Technology, whether you embrace it or resist it, is changing the way we do things. You may be proficient on numerous platforms, or you may need to call in an expert for help. If it is a computer issue or an App for a smart phone, I suggest calling in a 12 year old.

Emailing is in, writing letters is out. Cell phones are in, land lines are out. Texting is in, having a conversation is out. Uber is in, taxis are out. Airbnb is in, hotels are out. Online phone directories are in, phone books are…Do young people even know what a phone book is?

Something else that is quickly becoming obsolete is a Church Pictorial Directory that you can hold in your hand. Like Westminster, many churches have gone online with their directories, as there is more flexibility in the information that can be shared.

A colleague tells of a church with a pictorial directory that wanted to provide more data on each member than simply name, address, phone and a photo. To help their members know a bit more about each other, the church asked everyone to list what they do for a living. So, beneath a photo, it might read: “Sam and Susan Smith, Business Owner and Attorney,” or “Mary Williams and son John, Engineer and student at the University of Delaware.”

Providing these extra details gave others an idea of what each person did, which might help people connect. However, it also gave the impression that people could be described simply by what they did for a living or where they went to school.1

If you were asked to describe yourself in a handful of words, what would you say? What words pop into your mind to provide others a glimpse of you? Avid reader? Tennis player? Risk taker? Lucky grandmother? Love to sing?

Now, think about the way the world might describe you. The world often defines us in terms of what we own or how successful we are in our career or how fashionably we dress.

Imagine a church directory in which the world provided the words to describe us. Rick and Jeannette Andrews: Own a large beach house in Rehoboth. Linda Thompson: Had a 3.6 GPA at Princeton.2
I can think of a word that the overwhelming majority of people in the world would use to describe nearly everyone in this sanctuary (chapel). “Privileged.” I doubt that word came immediately to mind for most of us, but it surely describes us in the eyes of much of this struggling world. We are privileged.

Turning from the world’s assessment, did you catch how the author of the First Letter of John describe people who follow Jesus? He writes, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” The Apostle Paul also describes us this way. In his letter to the church in Rome, he writes, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” (Romans 8:14). Also, in his letters to the Galatians and Philippians, Paul names followers of Jesus as “children of God.”

God loves us as a perfect parent loves a child. In your mind, in your heart and in your soul, you should know that you are a child of God. That is your foundational identity. You can list a number of words and phrases that describe you – gregarious, trustworthy, jinxed, resilient – but first and foremost, you should think of yourself as a beloved child of God.

If it’s difficult for you to think of yourself as a precious child of God, next time you pray, say, “Thank you, God, for loving me as your child.” Say it every time you pray until you know not simply in your head, but in your heart and soul, that basic to your identity is that you are a beloved child of God.

This is a struggle for many, because most of us were raised to believe we must earn everything. But the Scriptures are clear, God does not love you by virtue of the fact that you have proven you deserve God’s love. God loves each of us despite…despite our short temper, despite our self-centeredness, despite our judgmental attitude. God loves us despite the fact that we are not perfect.

There is an old tale from the Middle East, about a man sitting in a café with his friend, drinking tea. The friend was curious and asked, “Why did you never marry?”

“Well,” the man said, “I spent my youth looking for the perfect woman. In Cairo, I met a beautiful and intelligent woman, with eyes like dark olives, but she was not kind. Then in Istanbul, I met a woman who was a wonderful and generous soul, but we had no interests in common. One woman after another would seem just right, but there would always be something missing. Then one day, I met her. She was beautiful, intelligent, generous and kind. We had everything in common. In fact, she was perfect.”

“Well,” said the friend, “what happened? Why did you not marry her?”

The man sipped his tea and said, “Well, it is a sad thing. It seems that she was looking for the perfect man.”

No one is perfect. God loves you not because of your accomplishments, but despite your failings; not because of your virtues, but despite your flaws. Like a mother who loves her child no matter how impossible the child is to love and like the shepherd who never stops searching for the one sheep that strays, God does not love you because; God loves you despite.

Are you ready to be pushed out of your cozy solitude? Well, it doesn’t really matter, because here it comes, ready or not. I want you to do something very un-Presbyterian. I want all who are able to stand and turn to someone near you other than a family member. Make sure people who are sitting have a partner, too. I want each of you to say to the other person, “I’m not perfect and you’re not perfect, but God loves us anyway!”

We are children of God who are cherished and embraced for who we are. But that is not the end of it. God loves us far too much to allow us to remain as we are. After declaring that we are beloved children, John writes, “What
we will be has not yet been revealed.” That is, God loves us as we are, but knows we possess the potential to become more than we are.

Part of what it means to follow Jesus is to never become complacent. When we read the gospels, we see that Jesus loved his disciples. And because he loved them, he was constantly prodding them to live in new ways. He challenged them to become more compassionate. He urged them to become more forgiving. He expected them to counter injustice by treating each person with dignity and embracing those labeled outcasts. He expected his followers to become more generous to people who lacked food, shelter and clothing. He summoned them to become peacemakers.

God sees us not only as we are, but envisions the person we can become. We have a tendency to think we are who we are, and we’re too set in our ways to change. It is Popeye’s philosophy, “I yam what I yam and that’s all that I yam.”

To settle for such thinking is to forget that God’s business is resurrection. God is constantly seeking to transform the old you into someone new. God can see the incredible potential within you and wants you to flourish.

Celtic theologian John Philip Newell, who spoke here a few years ago, writes: “Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth century Christian mystic, said that we are not just made by God, but we are made of God. We are not just fashioned from afar by a distant Creator. We are born from the very womb of the divine…What does it mean that we are made of God rather than by God? In part, it means that the wisdom of God is deep within us (waiting to be discovered)...(and) it is to say that the creativity of God is deep within us (waiting to be released)...(And) – as a sheer gift of God – within us is the capacity to bring forth what has never been before, including what has never been imagined before.”

If we had to rely simply on whatever we could muster on our own, it is doubtful that we would grow into better selves. However, we can become more whole and satisfied, because – as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome – “the Spirit of God dwells in us.” (Romans 8:9).

The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther surely had today’s passage in mind when he wrote, “This life is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road.”

As you are aware, life never stands still. It constantly flows forward. Attempting to halt its movement is useless. God urges us to lean into the future and to embrace a rich and vibrant life no matter what age we are. A life comprised of tight, loving bonds, a life that is open to surprising new experiences, and a life filled with opportunities to deepen our satisfaction by putting energy into helping others.

So, pay attention to God’s Spirit within you, urging you to live in Christ-like ways. Expand the horizon of your mind so that you can glimpse the new person God wants you to become. Be alert for the opportunities that present themselves. Then, you are ready to embrace the extraordinary adventures God wants you to pursue.

NOTES

2. Ibid.
Great God of love and grace, you watch over us, protect us, push us, direct us as a shepherd takes care of their sheep, journeying with us through even the darkest of valleys, and offering to fill our wants with what only you can provide. You love us, forgive us, save us and stand among us as our parent, and friend, and savior. Calling us your children, you invite us to walk into the future unafraid, to care for your creation, to live as people claimed by you. Your love overflows, your grace abounds, your hope gives life. For all these gifts, we give you thanks and praise.

Remembering that Earth Day was just a few days ago, we pray for your creation this day. May the air around us be free from dirt, the dirt below us be free from pesticides, the waters beside us free from pollution. Bring cleansing to fouled streams, healing to damaged fields, and life back where human damage has threatened the existence of animals and plants. As your children, help us to take responsibility for our actions, to have the energy and vision to be caregivers for creation, and to be committed to living lives that save the environment rather than use it up.

Remembering the violence that fills this world, we pray for peace. Where disagreements are settled by weapons, where anger threatens relationships, where war seems to be a way of life, where forgiveness seems impossible, O God, give new vision. Curb our tendency to retaliate when we are wronged. Fill us with wisdom to know the things that make for peace. As your children, help us to find a way to soothe ancient hurts, to break down walls that divide, and to build community throughout the world.

Remembering that you gave us a church in which to grow in faith, we pray this day for your church. We pray for the church around the world, of all faiths and all denominations, in all places. And, we pray for our own denomination even as we pray for this specific congregation. When we let our own fears get in the way of courageously living out your Gospel, give us a deeper trust in your love. When we shut our doors to those who are old, to those who are hurting, to those who live or love differently, to those who are poor, to those who feel lost, O God, give us a deeper commitment to living as your children and to bearing witness to your amazing love in all that we do.

Remembering that Jesus healed the sick and fed the hungry, we lift up to your care those who are in physical or emotional pain this day. Be present, O God, wherever there is pain, and give those who are struggling the assurance of your nearness. We pray for those who are hungry...for those hungry for food, for those hungry for community, for those hungry for acceptance. Fill stomachs with food that nourishes, fill lives with the bread of your love and hope.

Remembering those whose lives are impacted by natural disasters, we pray this day for those affected by the earthquake and it’s aftershocks in and around Nepal. For those responding to this tragedy, for those who lost loved ones, homes, businesses, cherished pets, their worldly belongings, we pray. For those who provide care for the injured, and those who bury the dead, we pray. For those who will help rebuild schools and clinics and homes, we pray. For those who wonder and worry this day, we pray. Let your healing, hope-giving, peacemaking spirit fill the land.

Remembering the love shown to us in Jesus Christ, we remember the prayer he taught saying…

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not, into temptation. But deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.” Amen.