

Rev. Tim Wray, Airdrie, AB

Grace to you and peace from God our Father through our Lord and savior Jesus Christ.

“It’s getting scary”

Maybe it’s just me, but it seems that I’ve heard this phrase more and more often in everyday encounters where folks are reflecting on the capabilities of technology in the world. Just listening to the latest press release of this or that machine, it’s easy to fall prey to fears of ci-fi like techno- take overs.

Unprompted, one of my children piped up the other day with the thesis that they would be fine if society just stayed where it was at by way of technology, and we just put our efforts into solving problems like wars and poverty rather than pushing further and further into realms outside of our current scope of influence and ability.

Have you noticed that we are going through a period of massive transformation in nearly every field of work, study and play?

We feel the changes reaching into every aspect of our lives; be it our relationship to the state and its various branches, our views of religion, our connection to the economy, what we produce and consume, the way we relate to the world through our bodies and who we identify as our “community”. Things that only a few decades ago would have been easily described and pointed out are now less clear cut. All of these changes are part and parcel with what is becoming a great unraveling of all that we knew.

Both a product and a cause of this transformation is a school of thought called “Critical Theory”. Explained in simple terms, Quote:

“Critical theory is an approach to understanding society and culture that focuses on questioning and challenging power structures and social norms that may be oppressive or

unjust. It originated in the fields of philosophy and sociology and seeks to uncover the hidden assumptions and biases that underlie our social systems and institutions.

[Critical theory often looks at issues such as inequality, discrimination, and exploitation, and aims to empower marginalized groups by exposing the ways in which dominant groups maintain their power. This involves examining how cultural, economic, and political systems work to perpetuate inequality, and working to create more equitable and just alternatives.]

Overall, critical theory encourages us to question what we take for granted about our society and to strive for greater social justice and equality.” End quote. What’s startling is that this text book answer was generated in about two seconds by Chat GPT, the artificial intelligence software that scours the web and produces a succinct essay on what you ask it.

Now would you believe it if I told you that when I adjusted my search in Chat GPT to read, “Explain Critical Theory to me in simple terms as it relates to issues of artificial intelligence.” it responded with the “error code” and suggested that I subscribe for \$20 USD/month I could secure better responses. Huh.

Throw on your critical thinking hat. What power dynamics are revealed through the otherwise innocuous error code?

What you are willing to open your eyes too is easy to see through – like an error code that directs you to a subscription service. That’s a mere annoyance. But it’s what you are NOT willing to see that really takes you out at the knees.

For me, this is the big “aha” of critical theory. How it names the ways in which the oppressed give consent to the very arrangements that keep them down.¹ Does an error code mean I

¹ Branson and Roxbrugh, Leadership, God’s Agency and Disruptions: Confronting Modernity’s Wager, p.152

should stop searching for the truth of a matter? Freedom is paired with an awakening to the fact that things don't have to be the way that they are. With renewed vision we are free to act differently, and when we do, ceilings crack, walls crumble and doors open.

Keeping this in mind, lets pick up the story from John 4, often called, "The woman at the well". Firstly though, why is it called that? It seems that the well is not her rightful place. She is isolated at the well in the heat of the day, vulnerable to the sun's rays and, apparently, to the demands of thirsty men. She handles herself well though, not afraid to speak her mind. She is strong. Strong enough to carry water, to take the heat and to speak frankly to a foreigner asking for a drink. I can't help but conclude that there was a lot more to this woman than the well the title associates with her.

Speaking of wells, how thirsty must she have been with the mid-day sun beating down on her? She was certainly quick to ask for Jesus' living water at the promise of never having to return to this hole again.

Jesus picks up on her discontented thirst and starts enquiring about her relationship status. The topic is not so out of sorts given that their mutual ancestor Jacob met his bride, Rachel, at a well. So they get into it.

"I have no husband."

"You are right...for you have had five husbands and the man you have now is not your husband."

Suddenly, the woman pushes back at what Jesus has married himself to, switching the topic to religion and a regional controversy over where proper worship takes place. Jesus accepts the change of topic but relativizes the debate and invites her into a new possibility. He says, "Believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain

nor in Jerusalem...true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father **seeks** such as these to worship him."

She shares her readiness for the realization of this promise, "I know that the Messiah is coming."

Jesus said to her, "I am he."

Let's recap.

The woman's physical need and social expectations requires that she perpetually draws water from this well – but she released from this by promise of Living Water.

Expectations of true love and happily ever after – released by Jesus' lack of judgement at her marital history and current arrangement.

Religious certainty and the resulting confrontations– released by worshiping in Spirit and Truth.

Longing for the Messiah – released by Jesus' very presence to her.

Released, the woman sets down the jar and she goes and does what a disciple is called to do. She uses her freedom to form a community of hope. She connects with her Samaritan kin, pushes convention aside and invites her Jewish friend to stay with them. For two days Jesus dwells right there, among supposed adversaries, and the people experience God's power. It is for this reason that Jesus had to go through Samaria. In the final verse of the story the towns people said to the woman, "We know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Such a marked transformation in Samaria because a woman sets down her jar and is present to her neighbors.

From slogging it out in the daily grind, serving a never ending, isolating thirst...transformed into a woman surrounded by a community of hope.

She sets something down to cooperate with God's spirit, which is to dwell with her neighbors and Jesus.

Contrast this with the story of Nicodemus that we heard last week. In his case he is isolated by fear of losing his privilege. Stuck in the darkness of his pride he can't see how he is complicit in his own captivity. With out a spirited community surrounding him he doesn't make sense of Jesus' claims of being born again, being of water and the spirit, or even John 3:16. Not yet anyway.

But there in Samaria, far from the centers of power, this group of half-breed cousins of Jesus glimpse at the implications of what Nicodemus, the teacher and leader couldn't quite grasp for himself. Having experienced Jesus among each other, they see for themselves what Jesus had tried to teach the Pharisee, "That Jesus didn't come into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world would be saved through him."

As Christians and readers of John's Gospel we discover a theological correction to critical theory and the quest of human liberation – the truth that it is God's Spirit who is the agent that is calling us to act in collaboration with God to do a new thing among our neighborhoods. In fact, it is God's very spirit among the oppressed that is doing the liberating.

What is scary in this world is not what we can see, for it's what we choose not to see that binds us. We can curse artificial intelligence, the rapidity of technocratic evolution, and the obvious power brokers that are winning the fight for our attention and our wallets. But are we willing to see our own complicity in the isolation we experience from each other, the land and even our own bodies as we cast our gaze on yet another technological wonder that scares us. Are we willing to set down this water jar, these tools that pattern our days into isolated routines, so that we can be present to the people around us and God's Spirit that unites us?

Regardless of what artificial intelligence can generate from the body of human literature, the Christian witness is that God is doing a new thing among God's people. Out of deep love for the world, Jesus enters our darkness and invites us into each others lives with the goal that we begin to encounter Christ among us. This is God's saving power in the world.

With this clear in our hearts, we can deal with the ambiguity of a technocratic future, because we stand a chance at discerning how it is that human beings are different from our inventions. Among God's creatures resides resurrection power. Tending to this power and the people it animates is the way that God has and continues to form communities of hope in an unraveling world. That's not scary at all!