

Sermon: Written on Our Hearts

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, October 19, 2025)

Much advance has been made in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the past decade. Gone were the days when internet search engines simply give you a list of relevant websites to one's query, which in itself is impressive enough already. Now most search engines will utilize some form AI to organize their answers in helpful and coherent summaries, in response to whatever inquiry a human user might pose.

I am hearing that more and more people are carrying on regular conversations with large language model like ChatGPT. Some are even turning to chatbots for counselling or spiritual advice. Even prominent Christian denominations are jumping into the act, of providing chatbot services specifically tailored to one's particular theological bends.

The Catholic Church has this majestic sounding Magisterium AI at their disposal. The Episcopalian Church has this friendly chatbot called Cathy, kind of like a neighbour next door. And the Presbyterian (that is PCUSA) has a chatbot named Polity Pal, capable of answering faith related questions with instant reply, that is consistent with the Reformed tradition, in accordance to the Scripture.

I don't know of any Canadian denomination that is providing similar service, but did come across a podcast released by Rev. John Borthwick, the director of Lifelong Learning of Knox College, Toronto, engaging in a fascinating, 40-minutes long, conversation with ChatGPT. According to John, the voice one hears in the podcast came from Speechify, another online AI service that turns text to speech, while featuring a few celebrity voices including Gwyneth Paltrow.

Listening to that podcast, I am not sure if I could identify the AI voice as Gwyneth, but she does sound quite smooth and engaging. It's like listening to a conversation between two intelligent parties, as they explored key challenges facing the PCC, including membership decline, ministry leadership, reconciliation efforts with indigenous communities, inclusion of LGBTQ+ communities and the future of the denomination.

Upon hearing that podcast, I think we can put to rest the original question "Can machines think?", put to us by Alan Turing back in 1950, when he wrote a odd little paper, titled "Computing Machinery and

Intelligence.” I think the real question is no longer whether machines can think, it is “what kind of relationship will humanity have with AI?”

Turing, the English mathematician, code breaker, and widely regarded as the father of theoretical computer science, had proposed a test, originally called the imitation game. In asking can machines think, Turing recognized the inherent difficulty in defining the abstract concept of ‘thinking’. So he set up a scenario, kind of like a three-party game, between a judge, a man and a woman. They are sitting in three different rooms and can only communicate with each other in writing. The judge then questions the two participants, trying to determine who is the male, who is the female. Should the man succeed in convincing the judge he is a woman, the man wins the game. Otherwise, the woman is the winner.

With that basic mechanics settled, Turing then proposed to replace the male participant with a machine capable of generating meaningful responses. Should the machine be able to convince the judge it is a woman, then there would be no reason to not acknowledge the machine as intelligent. It’s an interesting theoretical setup, of a relational interplay between the three parties. I wonder if Turing got his inspiration from the parable of Jesus, as told in Luke 18:1-8, our Gospel reading this morning.

In that parable, there was a judge in a certain city, who neither feared God nor had respect for people. It is an utmost terrifying combination as the lack of feared for God renders one immoral, and the lack of respect for people renders one unethical. A judge who is both immoral and unethical would most certainly pervert justice, and most certainly pervert it for his own sake. Yet, he is a judge, with power and authority unthinkable to commoners, and certainly unimaginable to a lonely poor widow. Without a husband to provide for her needs, and without a male kin to protect her legal interest, a widow in the ancient world is truly vulnerable.

The contrast between the two is salient, as this nameless widow came to this heartless judge, not once or twice, but repeatedly, pleading and crying out in verse 3, “Grant me justice against my accuser.” She had been wronged by her adversary, most likely in the context of a dispute in the court of law. We are not sure if injustice had truly been done to her, and we are not sure if this heartless judge was somehow involved. But we are certain this widow felt that she was wronged, and she sought vindication from the one who has power. To her, she sought justice.

At first, the judge ignored her, refusing to entertain her plea, but she kept on coming, unrelenting. She might have pounded on his door at night,

accosted him in the street, embarrassed him in front of his esteemed friends. So the judge said to himself in verse 5, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”

The term ‘wear me out’ in Greek is ὑπωπιάζω (hupópiázó), which literally means to ‘strike under the eye’, or in the boxing term ‘to give someone an upper cut’. The picture painted here is not a nagging old lady badgering a judge. No, the picture painted here, with such a colourful use of word, is actually that of a pair of worthy opponents locked in a bitter struggle, with the outcome far from certain. Facing such a worthy opponent, this heartless judge relented, and granted this nameless yet relentless widow the justice due her.

Now some of you who are paying attention might be asking: Wait a minute Pastor, this is only a two-party scenario, not a three-party one. Where is the missing party? Where is the man? Well, the man is us, all of us who hear this parable, and are chewing on the words of Jesus, for the Lord proceeds to address us the hearers directly, *“Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.”*

The point of this parable, is to show us though a relational example between an unjust judge and an aggrieved widow, of what God is to us, in order for us to truly understand and fully appreciate who God is.

Whereas this judge has no respect for people, God sees us and all that God has created as good. Whereas this heartless judge has no care for those under his care, God loves us to the point of willing to sacrifice the Godself in order to save us. Whereas this crooked judge revel in unrighteousness, God is holy, and God desires us to be holy, and knowing that we are unable, God justifies us in faith through Christ. Whereas this totally annoyed judge who just want to get rid of this annoying widow, the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, and the Spirit of God still dwells within us. If this unjust judge is willing to grant justice out of self-interest and self-preservation, wouldn’t our God be much more willing to grant us justice, because the innate nature of God who is good, is love, is holy, and is all powerful? Of course God would.

God is not an artificial set of codes or equations or algorithms, that is immaterial and impersonal. God is not the Law craved in stone, written in

fine scrolls, infallible and inerrant, God is not a set of doctrine we can neatly summarize and then give our intellectual assent. God is not up there and out there, so far out of our reach, out of our ability to comprehend.

The days are surely coming, and is already here, as prophesied by Jeremiah, speaking on God's behalf, *"I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."* (Jeremiah 31:33) God cares to have a relationship with us. This language of writing a new covenant onto our hearts tells us that through Jesus Christ, God is with us, in us, in our hearts.

More important than justice, which God is more than willing to grant, God grants us a true relationship, of friendship with Jesus, as in Christ's own words, in John 15:15, *"I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."* Yes, that's what we are to Jesus, not as servants but as friends. That is the kind of faith Jesus hopes to find when he comes again in glory.

It is unclear what kind of relationship we could have with AI. Will it replace it? Will it help us? Will it dominate us, and turn us into immobile batteries, like in the movie Matrix? The technology is still evolving, and the jury is still out. But, with most assured certainty, friendship with Jesus is obtainable and wonderful.

I will leave with you a poem written by Joseph Scriven in 1855. Scriven had experienced significant personal loss, including the death of two fiancées. From these heartaches, and through faith in God, he took a vow of poverty and began to help the poor and the handicapped in whatever way he could. He devoted the rest of his life to that mission. When his mother became ill back home in Ireland, Scriven did not have the necessary fund to help her nor go to her, so he penned the words to this poem for her, and it has since comforted, encouraged and uplifted countless others.

What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear.
What a privilege to carry, everything to God in prayer.
Oh what peace we often forfeit! Oh, what needless pain we bear.
All because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**