When I think back to my adolescence, those awkward years as the opinion of my peers became increasingly important, who looked at me and saw me, and invested some time putting their thumb on my scales to tip life in my favor. One was the director of maintenance where I worked my first job at the boarding high school I attended.

What did he do? He trusted me. He listened to my evaluation of a problem or my suggested solution. He respected me. He gave me responsibilities beyond my years. He recognized ingenuity and problem solving skills. And he confirmed them.

He and a number of others offered me their time and attention in person, and what they did for me could never have been accomplished with a text, tweet, email, or snapchat.

Don’t get me wrong there’s nothing wrong with our technology. It is simply a tool. But like the amoral nature of a printing press that technology can be used for good ends or evil ones. It happens for good ends with greater intentionality and can move more easily to evil ends unintentionally.

Part of our challenge is tied to our mission as a congregation. And our mission is really just another way of stating the great commission given by Jesus. Our mission is “Loving people into a lifelong friendship with God.”

Scripture and just the experience of life is clear that to be actively involved in loving people demands relational engagement. To love our spouse or significant other demands relational engagement. To love our kids to love our parents demands relational engagement. To love our siblings demands relational engagement.
To love our friends demands relational engagement.

To love period is wrapped up with relational engagement. This is why this second in our From the Heart is about relational engagement. The hearts of your pastors long for this to be a place and for us to be a people immersed in relational engagement.

And here is where the technology we regularly hold in our hands comes into play, and it is not just changing the world and how we relate to the world it is changing us.

In 2001 Gallup took a pole and every average American said they had 10 very close friends.

Three years ago in 2014 they took the same pole and every average American said they had 2.

For all our great and helpful and amazing ways to connect with our smart phones, tweets, texts, emails, face book, snapchat, Instagram, and more our number of close friends is down 80%.

I wonder if some of the greatest of Bible stories would have even ever happened had Jesus walked this earth in a time of smartphones?

Would the constant demands of connectivity, the backlog of emails, the friends dropping messages have kept Nicodemus so occupied that while he would like to have found Jesus that night to ask some questions, he was just too swamped, to electronically engaged to go physically and relationally engage with Jesus.

If Jesus had been sitting by that well in Sychar checking his messages while the disciples went to get lunch, if the woman coming to the well was walking head down phone in one hand water jug in the other, with both of them enrapt in their cyber world might the living water conversation never have occurred? Might a whole town not been drawn out to the well to meet the Messiah?
Rick Warren writes: “We live in an ADD world. It seems like everybody’s got Attention Deficit Disorder because our tools and technology have left us perpetually distracted and we no longer pay attention to the people around us.”

We are relationally disengaged!

Simon Sinek makes a strong case that we are at risk of addiction to our electronic media, the social networking sites. That getting a text, a tweet, and especially a “like” produces a chemical hit of dopamine in our brains and this is the same hit that happens with alcohol, sex, gambling. And we have restrictions on alcohol but we have no restrictions to electronic media and so during adolescence when we need to be developing how to create social networks and finding balance between immersion with peers and the need for solitude, today there’s this nearly constant interaction with our smart phone or computer.

When we wait for a meeting to begin what do we do. We all sit there heads down checking our phones and then if we are in a really respectful mood we put our phone down when the meeting begins. But with our phone sitting there before us we are signaling that there may well be someone somewhere saying something and that they are more important to us than the ones with whom we are currently present.

Don’t think its an issue for you? Try, just try unplugging. Slide that phone into that little bag and leave it there for just one hour, then 2, 4, 8, 16, 24 hours and have a Sabbath from your technology.

This is a piece of cake for the 2% who still don’t have a cell phone, but for 98% of you this may be tough. Mary Meeker’s study says that we touch our phones or check our phones 150 times a day and we collectively upload 1.8 billion pictures to facebook per day!!
By 2014, 3 years ago texting while driving became the number one cause of death of teens in America.

Mom and Dad its easy to get caught up. Research is telling us that kids are complaining that they can’t get their parents attention. Of course they get together to not be together as well. And of course there’s nothing like a group of friends going out to eat and spend some time together---except too often they are really aren’t spending time together.

Research indicates that there can be a huge difference in the effect of our interaction with social media sites. The difference may be tied to whether the interaction is symmetric, like interpersonal conversation, or asymmetric where it is more one sided as in following some celebrity or consuming mass media content.

Relying on data from Facebook users, researcher Burke found that mutual relationships with Facebook friends increase social capital, the quality of social networks and decreased loneliness, but asymmetric relationships of more receiving but less giving of messages hurt social capital and increased loneliness.

Think of the rhythm of Jesus’ life when he walked our world. He was Immanuel—God with us. Not just God in the same neighborhood. Not God just physically present but mentally somewhere else thinking about sustaining the universe. No he was God with us. Present and relationally engaged.

What does that mean it me to have relational engagement?

William and Louise Senft in their book Being Relational give us some hints.

First relational engagement isn’t a sequential process. It isn’t a step one, step two kind of thing.
Second it is very much a deliberate intentional act. Even after it becomes a habit it still takes some intention.
Third here are some words that help that intention: Present, Attentive, Interested.

The greatest gift we may be able to give is our attention. To be present, attentive, interested in a person is to love that person. Our attention demands our time and our time is our life and those moments of attention we can never get back and it makes them really valuable.

Paul wrote to the Philippians (2:4) Do not be interested only in your own life, but be interested in the lives of others.”

But here’s why a conversation about unplugging has relationship to relational engagement. No matter how much we may try to convince ourselves we can multi task and do two things at once it is impossible to give your attention to two things at once. If it seems you can you’ve just become adept at switching back and forth very rapidly between two things.

We must have been too busy and too distracted sometimes as parents. I remember clearly our son as a toddler taking hold of our head in his two little hands do command our full attention.

I’m not campaigning for the abandonment of technology I am saying we need a lot more face to face time to put our phones down and look up. To look one another in the eye. To communicate.

In counseling couples through some challenge or in preparation for marriage the issue of communication inevitably comes up and we spend some time recognizing that the goal of communication is shared meaning, “If I say to you, today I saw an elephant.” I have spoken words but what did I see? A real elephant. A purple stuffed animal elephant won at a fair? A tiny silver elephant for a charm bracelet, or an article in National Geographic on elephants. We haven’t really
communicated until we have shared meaning. And then it is important to know the low value of words. Only about 7% of the communication is the words. Some 93% is tone of voice and body language almost all of which is missed communicating via some social networking site.

So what can we do to become more relationally engaged?

1. Start conversations become curious about people
2. Volunteer somewhere
3. Tell your story
4. Ask questions to get to know people and your community
5. Leave some room in your schedule for relational interruptions
6. Make some time for solitude and silence in your life

It was the balance between the mountain alone in solitude and the multitude that enabled Jesus to practice relational engagement.

Be like Jesus Be present, Be attentive, Be interested.

So today here you sit around tables and for a few minutes discussing today’s subject I want us to practice being present, attentive, interested If you arrived before the “Meet and Greet.” You’ve already met each other. If you haven’t met please do first before we go to the questions.

I want to make sure everyone is as comfortable as possible so I want to pretend that I’m handing you each a permission slip and it is simply a skip-bo card. As we discuss if there’s some subtle or not so subtle pressure you feel to participate and you aren’t up to that right now all you have to do is say pass. And if someone at your table says pass please be attentive and respect that choice as you continue your time for relational engagement. There will be some questions on the screen. You probably won’t have time for all of them so read through and engage with the ones you like. When time is up I’ll call us back to order and there will be a song, and we will be dismissed.
QUESTIONS:
How tied would you say you are to your phone, electronic media, etc?

How tied would your friends say you are to these devices?

How has social media kept you from developing relationships with the people with whom you live and work?

What are some ways you can turn your attention more to the people around you each day?

What are some ways you can show others that you are truly paying attention to what they are saying or doing?

What is the relationship between being relationally engaged and loving people into a lifelong friendship with God?

What difference do you think being present, attentive, and interested might make in your life and the lives of those you care about?

Jesus calls us to still our souls. To retreat to moments even seasons of solitude that from our solitude we might come back for relational engagement ready to be present, attentive, interested so people can be loved into lifelong friendship with God.
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Sermon archives are available at hospitalchurch.org.