lot of things offered here," Participant 2 echoed. "If you want to get involved with something, there are ways to get involved. There are ways to find groups." "There are so many different things you can do here," Participant 5 shared. Participant 6 simply declared, "There's a lot of opportunities to join in." Repeating the same sentiment, Participant 4 said, "This church is doing a lot for all kinds of different people." In the minds of participants, therefore, St. Paul had an infrastructure in place to give authentic relationships a chance to form and thrive. Having those opportunities is only half the battle, though. There also needs to be a willingness and desire to take advantage of them.

Did the sermon series succeed in stirring up that willingness and desire within members? It

is difficult to speak definitively on that question. Yet one piece of evidence powerfully suggests that the community is growing in its desire to be connected and build authentic relationships: an increase in people sticking around after services to engage in conversation.

One fruit I have observed from the series is a more crowded narthex and gathering hall after our worship services end. Rather than people rushing out to get to their cars and go home, they appear to be more eager to stick around and connect with their fellow parishioners. I am not alone in this observation. "I think I see more people visiting with each other after the services, in the hallways, just standing around in the gathering hall," noted Participant 3. "And I think that's good." "People are totally receiving what you've been saying," Participant 7 commented. "You can see people are gathering more in the hallway or talking pew to pew and you can definitely tell that it's been a big change, which I've done, as well, myself." "I've definitely seen a lot more people talking in the narthex after church," Participant 1 shared. "A lot of different generations interacting with each other … people lingering after church, people that I haven't seen talking with each other before … that's the one that's the most visible." Participant 10 observed, "I've noticed a lot more people in the gathering hall after service that are convicted to stick around and eat and talk." "People seem friendlier after the service," Participant 4 said. "They are more likely to strike up a conversation afterwards because you have broken that ice, so to speak. I think that's effective."

If these comments are indicators of a genuine change, this series could have lasting ripple effects on our authentic relationships at St. Paul. The infrastructure has been in place. The opportunities existed. But the willingness to engage and join in was tepid. Yet the series seems to have now awaken a desire to take the time to connect with fellow brothers and sisters in the church. This desire, along with the manifold opportunities for fellowship, could signal the

beginning of a chapter at St. Paul in which the value of "Authentic Relationships" moves from "aspirational" to "lived out."

Summary

Interviewing the ten participants offered a unique window into the strengths and weaknesses of the sermon series. Overall, the series appeared to achieve the goal of increasing the hearers' ability to articulate the obstacles that hinder authentic relationships and to express a Gospel-centered response to overcoming them. After hearing the sermons, participants in the study were better able to describe an authentic relationship. They grew in their knowledge of each obstacle and the power each had to disrupt relational well-being in the congregation. Additionally, the sermons aided in allowing the participants to better express how Christ helps us overcome these obstacles.

Along the way, a few weaknesses were uncovered and lessons were learned. The power of illustrations and object demonstrations, for better and worse, came to light. Furthermore, the interviews offered insight regarding potential avenues for a future series on authentic relationships, perhaps one tied to personality styles or one that moved outside of the congregation and into the realm of other relationships. Best of all, though, the interviews confirmed a recognizable shift in how the members of St. Paul interact with one another before and after worship services. This trend has breathed life into the skeletal bones of the series' content and could enable it to endure as a living proclamation, one which can exist well beyond the final sermon's "Amen."

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY

"It is not good that the man should be alone." God said it of Adam in the Garden at the dawn of time. But God also says it in this time of me and the members of St. Paul Lutheran Church. He says it of the 90-year-old widow who finds it difficult to pay attention to the sermon, her heart overwhelmed by missing someone with whom she can share her joys and burdens. He says it of the college student who looks around the congregation and all the families and couples and feels out of place, just as he does in his campus life. He says it of the middle-aged mother who carries her screaming child to the cry room, desperately hoping both to be seen and to be ignored. And yes, He says it of the pastor, the one speaking to an audience of hundreds and yet wondering if anyone cares about him beyond what he has to offer. Much has changed between Gen. 2 and Grafton 2024, but the problem of isolation remains. Even in a congregation of 2,500, many feel isolated and alone. And it is not good.

But why do we feel this way? What contributes to this isolation and loneliness? What barriers keep us from forming authentic relationships with one another? Five years ago, the vision team of St. Paul began asking these questions, but the answers seemed elusive. The congregational leadership and publications have communicated the need for authentic relationships persistently over the last few years, but members still struggle to find genuine connection and fellowship. The desire is there, yet that desire is not enough on its own to simply will this value into existence. Instead, that desire must be complemented by an intentional approach to articulate what is hindering these relationships and to express a Gospel-centered response aimed at creating them.

This project was a commitment to that task. It was a commitment to St. Paul's value of

authentic relationships. It was a commitment to learn about the foundational obstacles that get in the way of building genuine community. Scholars and Scripture offer extensive wisdom in this realm, and this project committed itself to hear them and learn from them. Finally, this was a commitment to expressing hope for a future, a future where the Spirit has worked through the insights of this project to enable the members at St. Paul to know how to better relate to the brothers and sisters around them.

The vision team labeled "Authentic Relationships" as an aspirational value. Certainly there will always be something aspirational about it until Christ returns. But rather than accepting this truth and becoming defeatist, God gives us the tools to optimistically work toward turning what is only aspirational into something that reflects a beautiful "now, not yet" reality. St. Paul can have authentic relationships. It is not a lost cause.

This sermon series, informed by secular and scriptural wisdom, aimed at enabling the people of St. Paul Lutheran Church to articulate the obstacles that hinder authentic relationships and express a Gospel-centered response toward building greater authentic relationships in the congregation. The congregation learned about the barriers of individualism, physical distance, inconvenience, time, and technology. The people saw how their own sinful desires latched onto these barriers and fortified them. Yet above all, St. Paul heard the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ, a Good News not only for our eternal well-being, but also for our relational health in the here and now. Through Christ, parishioners received forgiveness and strength to choose community over individualism, to draw nearer to one another, to embrace the joy of being inconvenienced, to take time for each other, and to view technology as a means to serve the true Master and to build authentic relationships.

The same God who looked down at the isolation of man in the beginning and provided a

solution is able to do the same for the members of St. Paul through the life-giving Gospel of His Son, Jesus. God has also given the Helper to bridge barriers. And through this Helper and all that He can do through this project and beyond, the 90-year-old widow and the college student and the middle-aged mother and the pastor can all come together at St. Paul in authentic relationships, look around, and joyfully declare, "I am not alone. And it is good."

Present and Future Implications

As St. Paul and its pastors seek to build on the sermon series and continue to promote the value of authentic relationships, a few practical steps have already been taken, with the potential for others down the line. One of the biggest changes enacted since the sermon series has been a reimagining of our Gathering Hall space, the space where most of our between-service fellowship happens.

The Gathering Hall is a hallway between our sanctuary and our Family Life Center, a space that hosts our Adult Bible Class and other events throughout the year. Once a driveway between buildings, the Gathering Hall is now an enclosed space the width of a couple cars. The Gathering Hall is a relatively small space for fellowship, particularly for a congregation our size. Yet motivated parishioners have made the most of it and turned it into a place which is conducive for fostering authentic relationships. In the last handful of months, chairs, tables, and high-top tables have been added to the space and an increased number of baked goods have been set out to encourage people to gather, snack, linger, and talk.

This low-cost makeover finding success, conversation has now shifted to other spaces on our campus. In August 2025, a new school wing was dedicated at St. Paul, the culmination of years of planning and fundraising. The new addition has opened up rooms off of our Family Life Center. While firm plans have yet to be made for these rooms, the desire is to utilize them to

increase our opportunities for gatherings and Bible studies. Thus far, our Women's Guild has met in one of these rooms and we are also using them for our new MomCo Ministry, a gathering of Christian mothers that was paused for years while our growing school took over more and more of the rooms on our campus. As we look to firm up concrete plans for these recently vacated rooms, our value of Authentic Relationships will certainly be at the forefront of these conversations.

Additionally, the Board of Parish Education made plans to follow up on the sermon series with the promotion of a congregation-wide small group Bible study, beginning in October 2025. The study will encourage parishioners to build authentic relationships with one another in fellowship and in study, as some groups gather at St. Paul and others gather in people's homes. Not only will these gatherings promote authentic relationships, but the content of the study itself will also reinforce this value. Groups will be studying *Together* by Ben Mandrell, a book that focuses on the community that marked the early church of Acts 2. The lessons from this study will assist members in continuing to push past the barriers outlined in the sermon series and work toward greater relational connectedness.

In the future, I also plan to promote a study on *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. While I do not currently know if this will be in the format of another small group study or a topic for my Wednesday evening Adult Bible class, I do intend to use it as a resource to build on my sermon series. Even though I incorporated some of Bonhoeffer's thought into this series, much was left on the "cutting room floor," and I look forward to incorporating that material at a later time for the benefit of promoting authentic relationships.

These are the primary present and future practical implementations stemming from this study, but others are possible. Some of the worship service changes/additions made during the

series may come back on a more permanent basis, particularly the communal distribution of the Lord's Supper and the practice of having a prayer leader present at the conclusion of each service. Beyond this, my ultimate hope is that the spirit of fostering authentic relationships takes hold among leaders and laity alike to create ministry changes and programs that none of us can even begin to imagine at the moment.

Conclusion

It's 9:04 on a Sunday morning. The 8 a.m. worship service concluded about five minutes ago and I have been shaking hands and greeting parishioners on their way out of the sanctuary. The handshake line fizzling out, I am left alone with no more parishioners coming my way from the narthex. I pause for a beat and then make my way through the narthex and step toward the sanctuary doors. What catches my eye as I round the corner brings a smile to my face: groups of people, scattered around the sanctuary, still standing in their pews and engaged in deep conversation with each other. In joy, I go over to these brothers and sisters and greet them where they are at, happy to have needed to go to them to give them a handshake rather than having them rush out to meet me in the receiving line.

After taking in the beauty of these connections, I walk to the front of the sanctuary and step into the vestry in order to remove my vestments and my microphone. While in the vestry, I connect with the liturgizing pastor, talking about our family lives and our plans for the rest of the day. Our dialogue is interrupted as two elders enter into the room, sharing their greetings and engaging in some light-hearted banter before they go to the sacristy to prepare for the next service.

The vestments hung up and the microphone placed in its charging station, I make my way to the side door, which opens into our Gathering Hall. As I have grown accustomed to doing, I

open the door slowly so as not to wallop an unsuspecting member on the other side. The slow-swinging door reveals an utter delight: a Gathering Hall filled with people, young and old, living out the value of authentic relationships. Kids with powdered donut goatees dance and mimic their favorite athletes. Adults stand huddled around a high-top table, sipping coffee and swapping stories. At the far end of the room, two parishioners let out uproarious laughter and pat each other on the shoulder.

It's been four months, but I see it. In the parishioners who have not left their pews, I see it. In the vestry conversations and blessed interruptions, I see it. Above all, in the packed and noisy Gathering Hall, I see it. Authentic relationships are blossoming. The word "reality" is beginning to nudge "aspirational" to the side. We still have a ways to go, but thanks be to God, the value of authentic relationships is more than just a statement on a banner, it is alive and well inside the walls of St. Paul Lutheran Church.

APPENDIX ONE

Publications for MAP Research Participation

Pastor Anderson needs volunteers for his Doctor of Ministry project

The time during Sabbatical enabled Pastor Anderson to complete his proposal for his final project and get it approved. The next step is the "research phase" with the congregation. During the first five weekends of Lent (March 9th-April 6th), Pastor Anderson will be preaching a sermon series on the theme of "Authentic Relationships," one of St. Paul's five core values. He will need participants from the congregation who will be willing to commit to being present for all five sermons and who will be willing to be interviewed two times, once before the sermon series and once after. If you would like to help out, please fill out a participant form, which can be found online on the homepage of our church website (splgrafton.org) or as a physical form in the narthex. If completing a physical form, please return it to the church office mailbox in the Gathering Hall.

Alternate, Shortened Version for Publications

Participants needed for Pastor Anderson's final project

Who: Any member of the congregation, ages 18 and older

What: Be willing to be present for a five-week sermon series starting March 9th and ending April 6th. Be willing to be interviewed by Pastor Anderson two times, once before the series and once after it.

How: If interested please complete a participant form, which can be found online on the homepage of our church website (splgrafton.org) or as a physical form in the narthex (physical forms to be returned to the church office mailbox in the Gathering Hall)

Questions? Contact Pastor Anderson (pastor.anderson@splgrafton.org or 262-377-4659 ext. 333)

APPENDIX TWO

Participation Form

Pastor Anderson's Doctor of Ministry Project

The time during Sabbatical enabled Pastor Anderson to complete his proposal for his final project and get it approved. The next step is the "research phase" with the congregation. During the first five weekends of Lent (March 9th-April 6th), Pastor Anderson will be preaching a sermon series on the theme of "Authentic Relationships," one of St. Paul's five core values. He will need participants from the congregation who will be willing to commit to being present* for all five sermons and who will be willing to be interviewed two times, once before the sermon series and once after. **Participant forms are to be completed by January 30th**. You will be notified at a later date as to whether or not you will be asked to participate and, if you are asked, what the next steps will be.

1. **Name**: _____

2. **Age**: _____

3. **Gender**:

   □ Male

   □ Female

4. **Marital Status**:

   □ Married

   □ Unmarried (Single, Widowed, Divorced, etc.)

5. **Member at St. Paul**:

   □ Yes

   □ No

6. **Phone**: _____

7. **Email (if applicable)**: _____

8. **Commit to be present to hear all 5 sermons (one a weekend) from March 9th - April 6th**

   □ Yes, I will be physically present for all 5 (preferred)
   □ Yes, I will hear all five sermons, but may need to view one or two online
   □ No

According to the research regulations of this study, ten participants will be chosen at random. You will be notified via your listed contact information within the next few weeks if you have been chosen or not.

Thank you for your willingness to participate!

APPENDIX THREE

Informed Consent Form

Study Title: Authentic Relationships among the Body of Christ

Researcher: Rev. Luke Anderson

Email Address and Telephone Number: pastor.anderson@splgrafton.org, 414-551-7500

Research Supervisor: Dr. Glenn Nielsen

Email Address: nielseng@csl.edu

You are invited to be part of a research study. The researcher is a student at Concordia Seminary in Saint Louis, Missouri as part of the Doctor of Ministry program (DMin.). The information in this form is provided to help you decide if you want to participate in the research study. This form describes what you will have to do during the study and the risks and benefits of the study.

If you have any questions about or do not understand something in this form, you should ask the researcher. Do not sign this form unless the researcher has answered your questions and you decide that you want to be part of this study.

WHAT IS THIS STUDY ABOUT?

As a congregation, St. Paul recently adopted a new mission statement and a set of five values. One of these five values is "Authentic Relationships." While we aim to have greater connection as a congregation, we admittedly often fall short in living this value out, falling prey to a variety of obstacles. The purpose of this study is to preach on the topic of "Authentic Relationships" so that people may be better enabled to articulate the obstacles that hinder authentic relationships and express a Gospel-centered response toward building greater authentic relationships in the congregation.

WHY AM I BEING ASKED TO BE IN THE STUDY?

You are invited to be in the study because you are a **member** of St. Paul Lutheran Church who falls into one of the below categories:

- Married male, age 26-45
- Married male, age 46-65
- Married male, age 65+
- Married female, age 26-45
- Married female, age 46-65
- Married female, age 66+
- Young adult (male or female), age 18-25
- Single adult (male or female), age 26-45
- Single adult (male or female), age 46-65
- Single adult (male or female), age 66+

If you do not meet the description above, you are not able to be in the study.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL BE IN THIS STUDY?

Ten participants will be in this study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The researcher is a pastor at St. Paul Lutheran Church.

WILL IT COST ANYTHING TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

You do not have to pay to be in the study.

HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to be in this study, your participation will last about 7 hours. You will be asked to complete two 45-minute interviews at St. Paul (one before March 9th and one after April 6th) and will need to come to worship at St. Paul to hear a sermon for five consecutive weeks between March 9th and April 6th.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?

If you decide to be in this study and if you sign this form, you will do the following things:

• Give personal information about yourself, such as your age, gender, occupation, and education level.

• Answer questions during an interview about authentic relationships, the obstacles that hinder them, and a response to overcome them.

• Listen to a sermon series on the topic of authentic relationships.

• Answer another round of questions during an interview about authentic relationships, the obstacles that hinder them, and a response to overcome them.

While you are in the study, you will be expected to:

• Follow the instructions you are given.

• Tell the researcher if you want to stop being in the study at any time.

WILL I BE RECORDED?

The researcher will audiotape your interview. The researcher will use the audiotape in order to recall the conversation, take notes, and write a transcript of the conversation.

The researcher will only use the recordings of you for the purposes you read about in this form. They will not use the recordings for any other reasons without your permission unless you sign another consent form. The recordings will be kept for seven years and they will be kept confidential. The recordings will be destroyed after seven years.

WILL BEING IN THIS STUDY HELP ME?

Being in this study will not help you beyond the spiritual benefits afforded to all parishioners attending the worship services. Information from this study might help researchers help others in the future.

ARE THERE RISKS TO ME IF I AM IN THIS STUDY?

No study is completely risk-free. However, we don't anticipate that you will be harmed or distressed during this study. You may stop being in the study at any time if you become uncomfortable.

WILL I GET PAID?

You will not receive anything for being in the study.

DO I HAVE TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can decide not to be in the study and you can change your mind about being in the study at any time. There will be no penalty to you. If you want to stop being in the study, tell the researcher.

The researcher can remove you from the study at any time. This could happen if:

• The researcher believes it is best for you to stop being in the study.

• You do not follow directions about the study.

• You no longer meet the inclusion criteria to participate.

WHO WILL USE AND SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT MY BEING IN THIS STUDY?

Any information you provide in this study that could identify you such as your name, age, or other personal information will be kept confidential. The participants will simply be listed as "Participant A" all the way through "Participant J". In any written reports or publications, no one will be able to identify you.

The researcher will keep the information you provide in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office and only the researcher and research supervisor will be able to review this information.

Similarly, all audio recordings will be kept in the locked file cabinet in the researcher's office and only the researcher and research supervisor will be able to review this information. The researcher alone will have the key to the cabinet.

Even if you leave the study early, the researcher may still be able to use your data, but only that which has been shared prior to leaving.

Limits of Privacy (Confidentiality)

Generally speaking, the researcher can assure you that she/he will keep everything you tell him/her or do for the study private. Yet there are times where the researcher cannot keep things private (confidential). The researcher cannot keep things private (confidential) when:

• The researcher finds out that a child or vulnerable adult has been abused

• The researcher finds out that that a person plans to hurt him or herself, such as commit suicide

• The researcher finds out that a person plans to hurt someone else,

There are laws that require many professionals to take action if they think a person might harm themselves or another, or if a child or adult is being abused. In addition, there are guidelines that researchers must follow to make sure all people are treated with respect and kept safe. In most states, there is a government agency that must be told if someone is being abused or plans to hurt themselves or another person. Please ask any questions you may have about this issue before agreeing to be in the study. It is important that you do not feel betrayed if it turns out that the researcher cannot keep some things private.

WHO CAN I TALK TO ABOUT THIS STUDY?

You can ask questions about the study at any time. You can call the researcher if you have any concerns or complaints. You should call the researcher at the phone number listed on page 1 of this form if you have questions about anything related to this study.

DO YOU WANT TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

I have read this form, and I have been able to ask questions about this study. The researcher has talked with me about this study. The researcher has answered all my questions. I voluntarily agree to be in this study. I agree to allow the use and sharing of my study-related records as described above.

By signing this form, I have not given up any of my legal rights as a research participant. I will get a signed copy of this consent form for my records.

Printed Name of Participant _____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____

I attest that the participant named above had enough time to consider this information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

Printed Name of Researcher _____

Signature of Researcher _____

Date _____

DO YOU AGREE TO BE AUDIOTAPED IN THIS STUDY?

I voluntarily agree to let the researcher audiotape me for this study. I agree to allow the use of my recordings as described in this form.

Printed Name of Participant _____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____

APPENDIX FOUR

First Interview Questions

1.) Please state your name:

2.) What do you think is the meaning of St. Paul's value of "authentic relationships?"

3.) What are the components of an authentic relationship?

4.) What obstacles get in the way of authentic relationships in the Church? Which two do you think are the biggest?

5.) Specifically, what keeps *you* from having authentic relationships?

6.) What do you think are the characteristics of individualism? How does individualism affect authentic relationships?

7.) How does physical distancing affect authentic relationships?

8.) Where does the idea of "convenience" fit in with authentic relationships?

9.) How does time affect authentic relationships?

10.) How does technology affect authentic relationships?

11.) As you think about St. Paul, what obstacles do you think hinder relationships in the Church? Are there others you can think of that affect us here?

12.) What are we doing well?

13.) How does Christ help us to overcome the obstacles that hinder authentic relationships?

14.) What biblical texts or examples paint a portrait of what authentic relationships can look like in the body of Christ?

15.) Anything else you want to share about how we can build authentic relationships at St. Paul?

APPENDIX FIVE

Sermon One

Authentic Relationships: Individualism vs. Community in Christ

Based on Luke 19:1–10

It's Wednesday evening. Bible class has just finished. I walk over to the livestream computer, turn it off, and wheel the computer cart back into the office. I pack up my microphone, put it back in storage, and make my way back out into the Family Life Center to behold a beautiful sight: authentic relationships. (picture on screen) Brothers and sisters remain seated at tables, engaged in meaningful conversation. No one seems in a rush to get out the door. The study may have ended, but the Word continues to unite and pull people together.

As we consider this value of authentic relationships here at St. Paul, let me begin by asking this question: who is at the center of your story? Who's the main character? Who's on the cover? My life story is filled with plenty of major characters. My wife and children bring me countless joy from 5am until the moment I kiss them all goodnight. I have many ministry partners that make my calling easier. I get to spend time with all of you. There are indeed a lot of characters in my story. But there is one character that I get pushed toward more than any other … a character I am often told is the center of my story (picture of me). The world keeps persuading me: It's all about me. It's my life. It's my story. I am the one writing it and running it. It all revolves around me.

As we aim to live out the value of authentic relationships here at St. Paul, one of the things that gets in the way is this me-centric approach to life. I could give this obstacle many names: vanity, egotism, self-centeredness … but the one I am going to use for today is the term individualism. There are different social and philosophical definitions that you could find for this

word, but here is what I mean by individualism: individualism is an approach that puts you at the center and emphasizes your freedom and happiness while simultaneously de-emphasizing the community around you. Individualism wants you to root your identity in who you are as an individual and your own pursuit of happiness much more than in your communal identity and the common values you share. That is individualism.

There is so much in life that is now tailored specifically to your goals, your needs, your happiness. Andy Crouch, in his book *The Life We're Looking For*, talks about this under the umbrella of personalization. Your social media sites, your ads, your Netflix account… it is all personalized according to your interests. You've had this happen before, right, where you are talking with your friend at dinner about a destination you have always wanted to visit and then—Boom!—there it is on your phone the next day, an advertisement for a vacation to that very place. This is personalization, and it reinforces this individualistic idea that you are the main character of your story and that life revolves around you. But there is something very cold and hollow and impersonal about it … and the only community it seems to provide is that of a mirrored reflection of your own face.

In the Church, we have another name for this individualism. It's called "sin." On this first Sunday in Lent, we often pause to recall the Fall in Genesis chapter 3. And what led to the Fall? A turning away from an authentic relationship with God and those around us in favor of an individualistic pursuit of freedom and happiness. "Don't you want to be God?" The serpent says. "Don't you want to be the star of the show? Don't you want it to be all about you? Here's your chance." In listening to the serpent and taking the forbidden fruit, man looked away from God and his companion and turned inward. God created us as individuals, but when this individual identity turns to sinful individualism, the result is a strained relationship with God and with

others. (picture of Adam isolated)

As you turn inward and give into this kind of sinful individualism, think of how your relationships suffer. Your pursuit of career success squeezes out time to visit your aging parents. Your desire for independence pushes out friendships that have offered support and a listening ear. Your 24/7 access to your online hobbies and entertainment tunes out the words of a sibling or spouse.

And what of your life in the church? (picture of isolated person) The itch to get back to your hobbies and routines leads you to rush out the door after service instead of conversing with your brothers and sisters. A "what am I going to get out of this?" attitude keeps you from participating in various Bible studies or fellowship events, paying little regard to how much others, including the leaders, will be blessed by your presence and attendance. A selfish hording of time prevents you from saying "yes" to serving in an area of ministry that will lessen the burden on others. Sinful individualism pushes you into a life narrative where you are at the center and you do not even realize how isolated you have become… until the pace slows down, the lights go dim, and you lie down for your sleepless rest as the loneliness begins to creep in.

Zacchaeus felt that loneliness, too. (picture of Zacchaeus by himself) He had written a seemingly beautiful story for himself … a story of power and riches and status … and he was at the glorious center of it all. Yet his individualistic pursuits came at a cost: he was terribly alone. People hated him. They labeled him: a tax collector, a thief, a cheat, a traitor, the scum of the Judean earth. And if he got lucky enough to come across a group that did not know of his reputation, his diminutive stature made him easily overlooked and ignored. Zacchaeus is tired of the individualistic story he has been living and he climbs a sycamore tree, climbing, perhaps, because of his stature or perhaps because no one would bother letting him in. He climbs that tree

looking for Jesus, looking for a way out of his individualism-induced isolation.

From that tree, Zacchaeus looks. He sees a villager named Joseph, a man he took a little extra from during his last collection. He sees a widow named Ruth, a woman to whom he had denied leniency when she could not pay what she owed. He sees all kinds of faces shouting down the road … faces that once seemed like nothing but a stepping stone to his success … but faces he now longed to be a part of. Zacchaeus follows their gaze and sees Jesus, the man he wanted to learn more about.

And Jesus sees Zacchaeus. (picture of Jesus and Zacchaeus) *Jesus sees Zacchaeus*. Jesus could have paid him no attention. Jesus could have kept walking, exhausted at the thought of interacting with such a man. Jesus could have pushed Zacchaeus down to the status of a forgettable footnote in His story. But Jesus sees Zacchaeus. He loves him. He sees him as a main character. Zacchaeus is on the cover of Jesus' story. Jesus sees what individualism has cost Zacchaeus. Jesus sees the loneliness and isolation. And He changes it all, not with a personalized ad, but a personal invitation, "Zacchaeus, hurry down. I must stay at your house today."

Jesus overcomes individualism with an invitation to community. Jesus refuses to play our individualistic games… He refuses to make it all about Himself. He looks outward and He sees. He sees Zacchaeus. He sees me. He sees you. He sees your broken relationships and heartache. He sees your restless nights and your lonely thoughts. *He sees you*.

With his gaze fixed on you and me and Zacchaeus, Jesus climbs a tree. Forgetting self, He climbs a tree and keeps on looking outward. (picture of Jesus surrounded on cross) "Father, forgive them," He says, looking at the soldiers who nailed Him to the cross. "Woman, behold your son," He says, looking at Mary and John. "Today, you will be with me in paradise," He says, looking at the thief right next to Him. Jesus keeps on looking outward and He looks all the

way to you and to me. On that tree, He writes your name in a book—not with ink, but with blood—and your name is included, not as a forgettable footnote, but as a main character, a character the story would not be complete without, a character surrounded by a community of authentic relationships.

The entire life of Zacchaeus changes when he realizes that Jesus is not a part of the Zacchaeus story, but that he is a part of the Jesus story. Jesus overcomes this sinful individualism of Zacchaeus and gives him salvation, communal salvation. "He also is a son of Abraham," bringing Zacchaeus into this family of faith that has existed for generations. Jesus gathers that which was lost and alone and brings him into a fellowship of the found. Notice how the life of Zacchaeus changes. He stops focusing on himself and his riches and status and he begins to look where Jesus looks… he begins to look outward. (picture of Zacchaeus and others) He gives money to the poor. He repays what he had stolen. He experiences reconciliation with the crowd of villagers and widows he cheated. And he finds his place among them, no longer as the short, reviled tax collector, but as a loved and accepted brother in Christ.

Dear friends, what might happen for us as the Spirit leads us to realize that Jesus is not a part of our story, but that we are a part of the Jesus story? (picture of Jesus among the Church) What might happen as we look where the eyes of Jesus look … as we look outward? What might happen to our relationships with friends and family? And what might happen to our relationships here at St. Paul, as we look where Jesus looks?

When I was on sabbatical, I visited other congregations on the weekends. Most of the time, I have to admit, I took a very individualistic approach to worship. I came in right before the service, I sat by myself, and I left right after the closing hymn … the first one to the parking lot. It made my Sundays more efficient, but it was incredibly lonely.

Until I went out of town and went to a small LCMS church in Colorado and decided to do things completely different. I made a decision that I was going to go early that morning. So I arrived 20 minutes before the service. Instead of looking for the first available pew with no one in it, I chose to sit next to an older couple. We talked about my travels and their family. Before I knew it, other members had seen me and came over to introduce themselves to me and hear what I was up to. The service began, we had the sharing of the peace, and all these people came over to shake my hand and tell me how glad they were I was with them. Even the organist came and found me and said, "Hey, I heard you were from Wisconsin." In 30 minutes, I felt seen. I felt like I was with family. All it took was for me to open my eyes outward toward them and for them to open their eyes outward toward me.

My first inclination was, "This could never happen at St. Paul. We're too big." But why can't it happen here?! It can happen here. It does happen here.

You can see it in the ladies who gather together to prepare a funeral meal, (picture) visiting with each other in the kitchen and humbly serving a family in their time of loss. You can see it in the youth group (picture), as they rally around each other during a fun game or shared Bible study. You can see it in the board members who gather together in prayer before their meeting (picture). We have many examples of Christ-centered community here and if you are not a part of it, step into the picture. Or if you are in the picture and see someone who is not, invite them in. Be like Jesus and say, "Hey! Hurry, come on in! You've got to be a part of this!"

Authentic Relationships begin with the Spirit helping us to see that Christ is the center and that He has graciously seen us and made us a part of His story. And it continues with us following His lead, taking our gaze outward, and looking at who is around us and seeing in them a brother and a sister… seeing in one another Jesus Himself.

So as I close the sermon today, we are going to confess the Apostles' Creed, as we normally do. But this time, I am going to ask that you face not the front, but each other. I want each side to turn and face the other side and I want you to look outward and see your brothers and your sisters, those who are part of this story, the Jesus story with you.

Turn away from individualism. Turn away from yourself. Turn outward. Turn toward community. May you see. May you feel seen. And may you always know that Christ sees you and you are a part of His family. You also are a son and daughter of Abraham, part of the family of faith. Praise God for that! Amen.

Let us stand, face one another, and confess our faith in the words of the Creed…

APPENDIX SIX

Sermon Two

Authentic Relationships: Love Knows No Distance

Based on Luke 15:11–32

(starting from the middle of the congregation) It has been said that love knows no distance. As I understand it, what this phrase means is that physical proximity has no bearing on the love we have for each other. If you love someone, it matters not whether that person is in the same room with you or is 2,000 miles away. Love knows no distance.

But how true is that, really? Does distance really not affect our love? Does it not affect the manner in which we feel connected to others? Does it not have an impact on authentic relationships?

Today, I want to consider these questions through the lens of our Gospel reading, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Last week, our sermon focused on individualism, this idea that you are the center of the story, and how this individualism creates a barrier to authentic relationships. In the parable, we see that barrier once again at work. The younger sin falls into this me-focused trap. He is the center of the story. He does not think of his community, his family. He does not take into account the feelings of his father or brother. He is so focused on himself, individualism at work … and he asks for his share of the inheritance.

After receiving it from his father, the son physically leaves (start walking away from the congregation) and not just to a neighboring village. No, the text says that he goes off to a FAR country (keep walking away from the congregation and back up the steps). In that far country, he squanders all that belonged to his father and is reduced to being valued less than a common pig. Miles and miles away from his father in this horrible state. He does not see the father. He cannot

communicate with the father. The physically distance is real and palpable.

What keeps us physically distant today? In his book Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam talks about how suburbanization has pushed us further apart and negatively impacted our sense of community and togetherness. In previous generations, you lived in the same neighborhood. You farmed together. You walked to school together. You went to church together. There was close physical proximity in many aspects of life. You really knew each other.

But now, as Putnam states, "We spend measurably more of every day shuttling alone in metal boxes among the vertices of our private triangles." That is a mouthful of a quote, so let me illustrate what he means. (have toy car) Here is our metal box. We get in our metal box and drive from the neighborhoods we live in to drop our kids off at school ten minutes away. (have car travel to the back right) After drop-off, we take a twenty-minute drive into work. (have car travel to the back left) Later, we go back home (have car travel to the front center). We shuttle alone in metal boxes among the vertices of our private triangles (repeating the car triangle). On the weekends, maybe we go to another location for church or a sporting event. Among these various locations, we experience very few relationships that overlap. Most of our relationships are now one-dimensional because of physical distancing: We have "work friends" and "church friends" and "neighbor friends," but they don't tend to overlap. Physical distance hinders our authentic relationships by reducing our shared connections and life together. Distance pushes us apart.

And what of St. Paul? When we come in to worship, do we desire to sit in the pew next to our fellow parishioner or do we seek an empty pew away from the crowd? When the sharing of the peace occurs, do we eagerly put our hand out or do we recoil at the thought of touching our brother or sister in Christ? As the worship service winds down, do we stick around for close communication or do we look for a quick and quiet exit back to the parking lot? Notice how even

at church, when we're physically in the same space, we keep ourselves at a distance. This robs us of the potential to build greater authentic relationships. Distance pushes us away from each other.

For the son in the parable, the distance certainly pushed him away from his father. Not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well. In that far off country, among the pigs, the son abandoned his familial tie to his father. "I will go back and beg to be my father's servant," the son thinks, "for I am no longer worthy to be his son." (move further back, behind the altar) In his guilt and shame he creates even more distance in his relationship with his father. They are about as far apart as they could possibly be. (move all the way back against the wall, as far from the congregation as possible)

What factors keep you from bridging the distance and forming better authentic relationships in this place? Perhaps there is fear concerning your ability to break into a congregational click. There are other groups that seem like they have known each other for a long time, but you don't know how you fit into that. Maybe you are afraid of the judgment someone might have towards you or maybe you are the one holding on to an unfair judgment of somebody else. Perhaps there is a grudge you hold against the member a few pews away. All these things create physical distance so that perhaps when you come in here instead of sitting close together, you all spread out. This distancing keeps you at a seemingly unreachable arm's length, away from one another, away from authentic relationships. (Long pause)

"While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." You see, in the parable, the father eliminates the physical distance. He runs to his son, bridging the physical distance, and he embraces his boy. Once miles apart, the distance has disappeared in this loving embrace. But that's not all, the father rebuffs the son's offer to be a servant. He forgives his youngest and welcomes him back as a beloved

son. Distance had impaired their relationship, but the love of the father eliminates the distance and brings his son close once again.

While we were still a long way off, our Father saw us and felt compassion, and came to us and embraced us through His Son. In His love for us, God bridges the distance. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” (move forward to in front of the altar, below the cross) The Son of God leaves His heavenly home in order to close the gap between God and us. Christ sees that we are a far way off … He dies to eliminate the distance. The curtain is torn. There is no reason to hide. You are not at an arm’s length, for the arms of Christ have stretched out wide (stretch out arms beneath the cross) to embrace you and welcome you back to the family. Like the son in the parable, you are given new clothes, clothed with the robes of Christ’s righteousness. Like the son in the parable, you are invited to the feast (motion to the Lord’s Supper). Come near, and taste and touch and feel the love of Christ! A love which knows no distance, because His love has eliminated the distance altogether and brings us near once again! (move to the bottom of the steps)

Like the Father in the parable, our God overcomes the physical distance with His love. He physically brings you near. He gives you His own Son’s body and blood to taste and touch. He grants you direct access to Him in prayer. And He forgives you … overcoming your shame and feelings of unworthiness and saying to you, “You are forgiven! You are my beloved child! Welcome home!”

Having eliminated the distance in our relationship with Him, the Father works through the Spirit to eliminate the distance in our authentic relationships with one another. (walk into the front part of the congregation). He overcomes factors like fear and judgment and grudges and empowers you to rightly see one another as fellow children in the home of the Father, as brothers

and sisters in Christ. He brings us close together and reconciles us to one another.

Having been reconciled, enjoy the closeness of the family. Sit in a pew with your fellow believer. (Act it out) Stretch out your hand to offer the peace of the Lord (offer the hand and say, "You are my brother/sister in Christ, I'm glad you're here"). Linger around in the Gathering Hall (there are plenty of people who would love to see you there!), stand shoulder to shoulder, eat some delicious goodies, and laugh with your brothers and sisters. Resist the technological urge to have more online events and virtual meetings and gather together as a board, as a small group, as Bible study. Gather together. Come early, stay late. Be close together. Let the love of Christ eliminate the distance between us.

The pinnacle of our Christian closeness is the Lord's Supper, where we all partake of the same body and blood of Christ and receive the same cleansing forgiveness and reconciliation. We cannot get any closer than we do in this meal. To further illustrate the closeness of the Supper, I want us to receive communion a little bit differently today. Rather than arriving and departing at your own individual intervals, you are going to come forward and kneel (or stand if you are physically unable to kneel) shoulder to shoulder, as close as possible, and receive the Lord's Supper together and be dismissed together. And who knows, as you return to the pew… maybe you inch your way just a little bit closer to your fellow parishioner … maybe you stick around a little bit longer this morning … maybe you enjoy the closeness of the family a little bit more than usual.

Brothers and sisters, love knows no distance, because there is no distance in the love of Christ. (take a few steps closer to the middle of the congregation) Only forgiveness. (step forward) Only community. (step forward) Only closeness. (step forward) How good and pleasing it is when we dwell together as brothers in sisters in close unity with one another! (from the

middle of the congregation, where I started). Amen.

APPENDIX SEVEN

Sermon Three

Authentic Relationships: The Joy of Being Inconvenienced

Based on Luke 10:25–37

As the sun began its descent toward the western sky, a Samaritan man kicked a small rock a few feet down the road in front of him. His mind felt like that rock, rattling around between the many thoughts he carried. He was thinking through all the various steps of his journey, trying carefully to plot out every detail of the next few days so that he could accomplish everything he desired to do. His eyes darted to the sky, as he attempted to determine how much daylight he had remaining. "I am making decent time," he thought, "I just need to keep up the pace."

A shoulder bump abruptly broke his train of thought. A priest had accidentally walked into him, seemingly in a hurry to get to wherever it was that he was going. In horror, the priest realized that he had bumped into a Samaritan and quickly walked away without saying a word. "Typical," The Samaritan man muttered to himself. Worried that the exchange may have knocked something loose, the Samaritan quickly checked his money bag to make sure all was accounted for. "Good, it's all here. Things are going to be tight as it is," he thought. "I certainly can't afford to lose anything."

Trying to be more aware of his surroundings now, the Samaritan scanned the road in front of him and saw another person, a Levite, scurrying by on the other side. "They all seem to be in a rush to get on to their business," he thought, "Perhaps I should pick up the pace, too." The Samaritan man accelerated his stride just a little bit. He looked down to kick another rock, but then he saw it, a trail of blood. Alarmed he followed it with his eyes down into the ditch. And then he heard it: the indescribable groans of a half-dead man … a half-dead Jewish man.

For a second, he froze. “I don’t have time for this. If I help out, it will completely mess up the timing of my trip. He’ll definitely need a place to stay and heal. Who is going to pay for that? Not him, it looks like he’s been robbed. I can’t afford to help him, I barely have enough for myself. And he’s a Jew! When is the last time a Jew has gone out of his way to help me?!”

Yet these thoughts vanish in an instant, as mercy and compassion wash over the Samaritan. He quickly springs into action, binding the man’s wounds and putting him on his animal. The Samaritan chooses to be a neighbor. He chooses to help. He chooses to enter into the messiness of an authentic relationship with this beaten Jew. He chooses to be inconvenienced.

“You go, and do likewise.”

That invitation of Jesus continues to echo off the walls in this place. I hear those words from time to time. I hear them when I am deep in the middle of my sermon prep and the phone rings, inconveniently interrupting my train of thought.

“You go, and do likewise.”

I hear those words when I am exhausted from a full day of spiritual care and walk into someone who inconveniently asks, “Hey, Pastor, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“You go, and do likewise.”

I hear those words when a board inconveniently schedules their meeting during the night of the big Vikings game.

“You go, and do likewise.”

I wonder when you hear those words. Maybe you hear them after a worship service as a needy brother or sister in Christ walks your way and you know that they are going to take up the next 10 minutes of your life recounting the happenings of their week.

“You go, and do likewise.”

Perhaps you hear those words when you scan the sanctuary for a place to sit and see someone who is an outcast, kept at an arm's length by the rest of the congregation.

"You go, and do likewise."

Maybe you hear those words when you really want to get home but see a parishioner in the parking lot who appears to have car troubles.

"You go, and do likewise."

You see, dear friends, part of growing in our value of authentic relationships here at St. Paul means that we need to be willing to enter into the necessary messiness of these relationships. We need to be willing to embrace the joy of being inconvenienced. Because real relationships, authentic relationships, will place a burden upon you. They will cause you to sacrifice time or rearrange priorities. They will cause you to feel physically and emotionally spent. I would go so far as to say that you cannot have an authentic relationship with someone without being inconvenienced by them, at least in some way.

Today we are called to embrace the inconvenience. Today we are called to find joy in the inconvenience. Today we are called to follow the example of the Good Samaritan. You go, and do likewise.

But why? Why should I go and do likewise? When so much in life is becoming more and more convenient, why would I go out of my way to choose the inconvenience of an authentic relationship with someone here at St. Paul?

The answer is found when we consider the source of those words, "Go and do likewise." The man who speaks these words, Jesus Christ, is not a fraudulent motivational speaker who pushes *you* to embrace inconvenience in *your* relationships while he slinks back into a life of comfort and ease. No, this is the man who lived out those words "Go and do likewise" and

embraced the messiness of authentic relationships better than anyone ever has.

We see it during his ministry, as so often His personal time is interrupted by crowds of people demanding His attention. Instead of pushing the people away, Jesus embraces the inconvenience of the crowd, having compassion on them as they wander through life like sheep without a shepherd. Rather than seeking the comfortable adoration of the public eye, Jesus inconveniently stoops to the level of having dinners with tax collectors and prostitutes, so that they can get to know Him better. Jesus embraces the inconvenience of having an authentic relationship with his disciples, enduring their foolish questions and their fickle faith.

And all of this pales in comparison to the inconvenience Jesus met as He accomplished our salvation. His flesh being ripped apart by the soldiers' whips. The saliva of the masses raining down upon Him amidst vicious taunts and insults. Piercing nails. Prickly thorns. Splintery wood. Gasps for air. The hand of God's judgment upon Him. There was certainly nothing convenient about Calvary, but Jesus wouldn't have had it any other way. Jesus went and did likewise to the ultimate degree for you and me and our eternal good. This is the One who offers the invitation to us- "You go, and do likewise."

Today, as we wrap up worship, we are going to do two things that are a little bit different than normal to put this into practice. First of all, we are going to take the time to read through every single name on our prayer list. These are brothers and sisters who need our prayers and the smallest thing we can offer them today is the inconvenience of a long prayer as we bring each one to God's throne of grace.

And secondly, I am going to invite you to share the burdens with a fellow believer. Maybe it's an upcoming surgery or health concern. Maybe it is someone in your life who is beginning to reject God and walk away from the faith. Maybe it's a financial concern. Today, we are going to

have a lay leader stick around after the service up front near the baptismal font, and they are going to make themselves available to you to pray with you if you would like that. Because part of being in an authentic relationship means not only that you will be inconvenienced by others, but that you will be willing to *b*e an inconvenience. An entire sermon could be preached on how we escape relationships because we don't want to be a burden or inconvenience others. That's the devil talking. "You don't want to be a burden." No, don't listen to him! Be a burden. Inconvenience others. That is part of being in an authentic relationship. That is part of being the body of Christ. We share one another's burdens. So after the service, feel free to share your burdens with this lay leader who would like to pray with you.

"There it is again," the woman thought. "The sound of a child who is having a rough morning." She resisted the urge to glance in that direction and instead tried to continue focusing on the pastor's words. It had been difficult to concentrate on the message with the interrupted cries and screeches. The messiness of worshipping with the full body of Christ on a Sunday morning at St. Paul was on full display for her.

The pastor began talking about the words of Paul in Corinthians, but the woman remained distracted. She thought about that child. She thought about the child's parents. She thought about how inconvenient it was for her to listen while this was going on next to her. Should she offer a stern glare? Should she point to the direction of the cry room? Should she wait until the service is over and give the young parents a lecture about how they should be dealing with their child? Should she tell the pastor or an elder to intervene for her?

As the organ played the final notes of the closing hymn, the woman was still contemplating these options. But then she looked up to the cross and heard it, those wonderful words, "You go, and do likewise."

With the words ringing in her ears, the woman walked over to the young family after the service, extended her hand, flashed a smile, and said, “I am so glad that you are here. Thanks for being a part of this family. If you ever need a place to sit, you are welcome to sit with me. Have a great day.”

Dear friends, you go, and do likewise. Amen.

APPENDIX EIGHT

Sermon Four

Authentic Relationships: Taking the Time

Based on Luke 10:38–42

Are you getting worn out from all this authentic relationship talk or do you have *time* for a couple more sermons? So far in our series, we have looked at three different roadblocks that can get in the way of our authentic relationships. During the first week, we examined individualism and how important it is to see ourselves as part of a community that is centered on Christ's story, not ours. In week 2, we spent time on physical distancing and were encouraged to draw closer to one another. And last week, we looked at the roadblock of convenience and how we need to be ready to embrace the necessary inconvenience that comes along with being in an authentic relationship.

Today we are going to examine an obstacle that is unavoidable for each and every one of us, the obstacle of time. How often have you said or thought to yourself, "Oh, I wish I had more time! There's not enough time in my day! If only I could have a few more hours!" Time is a valuable resource and it is limited. It is also a resource that has been evenly distributed among us. No one here has more or less of it in a day … we all have 24 hours. We all have sixty minutes in an hour and sixty seconds in a minute. It is impossible to change the equation and get more time… so the question becomes, "How are we going to use it?" And because this is a sermon series on authentic relationships, specifically I want to ask this question- "How is your use of time affecting your relationships?"

To illustrate, I have in front of me a tower of Jenga blocks. Let's say that this tower represents an authentic relationship in your life. Currently, the relationship is sturdy. It is strong.

It is not in danger of falling apart.

But … what happens when you begin to take blocks of time away from the relationship? 10 minutes staring at your phone instead of 10 minutes in conversation (remove a block). Taking your dinner to go sit in front of the TV instead of enjoying a shared meal (remove a block). Staying at work late to finish one more thing rather than heading out and having the time for a shoulder-to-shoulder walk through the neighborhood (remove a block).

The same applies to our life together here at St. Paul. Our authentic relationships with one another will weaken the less we invest time in them. Perhaps you have chosen to fill your family's schedule with all kinds of sporting events and trips, but all of this means your worship and social events here are more infrequent or more rushed (remove a few blocks). Maybe you decide to stay home to binge-watch your favorite show instead of going to Bible class and engaging with your brothers and sisters there (remove a block). Or it could be as simple as walking on by a fellow parishioner rather than taking a few moments to greet them and catch up (remove a block). As we take these moments of time away from one another and invest them elsewhere, our connection becomes weaker and weaker and weaker. Our authentic relationships become a shaky mess and it won't take much to make them crumble completely.

In our Gospel reading for today, you can see glimpses of an authentic relationship that is crumbling due to an improper investment of time. I'm talking about the relationship between Mary and Martha. Mary has decided to invest her time in relating with Jesus and others in her home. Martha chooses to invest her time in all kinds of busyness and preparations. She has taken away blocks of time from her relationship with her sister so that she could try to be the perfect hostess instead.

Notice how that has harmed her relationship with her sister. Martha is angry and bitter

towards Mary and complains about her. Martha tells Jesus that Mary has left her all alone, but the reality is that Martha has left Mary alone by focusing on busy tasks instead of on her relationship. Martha is anxious about many things and each one of them has taken a toll on the strength of her bond with her sister.

Enter Jesus, the One who always has the time. When the fullness of time had come, at just the right time, Jesus entered into our world and showed us a different way to invest our time. Day in and day out, Jesus used his time to invest in authentic relationships, to love people, to dine with people, to walk with people, and to tell them about His purpose. He was wholly devoted to the people around Him. He never seemed rushed.

I could go through countless examples in Scripture, but one in particular stands out to me. Two chapters before our Gospel reading, in Luke 8, Jesus is out and about among the crowds when a man named Jairus interrupts him and begs Jesus to come to his home and heal his daughter. Jesus immediately invests in that relationship and goes with Jairus. But while Jesus is on His way to this important task, a woman who had been battling disease for 12 years comes up to Him to touch His garment in order to be healed. She touches it and is instantly healed. The miracle has taken place and Jesus could keep on going toward the house of Jairus. No one would have blamed Jesus for pressing on. But instead, Jesus pauses. In the midst of this life and death situation with Jairus's daughter, He pauses. He stops and takes the time to invest in this woman. He calls her out so that He might affirm her and the faith that she had, so that she can know that she is not just a nameless face in the crowd, but a valuable member of the kingdom of God. Jesus takes the time… He takes the time for Jairus. He takes the time for his daughter. He takes the time for this diseased woman.

And Jesus takes the time for you and for me, too. He takes the time to become one of us.

He takes the time to pray for us in His High Priestly Prayer moments before He is betrayed. He spends those miserable hours on Calvary's cross, hours that must have felt like years, to invest in our eternal well-being. He comes back to life to redeem our time and to give us an eternity of moments with Him and all the saints in His eternal Kingdom. Having ascended into heaven, Jesus continues to have time for us, patiently hanging on every word of your prayers and making sure that you are never alone. Thanks be to God, Jesus always has the time!

The time Jesus invests in us makes all the difference. It made all the difference in the lives of Mary and Martha. I think we readily see the impact on the life of Mary, the one who sits attentively at the feet of Jesus. But I want you to observe the dedication of Jesus to Martha and the difference that makes. Instead of leaving her to her busyness and frustration, Jesus takes the time for Martha, slows her down, has a conversation with her, and invites her into a different reality, where she can invest in relationships above all else. Jesus invites her into a manner of living that will strengthen the weakened bond she has with her sister.

And you know what? I think we see the fruits of this later on in the ministry of Jesus. When Lazarus dies, the brother of Mary and Martha, the two sisters each spend time grieving before Jesus. As they pour out their hearts to the Lord, they both say to Him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." They both say the exact same thing… which suggests to me that these two sisters were grieving *together* … they were talking to each other and listening to each other… they were investing in each other… they were saying to each other, "If only Jesus had been here…" Their relationship has been strengthened as they take time for each other.

Jesus' time and devotion toward us can have the same effect. When someone here loses a loved one … you could let that news soak in for a moment and move on. Or maybe, you take a few extra minutes to say a prayer for them (place a block back in). Perhaps you go one step

further and write a sympathy card and send it their way (place a block in). Or maybe you invest all the way and give them a call or stop them after worship and have a conversation with them… reminisce with them, laugh with them, cry with them, eat with them (place blocks in).

How wonderful would it be if this kind of time investment begins to take over your entire life? How freeing that might be! How impactful that could be to your authentic relationships here at St. Paul! Do I have time for that small group? Of course, that is worthy of my time! (Place blocks in) Can I spare five minutes to eat and converse with my brothers and sisters in the Gathering Hall? Sure thing! (Place block in) Will I be able to serve shoulder to should with my fellow believers even if it means waiting an extra day to watch the finale of my favorite show? You bet! (Place block in) Jesus takes the time for us … and so we take the time for ***US***! (pointing around to the congregation) When we do that, notice what happens to our relationships as a result: (Jenga tower should be filled again) they are strong and durable and able to endure the test of time.

Here is what I am going to challenge you with today. If you have a watch or a phone, put it away. Until you get to your car, do not look at the time. I have already covered up the digital clock in the Gathering Hall. All that is left is this clock, a clock that is intentionally stopped with its hands extended outward. The hand of the Lord (the message on the clock) invests in us and we then invest in one other. So when the closing hymn is playing, enjoy the time of praise. Don't worry about how long it is taking. When the hymn ends … just sit … and then linger. Do not be in a rush to leave. Converse with your brothers and sisters. I would love it if I am standing back there twiddling my thumbs while I wait for someone to come through the handshake line. Live in this timelessness and enjoy the fruits of it. Focus on Jesus. Focus on others. Invest in authentic relationships. Do not worry about many things. Choose the good portion. It will not be taken

away from you. Thank God for that! Amen.

APPENDIX NINE

Sermon Five

Authentic Relationships: Technology as Master or Means

Based on Luke 16:10–13

Authentic Relationships. We have arrived at our final sermon in the series and our final obstacle- technology (pick up cell phone and show it to the congregation). Let me make sure my ringer is off … Oh, it looks like I have some notifications, let me just check this for one moment … (keep staring at the phone as you deliver the rest of this paragraph). So we have been going through these different obstacles. We have talked about the obstacles of individualism, physical distancing, convenience, and time. Along the way, we have highlighted another one of our values, Biblical Teaching, by using different examples from the Gospel of Luke to demonstrate how Jesus overcomes these obstacles … and today (get increasingly distracted) … today we don't have a parable … we don't have a narrative … today we focus in on a few direct words of Jesus … "no one can serve two masters" … you can only serve one … you can only have one master (trail off and scroll through the phone for a few more seconds before putting it down).

We have all seen this kind of distracted behavior, right?! Not only that, most of us have been guilty of it! It is so easy to get wrapped up in this technological world and not even realize how it is pulling us away from meaningful connection with one another. There is a reason I saved technology for last. As stated in the "As We Gather" paragraph on the front cover of the bulletin, technology is a unique and dangerous obstacle in that it is not only a potential obstacle in and of itself, but it also strengthens the potency of the previous four obstacles.

Week 1: Individualism- Technology makes it so easy to give in to individualism. It gives you the world at your fingertips. Your social media is customized to you. Your ego can be

inflated with likes and shares and views and followers. You can watch whatever you want when you want to watch it. You can shop and order food without ever having to interact with another human. It drowns out any voice that is dissimilar to yours and gives you an echo chamber of people telling you how smart you are and how right you are. Technology can so easily pull you out of community and out of Christ's story in favor of your own individual story.

Week 2: Physical Distance- Because technology can connect us with anyone, anywhere, it can also easily increase the physical distance between us. While it can be a huge benefit to those who live far away or those who physically struggle to leave their homes, it can also become an easy excuse to livestream worship in your pajamas or to ask for a Zoom meeting so you don't have to get in your car, taking away opportunities to be physically close to someone. As Robert Putnam, mentioned in an earlier sermon, notes, "Connecting with Grandma on Zoom is not the same thing as hugging Grandma." And even when we are physically in the same place, how often are meals and other times for communal connection interrupted because everyone is looking at one of these? (Hold up phone again) Technology can certainly increase the distance between us.

Week 3: Convenience- Technology can get us to avoid the necessary inconvenience in our authentic relationships because it shapes us to avoid inconvenience at all costs. Everything about our devices is meant to make things easier and more convenient… which could easily train us to run from the burdens and responsibility of a messy authentic relationship. Think about texting. Texting allows you to respond to someone on your terms, when you want to do it.

Finally, week 4: Time- Technology adds to the potency of the obstacle of time. Remember the tower last week of Jenga blocks? How many blocks of time do we pull out of our relationships with one another in order to engage with our devices instead? Just ask yourself this

question- how long could you go without your phone without becoming uncomfortable? Would you experience that same discomfort not hearing from a friend or family member or a fellow parishioner during that duration? We might have sturdy towers in our relationship with technology, but meanwhile are relational towers with others are crumbling because of it.

All of these are potential dangers that become realities the moment we see technology as an additional master. That is why the words of Jesus today are so important- "No one can serve two masters." Technology can all too easily become a second master for us, whether we realize it or not, or whether we even want it or not. Two weeks ago, I was talking with the Youth about their phones and they all said that sometimes they wish they didn't have one… and yet, it is so hard for them to get away from using them. One youth had 11 hours of screen time recorded for that day. I would venture to guess that this number might not be too different among some of us adults. Yes, technology can all too easily been seen as an additional master.

When that happens, relationships WILL suffer. Not just for the reasons already listed, but also because of what technology can do to us as people. I am convinced that the more time we interact with something, the more we become like it. It is easier to be more empathetic and humane when we are interacting regularly with humans. But when we interact constantly with technology? We can become cold and unfeeling and machine-like, resulting in cutting comments and name-calling that can quickly spill over into our real-life relationships. When technology is seen as a master, we become its disciples, and digital disciples are not well equipped for human authentic relationships.

Now this is the part where you expect me to say, "It's time for you to choose between your masters." Nah… you simply need to embrace the ONE master that has already claimed you as His own! You are not your own- you were bought at a price- the blood of Jesus Christ! Christ IS

your true Master. He made sure of it on the cross. He made sure of it in the waters of baptism. Your slavery to any other master has been put to death. It's been crucified! It's been drowned! Jesus is your true master- thanks be to God! Jesus is the Truth, not Alexa or Google. Jesus is the Giver of all good gifts, not Amazon. Jesus is your rest, not Netflix. So it is not a matter of pulling yourself up by the bootstraps and having the will power to choose between masters, it is about remembering who your one Master is and who you are because of it.

Jesus, your Master, forsook individual concern and embraced this community with His story of selfless salvation. He has made you a part of something bigger than yourself. Praise be to our Master!

Jesus, your Master, took on flesh and drew closer to us than anyone ever has or ever will. His love knows no distance. He continues to draw close to you physically, giving you once again today His own body and blood to eat and to drink. Praise be to our Master!

Jesus, your Master, inconveniently took our burdens and died with the weight of our sin on His shoulders. He shows us the beauty of a love that is willing to "go and do likewise" and embraces inconvenience. Praise be to our Master!

Jesus, your Master, always has the time. He took time for Mary and Martha. He takes time for you and for me. Even today, He stands ready to take time and listen attentively to all of our heartfelt requests. Praise be to our Master.

And finally, Jesus your Master, is the One who frees you from slavery to any other masters and allows you to see this (hold up phone) and your other technology for what it is: not a master, but a means. Jesus gives you the strength to use this as a means to glorify Him and to connect in authentic relationships with the people around you.

As Andy Crouch says in his book, *The Life We're Looking For*, "A truly advanced

technology should make us more fully persons, not less, the longer we use it. It should connect us ever more deeply to other people, to nature, and to God; should be of special benefit to the vulnerable, not just solving their problems but elevating their dignity; and should have increasing benefits even for those who do not wield it, rather than degrading everyone but the ones who possess it."

What does that look like, though- a life where technology is a redeemed means instead of an all-consuming master? Well, there are certainly a lot of guidelines we could use from Scripture and Christ to govern our use of technology and steward it in healthy ways.

For the purposes of this series, though, I want especially to think about how we can use technology as a means to strengthen authentic relationships. With that in mind, to guide us in that endeavor, I think it is helpful to go through the previous four weeks and use them as guideposts to frame a use of technology that aids our fellowship and fosters authentic relationships.

#1- Use technology when it promotes community and avoid it when it promotes individualism. (Slide with Facebook ad for pizza on the left and a Facebook post by me on the right) The picture on the left of the screen is from my Facebook feed. This is what I get- ads for pizza, posts from the Minnesota Vikings, videos of basketball highlights. It's all about me. Individualism at its finest. How can we instead use technology for community? This past week on the St. Paul page I posted to ask how we can use technology to engage with one another. That is the picture on the right. 5 people took the time to engage with the post, to engage with me, to engage with each other. We had this community online engaging in this conversation. How can we better use technology to foster this kind of community rather than using it to pursue individualistic ends?

#2- Use technology as a means to set up physical gatherings. Don't let technology become

a substitute for physically gathering with your fellow believers; instead let it be a springboard to more time together in the same space. (Slide with text and promo for women's Bible study) Use text to invite someone to get coffee and converse with you. Use your social media to promote in-person gatherings like this upcoming women's Bible study.

#3- Use technology to embrace inconvenience. (Slide with reaction emojis on one side and a phone being dialed on the other side) If somebody shares something online that is gut-wrenching, I could just use one of those care emojis to react to the post and show my concern, conveniently easing my burden of responsibility in an instant. Or I could realize that maybe what they need is someone to talk to, and I could take the inconvenient step of calling them up to talk or set up a face-to-face visit, even though I don't know if that step will cost me 30 seconds or 30 minutes. Let's find ways to use technology to take that step, that inconvenient step, to foster an authentic relationship instead of opting for what is most convenient.

#4- Use technology to invest time in your authentic relationships here. (Slide with calendar app on one side and time usage report on the other) Set up calendars or alarms that remind you to reach out to a brother or sister in this place. Use an app that helps track how much time you are on a screen vs. how much time you are relating to others and challenge yourself each week to lessen your device time and increase your relational time.

For our service today, we are going to incorporate technology as a means to help us pray for one another. On the screen there is an email address where you can send prayers. I am going to encourage you right now, if you have a prayer request, to get out your phone and email that request to the address. We will read it during our prayers. I am also going to include all the names of people who asked to be prayed for during a Facebook post I did this week. This is just one small way we can use technology as a resource to foster authentic relationships.

Do not try to serve two masters. Serve the one Master and let His authentic relationship with you spill over in authentic relationships with others here at St. Paul. Seek community over individualism. Overcome physical distance and draw near to one another. Embrace the joy of inconvenience. Take the time to invest in each other. See technology not as a master, but as a means to greater fellowship.

And assembled as one, in the name of the Son,

lifting hearts, lifting hands, celebrating as friends,

and proclaiming the Lord, all our praises afford.

We are brothers and sisters in Christ.

Amen.

APPENDIX TEN

Second Interview Questions

1.) Please state your name:

2.) Now that you've heard the sermon series, how would you define an authentic relationship?

3.) What's different about an authentic relationship at St. Paul'?

4.) During the sermon series, I listed 5 obstacles- Individualism, Physical Distance, Convenience, Time, and Technology. I'd like you to choose the two that you think are the biggest obstacles at St. Paul and explain why.

5.) Which obstacle, if any, do you understand better as a result of the sermon series?

6.) What obstacles do you find personally in developing authentic relationships here, whether one of these 5 or not?

7.) How does Christ overcome these obstacles to authentic relationships?

8.) What was your biggest takeaway from this sermon series? What will you remember the most?

9.) Is there anything you wish would have been talked about that did not get addressed or did not get addressed well?

10.) What about the presentation of the sermons was especially effective or engaging?

11.) What did you think of the practical applications within the service itself (the changes made to how we do things during the service)? What worked especially well and was there anything that you didn't see as effective here at St. Paul?

12.) How can we better build authentic relationships here?

13.) What did you find most helpful about the sermon series and your participation in this study?

14.) Is there anything else you would like to share?

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