

VITRUAL REALITY ISN'T
August 11, 2013 –I John 1: 1-4
The Church of the Covenant

You must take anything I say about the Internet with a grain of salt; I am, after all, one of the last luddites on the subject; I only have a Smart Phone because it is almost imperative to have one in today's world. By the way, why should we have a phone that does more than we do? Why should we have a Smart Phone that is smarter than I am?

Texting is the bane of my existence. I remember the first one I received about 4 years ago. I heard my phone beep and thought I had an Email but couldn't find it. The text message, when I finally opened it, was sent on New Year's Day and wished me a happy New Year. I finally figured out how to text in June of that year, and finally responded, "Happy New Year in JUNE!!!!" This sense where people are breathlessly waiting for an immediate response to a text message, hovering over their cell phones with their shorts in a knot, probably does not work with me. You may have to wait 6 months for a response.

Do you remember how driving in the car used to be a time of relative quiet? No more. Now it is time to respond to cell phone calls, especially it seems on my day off. The Smart phone is so smart it now controls our life, demanding immediacy about everything; everything seemingly is a crisis and demands our immediate attention. I wind up answering church business Emails on my vacation because the thought of answering 350 Emails upon my return (I get 40 to 60 church Emails per day asking me for something) is just too much to endure. Two weeks of vacation as I took for the first time in several years back in April managed to generate more than 800. Chill out people; chill out.

I sit at a computer for about 4 hours a day to return Emails, write memos and letters. One time is very early in the morning generally before 6:00 a.m., one time is late morning, one time is late afternoon, and then there is that time after I return home from my evening church meeting after 9:00 p.m. when I get to sit and tap tap tap out more Emails. Shouldn't a day begin and end in prayer, not in Emails? Which god are we worshipping and serving? I remember a time perhaps ten years ago when I didn't have to do that; I was able to spend more time visiting people, sitting and praying with someone in person, going to the hospital seeing a church member, having a cup of coffee with someone. Remember that time when your phone didn't control your life? Remember actually BEING with people, not just sending them a text message? Today is better?

Then there is all that jargon associated with texting –the texting shorthand and protocols that one only learns by trial and error. I remember a couple of years ago thinking that the shorthand written message "LOL" meant "lots of love". Only then I discovered after a time that it actually meant "laugh out loud". Beloved, I have been wracking my brain trying to remember if I sent someone a text message something like this –"I am so sorry for your loss. LOL" --"I am deeply saddened that your dog passed away. LOL Stu" –"I am really feeling for you during this time where you lost your job. LOL Stu". I am DEEPLY sorry if you got one of those LOL messages from me LOTS of LOVE. Stu. But again, it just illustrates that most, best communication today is in person, personal, face-to-face –not via the Internet. Odd, isn't it? The very thing that is supposed to enhance our ability to connect with one another may actually thwart real communication. Beloved, there is a profound difference between REAL reality and VIRTUAL reality, and that's the gist of my sermon for today.

Our scripture from I John is informative. It begins, *"That which from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life..." (I John 1: 1)* It begins with a touchable and tangible God that we have known and experienced in and through Jesus Christ. Christianity is inherently incarnational; it requires being together in the flesh; it requires personal interaction; it started with Jesus being born and the Word becoming flesh, and it continues with HIM being present as we gather together in person, in the flesh, gathering together in Jesus' name. *"Wherever two or more are gathered in my name, I am with them"*, promises Jesus. There is something personal, something "face-to-face", something like "you gotta shake someone's hand and you gotta look them in the eye and you have to

actually BE WITH THEM for something to happen spiritually". You can't worship from a cell phone. You cannot "friend" God on Facebook. The Word of God, Jesus, became flesh; when we actually gather together, in person and together we again BECOME the BODY of CHRIST, and the way we relate to one another is also personally, and in the flesh, and eye-to-eye and face-to-face. There is no substitute for being WITH CHRIST. And there is no substitute for being WITH ONE ANOTHER in HIS name. And all of this is summarized then in what John writes next. He writes: "so that you may have fellowship with us..." (1 John 1: 3) And our fellowship with one another comes from Jesus' fellowship with us for "our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1: 3) This word "fellowship" is very interesting. It doesn't just mean coffee time. It literally means "same house" (Oike mene); it means living in the same house with one another. It is speaking of something so intimate that it is more like a family living in the same house, sharing with one another, BEING with one another. It means sitting in the same room and looking one another in the face; it is personal; it is intimate; it is relational; it is up close and in person. God has fellowship with us through Jesus being up close and personal with us in a personal relationship with us; we are to have fellowship with one another, being up close and in a personal relationship with one another. That's what Christianity is about.

You cannot "like" God on Facebook and think you've worshipped HIM. You have to enter into His presence and BE with other Christians to worship HIM. Virtual reality isn't reality.

You cannot "friend" someone on Facebook and think you actually have a real friend. I have 658 "friends" on Facebook. No you don't. I was told you are a rich man if you can count on one hand the five true friends you have. Friendship takes time, and being with someone in person, and walking with them through everything in life. It requires looking them in the eye, and praying with them, and caring about them in a way that takes our time and our heart and our life, not a 5 second text message. Virtual reality isn't reality.

I have a young friend of mine who spends literally hours a day on a video game called, I believe, WarCraft. Four, six, ten hours a day of time spent on virtual reality. At what point does his life become virtual and not real? At what point does what is real become what is virtual and what is virtual become that which is real? But then I have thought to myself –and how much time do I spend worshipping the gods of the INTERNET, how much time do I waste on virtual reality, and how much more time will I let it take from my relationship with others and my relationship with God? That which we spend our time on, we worship. Virtual reality isn't reality.

You cannot think that your relationship with God is some video game, where you zap evil with the Holy Spirit, on a screen, and where the warrior Jesus comes and saves you at the last second and you get transported to a higher level of the game. There is no reset button in life. You got one shot and it is as real as anything you can ever experience. There is no Jesus apart from fellowship with His Church. There is no relationship with God without a relationship with His people. It is REAL; it is completely REAL life. It is no video game. You gotta play this game in person. And where you spend eternity, whether in heaven or in hell, is determined by whether we understand the absolute need for personal fellowship with Jesus Christ and then through HIM with one another. Virtual reality isn't reality. A personal, life-giving relationship with Jesus that leads to a personal life-giving relationship with others IS. That's REAL. All this internet stuff is just a manufactured video game, a virtual reality, seeking to suck us away from living a real life. What a true FRIEND we have in JESUS –and I don't mean on Facebook. And Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*