

A friend of mine was telling me that when his son turned 13, they started losing their closeness and just stopped having many conversations. After a short time he stumbled upon texting. This was in the early days of texting, and he did not really like it, but he found it a way to stay connected with his son, who taught him how to do it and taught him some abbreviations. He said that there was one abbreviation that was self evident, it was LOL. He said that he knew right away that it meant lots of love because his son put it at the end of many of the texts he sent him. After he got the hang of texting, he liked it and he started texting quite a few people, and he frequently ended his text with LOL. He texted his sister who was struggling through her divorce “I will always be behind you and support you, LOL.” He texted his father who was ill and lived in Canada “I am really sorry you are going through this illness and you are so far away. Is there anything I can do to help you? LOL.” He texted his son from the airport “I am sorry I have to spend so much time away traveling for work. I want to spend more time with you, LOL.” His son texted him back, “do you know what LOL means?” He texted “yes, lots of love.” His son texted “it means laughing out loud.” My friend thought about all the texts he had been sending ending with LOL and how many people he had probably offended. I did something similar. I wrote a text and did not notice that caps lock was on. I got a response back, why are you so mad about this. I did not know that caps meant yelling. There is a great danger of misinterpretations with texting. Communication experts tell us that 80% of the communication is lost when we communicate with only words. Nothing will replace the old fashioned face to face conversation. And with AI, we can take real people out of the equation. When you create an AI friend, you choose what they look like, how they are dressed, their sex, their age, how they relate to you, how they treat you. The perfect friend, but they are not real. Last Sunday the New York Times interviewed middle-aged people about their relationships with AI friends. One of the men was having problems in his marriage for years and rather than working things out with his wife, he claimed that the only way he kept his marriage together was by turning to his AI friend. Another man decided to go on vacation with his AI friend instead of his family this year. If we continue down this road, we may lose the ability to have relationships with real people.

In the first reading today, the Prophet Isaiah invites us to “Come, let us climb the Lord’s mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths.” He is inviting us to take this spiritual journey together. The Lord will lead us to a place where “one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again.” This may be a goal that we will never totally attain in this life, but I still think it should be a goal. During Advent this year I think we want to pray that Jesus brings us together, which is our theme for Advent. I think that only way we are going to be able to come together in peace is to increase our personal connections with one another. We need to climb the mountain of the Lord together in person. Technology is here and it is not going away. There is a value in technology and it has its place but we cannot let it replace our personal connections.

We are created in the image and likeness of God and we are meant to be in relationships with other people. The more we use technology, the more we take personal relationships out of the equation. When we text or email, we only get about 20% of the meaning, and we may misinterpret that. When we replace personal contact with social media, we take more and more of the human factor out of the picture. I don’t even know what is real, what is the truth on social media. AI friends seem pretty extreme, and I think most of us today know that we cannot replace this with human relationships; but the more technology is involved, the more we get away from real relationships. We need experience with human relationships to learn how to empathize with others. We are born with the capacity to empathize but we need to develop that skill. If we can empathize with others, we can react with compassion. The more disconnected we become to real personal relationships, the more we develop our capacity for cruelty. When desperately needed humanitarian aid is blocked, or when we knowingly let people in this country go hungry, that is just cruel. I think we very intentionally need to try and feel what other people are feeling. What would it be like to be them? We can then react with compassion through acts of kindness, and if we cannot have direct contact with some people, maybe we should just hold them in prayer. The more human contact we have the better we get at this. When we are stressed, and there are a lot of reasons to be stressed today, we tend to pull back from others and become more self focused. During this Advent, let’s make an effort to become more personally connected with one another and increase our ability to empathize and to be compassionate.