

INTELLIGENCE, CREATIVITY, IMAGINATION & LOVE

1 John 4: 7-13,16,18-21

We've all heard the term: Artificial Intelligence or AI for short. Some of us have used it too. Most of our digital devices and computers have access to AI tools. Whether we're doing research about something, writing an email, a letter or a paper, trying to brainstorm ideas or create something artistic or musical, AI is a tool more and more people are leaning on. I know some ministers have also begun using AI to help them generate ideas if not write prayers and sermons... yes... I have not, and I have my reasons which I hope will become apparent in where this sermon is going...

But researchers are telling us of all the spectacular benefits of AI that are already being felt in all fields including medicine, science, sports, the arts and other fields too. And we need to acknowledge these benefits. Anything that advances the welfare of human beings and this earth, anything that provides better access to health and wellness, and anything that promotes growth and development knowledge that will benefit the most vulnerable as much as those with the power and the means, is to be welcomed... But does AI do all that?

Well, not according to Geoffrey Hinton. And who is Geoffrey Hinton? One of the greatest prizes given for pioneering science in the world today – the Nobel Prize in Physics, was awarded to Geoffrey Hinton this year. Why? Hinton is a scientist who crosses several fields, from computer science to psychology, and he is considered to be the godfather of AI. This means that his work has developed AI and opened the door to the proliferation of AI like no one else's work has. But the irony is, no one has been ringing the alarm bells about the dangers of AI like Geoffrey Hinton has either. It's like Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist who was the godfather of the atomic bomb who regretted deeply what he had been instrumental in creating. Hinton is equally concerned about AI and the harm it can do to our world. This is also why Hinton, who up till 2023 had been working for Google, quit his job and is now at the university of Toronto trying to help create all kinds of safeguards for the harm AI can do. By quitting Google, Hinton is now free to criticize AI without restriction.

So what are Hinton's concerns? Well, first of all, we need to understand what AI is and what it does. AI is the first kind of computer intelligence that doesn't just rely on humans to develop it and fill it with information and functionality. AI can actually keep learning and growing on its own once it gets going. Hinton anticipates a day in the not too distant future when AI will outstrip human intelligence and will not be controlled easily by humans if at all. It's one thing to control and direct knowledge toward the welfare of humanity, the earth and the care of the vulnerable. But AI can and is currently being used by weapons manufacturers, cyber terrorists, the wealthy and powerful outside of any democratically elected communities and states, to

cause chaos and harm for the benefit of their own power, control and profit. Hinton worries about the gap between the wealthy and the poor, the powerful and the powerless growing ever greater through AI and those with the means and capacity to develop it. And as we know from much of our history, scientific and technological progress do not equal moral progress, and in fact, just like social media does, AI is very adept at spreading conspiracy theories and misinformation as it is in generating credible information and life-giving knowledge. Election interference and gathering information on people to manipulate, blackmail or harm them is just the tip of the iceberg of what AI can do better than anything done yet.

OK, preacher, fine, thanks for scaring us some more on a Sunday morning as we're trying to find some inspiration and hope for living our lives today and tomorrow. Well, hold on... stay with me... because there is hope. There is always hope. But genuine hope also must begin not by escaping reality or truth, but by facing it, naming it and working through it. Part of any new discovery or learning is discerning what is good and what is not good, and how to embrace the good more deeply while working against the bad.

While many are feeling threatened by AI and all it portends to lead to, others are recognizing dimensions in life most precious that AI cannot simulate or reach. On this Anniversary Sunday, we think about relationships and community, sharing love and care, celebration and mourning, laughter and tears, and all this built over time and personal investment of our hearts and shared resources. All the growth and enrichment that comes from such connection cannot happen artificially however good the imitation. Words are words but do they come from deep in our hearts? Do our brains form the same way if we use ways of sharing provided artificially rather than from deep within ourselves where feelings, imagination and true creativity come from? Will the reliance on AI actually undermine the formation of deeper connections and expressions of love and care between people?

Let's dive into our scripture reading this morning in search of revelatory wisdom and guidance. As humans, we have intelligence; we have creativity; and we have imagination. But do we also have love? And is love at the heart of our intelligence, creativity and imagination? We can be smart in taking advantage of people, we can be creative in inventing all kinds of things that also harm life on this planet, and we can use our imagination to do all kinds of cruel things to those who threaten us in some way. We can be brilliant, in fact. But do we love? And can we find any fullness in life if we are not invested in love? Will there not be an emptiness in us we'll be trying to fill with all the adventure and invention we're capable of if we can never fill if we do not steep ourselves in growing the love in us we've been made for by our creator God?

In our reading we're told, first of all, that God is love. And we're also told that we as humans made in God's image, are made for love. To the degree that we steep ourselves in growing the love in us we will grow into our fullness as made by our creator God out of love and for love.

But we're also told several more things when it comes to love and how we're made. As human beings we make mistakes. As human beings we are vulnerable. As human beings made out of love and for love, sometimes the hurt and harm that befalls us in our vulnerability make us hurtful and harmful, even hateful in reaction and response. After a while hurt and harm become our masters and our whole perspective and motivating drive become how we can get on top, protect ourselves from others and get what we can get for ourselves and our own.

This also means that love, beginning with God to us, has to be stronger than the hurt and harm that has caused us to be hurtful and harmful to others. The love that is God has to reach into us past the toxic layers and concrete barriers of resentment, anger and despair, to rescue us and bring us back to our created purpose to love fully barrier-free... Not easy...

Here's what it costs God to reach into us: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent God's own self through the Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." Atonement is about at-one-ment. To atone is to make right and to reconcile. When there is hurt and harm, there has to be the sacrifice of letting go in order to forgive and open a pathway. That's what God in Jesus embodies and lives out. Jesus loves past the opposition, past the abuse, past the abandonment, past the betrayal. Jesus condemns the injustice and the wrong, but Jesus will never reject people because love must always find a way through hoping hearts may be opened to change and transformation, to recovery and resurrection.

Jesus will confront evil by speaking truth and standing up to it, but Jesus will also suffer people's rejection of God's love in him because people are driven by hate and indifference. AI can be a weapon to help control and dominate through manipulating, misinforming, deceiving and ultimately destroying what is perceived as a threat. There is no heart in it, no compassion, no grace, no repentance, no forgiveness, and no concern for justice because such concerns come from within hearts convicted, moved and transformed.

And this is where there is a special role for communities of belonging like churches to play. As churches we seek to learn, to teach and to demonstrate in community with each other and outreach into the world, that what is most valuable and worthwhile in life has to do with love, and love is always about the heart. Love is also about authenticity of feeling and genuineness of connection seeking heart-to-heart engagement. This is well beyond the reach of AI. There is a special intelligence that is linked to love. There is a special creativity and imagination that grows and thrives on love. This is what church can be and grow to become ever more fully. And this kind of connection is what all of humanity is called to protect and cultivate because it is threatened in ever new ways with our technologies.

Can AI serve the purposes of love? As a practical tool to care for people, yes, but as a tool to control and dominate to the advantage of those who possess it, no. The purposes of love must

be greater than the purposes of profit and power over others. The temptations are great, but so is the risk of losing our souls, destroying our humanity and this earth.

So, while I use AI in all kinds of ways to do research, I do not use it to craft words for a sermon, prayer or meditation. Why? Because I want to own every word as passing through my heart. I want to sit with scripture and text and silence and allow God to speak. AI doesn't recognize the heart and whatever intelligence it has cannot grow out of love. It will very soon surpass the smartest humans in terms of informational, computational and research knowledge. But it knows no empathy or compassion and it does not feel conviction, guilt and the need for forgiveness. It has no feelings. While it can generate great poetry or music, such poetry or music cannot emerge from the heart but simply imitates what has already been composed out of the hearts of those who have composed it.

And AI cannot generate community, because genuine community has to be rooted in relationships of caring and concern, rejoicing and weeping that come from heart-to-heart engagement. That's the treasure we have here at Armour Heights... It's a treasure we have inherited over many decades. Some of us are really new here, and others of us have been here a little longer. What we put into this community of ourselves is also what we'll get out of it – our time and money, yes, our presence and participation online and in person, yes, our spiritual longing in search of discovery and growth in God, yes... But all of that begins and ends with the opening of our hearts, the entrusting of ourselves to each other, the listening and sharing that has happened over many years, is happening now and will happen over the time to come.

“We love because God first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” May the love God has planted in us, the love that is cultivated in relationships of caring and service within communities like this church over time and through many ups and downs, be the love that flows through us into a world ever more threatened of losing its soul. Amen.