Could it be so? Might it be true? Could it really be, that Facebook is the religion of our time?

One of my professors in divinity school used to use a shorthand for describing how many followers each of the major world religions claims today: if there are six billion people on our planet, 2 billion are Christian, about equally divided between Catholic and Protestant, 1 billion are Muslim, 1 billion are Hindu, 1 billion are in China, 1/2 billion are Buddhist, and the remaining 1/2 billion follow other faiths or no faith.

Facebook, it was reported by the *New York Times* in July, now claims its own piece of this global pie, numbering its membership at 1/2 billion souls. It’s hard to think of anything – other than the venerable traditions named above, and a few of the corporate giants of our time, such as McDonald’s, Google, and Coca-Cola-- who have more contact with more people across more countries every hour of the day, every day of the year.

Many of those 500 million members spend a great deal of time on, connected to, or even within Facebook. They – our should I say we, since I do have a Facebook account -- greet one another via status updates, post photos of travel, children, and weddings, “connect” with friends and have bitter public exchanges people that used to be their friends. People meet their spouses on Facebook, promote social causes on Facebook, join political parties on Facebook. Clicking through the webpages of Facebook, one finds a great deal of evidence of a common community life on Facebook, in which preferences and recommendations are swiftly shared and information moves quickly across a network of loosely associated individuals.

One of the most compelling and challenging contributions of Facebook and other social media sites to modern life is their impact what is public and what is private in our lives and our culture. Many of you I’m sure read stories this week about Tyler Clementi, an 18-year-old college student in New York who threw himself off a bridge after his private sexual encounter with another man was made public on a social networking site. In the wake of suicide we are left with aching hearts for family and friends, with aching hearts and too many questions about what could have helped a suffering human being choose life over death. In this case, we are left also wondering “what have we wrought” when the technology so many people use for light-hearted connection and diversion becomes another, swifter, surer platform for abuse, harm, and destruction. If Facebook is a religion for our time, it has swiftly run a parallel course to the complicated history of other world traditions; it too, is being used for good and ill, to justify acts of mercy and goodness as well as acts of unspeakable violence.

If Facebook is a religion for our time, it is one at home with the global reach of great diversity, with millions of members connecting in India, Mexico, the Philippines, Turkey, and Indonesia, as well as in France, Canada, the U.K. and of course the United States. If Facebook is a religion, it is one that promotes freedom of expression, self-identification in categories such as sexual orientation, and the inherent value of the individual and her choices.
If Facebook is a religion for our time, it is one in which individuals publicize their commitments to a larger world. On Facebook, individuals exhort one another to action with political campaigns and draw attention to the moral issues of our day. With the click of a button, you can share your affirmation for good causes by “liking” them; you can sign charters, send emails to legislators, sound off, share information, and increase awareness for social change.

But is all that clicking really making a difference?

Social journalist Malcolm Gladwell, the author of the bestselling study of trends and movements called *The Tipping Point*, has come out this week with an article about how the rise of social media as a tool for social change has been greatly exaggerated.

Key to his argument is an understanding of the difference between low- and high-risk activism. As he takes us back to sit-ins at segregated lunch counters in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960, Gladwell speaks frankly about the dangers faced by activists in what became the Civil Rights Movement: the dangers of physical violence, police intimidation, getting kicked out of school, arrested, jailed, beaten, losing jobs, and risking death in the struggle for justice. What could convince people to join this fight? Citing a Stanford sociologist named Doug McAdam, Gladwell writes that only the strongest of personal ties to others engaged in the struggle kept people committed to such high-risk activism.1

In contrast, Facebook and other social media tools are purposefully built on networks of loose connections, drawing together not sisters, brothers, roommates, and neighbors, but huge conglomerations of friends-of-friends and acquaintances. Is he a Facebook friend or a friend friend, I have been known to ask, meaning: is this a breathing human you know and care for, or is this someone whose tiny picture appears on the screen every now and then, somewhat mysteriously?

Such networks, writes Gladwell, are “enormously resilient and adaptable in low-risk situations,” such as passing along information quickly. At the same time, he writes, “because networks don’t have a centralized leadership structure and clear lines of authority, they have real difficulty reaching consensus and setting goals.” In Greensboro fifty years ago, the hierarchy of the black church, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the NAACP mobilized students through years of struggle. These organizations demanded discipline and accountability. They provided support and training. It is hard to imagine how Facebook—or any loose-knit network—could mount, much less sustain, a similar campaign.

In our reading this morning, Victoria Safford, one of my favorite preachers and the minister of White Bear Unitarian Universalist outside Minneapolis, asked us a series of questions about the strength of our connections to one another. Here are her words again:

Douglas Steere, a Quaker teacher, says that the ancient question, “Who am I?” inevitably leads to a deeper one, “Whose am I?” – because there is no identity outside of relationship. You can’t be a person by yourself. To ask “Whose am I?” is to extend the

question far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder, Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?

Whose are you? To what people do you belong, my spiritual friends?

When I think about answering this question, I find I need to tell you more about who my people are. This morning, I am thinking particularly about my closest colleagues in ministry across the country. In my last month in Boston, I met for the last time with a group of women theologians and preachers who had been called to serve our congregations in Ashland, Oregon; Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts; Portland, Maine; Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Middlebury, Vermont. A few weeks later, after the moving trucks had pulled out of the driveways, after these women had been given the keys to new offices and houses of worship all over the map, I started getting emails from them.

“ Anders and I arrived in Middlebury on Friday, and our movers came Saturday. We are living in a beautiful condo overlooking a creek. The first morning, I saw a deer in a clearing across the creek, and yesterday, a great blue heron,” came one.

Then,

[I’m] writing from my minister’s office overlooking Diamond Park in downtown Meadville (think of the lovely little park in fictional River City, from "The Music Man," complete with gazebo and Thursday night free concerts in the park). My windows are framed by green branches, green bushes, green grass -- lots and lots of green, following a year in the desert!

And the next two:

I am writing from my new kitchen in Albuquerque... It is an adobe home with a beautiful, naturally landscaped yard filled with cacti, flowers, and desert grasses. There is a picnic bench outside the french doors next to me. A big difference from our 2nd story Cambridge apt!

[we] enjoy the sudden, arresting views that one encounters when driving around the city. To the east are the Sandia mountians, to the west a vast expanse of mostly undeveloped desert stretching as far as the eye can see. The city is sloped toward the mountains, so at times one can see both views at once.

Followed by... We are loving Ashland - it is a wonderful combination of natural beauty and amazing culture. The Shakespeare offers a free show in the central plaza of their three theaters -- we saw some amazing dance Friday and Saturday night which captivated the baby. Interesting shops, delicious restaurants, wild street performers complete with fire - it’s just great.
Each time an email bounced toward me, I found myself sitting in the minister’s office feeling the strength of my connections with these amazing women, and with their new congregations. Quickly, I typed back:

I'm reporting in from a camp chair in my empty Santa Monica apartment. Palm trees and ocean fog outside my window, and a green jewel of a hummingbird that's been visiting the blooming shrubs by the driveway.

Today is Association Sunday, a time when congregations across the country – congregations facing a “Music Man” gazebo in eastern Pennsylvania, Unitarians nestled among the Sandia mountains of New Mexico, supporters of liberal religion in the Rouge Valley of Ashland, Oregon, and those gazing upon the blue herons of Middlebury, Vermont – a time when real people in each of these real congregations can feel the real presence and support of one another.

This is not a time to allow ourselves the luxury of a loose network, of an “association” that is somehow ungrounded from daily reality of all the souls currently at home in our faith. Instead, it is a chance for each of us to think about whose we are, about who we belong to, about the people who call us by name. If we believe in mobilizing social change, if we gather not only to grow our own souls but to reach out to others in need, then our connection to others in our movement must be deeper and broader than it has been. It must look less like a social media network, and more like an unbroken circle of care and concern. I think of Emily, and Angela, Jill and Leslie, Christina and Carmen, and the congregations they serve. I think of my parents at UU congregations in Maryland, about how my brother, who was married in July in a Catholic service, has secretly already promised me his kids will find a UU church when it’s time for them to take Our Whole Lives, the UU sexuality education curriculum we usually call OWL.

I know for sure that I belong to these women, to this movement, and to the cause of liberal religion and its expanding borders. I know this is not a loose network to me. I don’t want it to be loose to you, either.

In a vast and lonely city like Los Angeles, I know this congregation – and our sister congregations in downtown LA, in the Pasadena hills, in the San Fernando Valley, and all along the Pacific Coast – that this congregation can be a tight-knit force for love in world of loose networks. We are specific among vagueness. We call to you by name.

In a vast and lonely city like Los Angeles, in the clicking immensity of the world of social networks, loose connections are tempting. Our online friends appear and disappear in their little boxes, inviting us to imagine ourselves surrounded by loving crowds. But today I say to you, strong connections with friends whose hands you can touch, strong connections of care and concern of kind people who will stand by you in dangerous times, people who need you, and love you, and to whom you are accountable, the relationships form and transform us will not take place in the airy world of social media.

And that is why Facebook cannot be a religion for our time, because it can never bind us together in deepest sense of that word, in the old Latin sense of that word, religion as in ligament, connective tissue, binding us together, holding us when we need one another most.
In 1648, I am told, religious separatists arrived on the rocky shores of Massachusetts. These Puritan leaders could never have imagined a place like Los Angeles, a place so gleaming, sprawling, multiethnic, multi-identified. A place so green, so lush, so Edenic, a city rising out of the desert valleys, edging to the wide blue ocean, moving its people and cars and goods over the dry hills. And yet there are those of us here whose lives have been altered by the choices made by those Puritan leaders. There are those of us here who belong to these distant ancestors, because they planted the seeds of a high-risk faith, one that demands real commitments from us, one we hope and pray and wish would truly hold us accountable to our highest values. This faith is based not on creed but on covenant. It is based on relationship. It is based on what we unite to do together. It is based on who we are to one another.

Maybe social media has a role to play for us. Maybe Facebook can be a tool, a way, a path for this faith, for this connection, for strengthening our sense of love and purpose when we cannot be with one another. But it is not the thing itself. It is not the binding force that can fight for change, that can beat back loneliness, that can join hands with sisters and brothers all over the planet. It cannot take the place of this congregation, or our communion of congregations. And for that I am truly grateful.

I thank you for logging out, and closing up, and powering down with me this morning. I thank you for your generosity to this church and to our circle of congregations. I think of my sisters in ministry and the good work they are doing, and how we are all part of that work. From the swift rivers of Oregon to the dusty desert of New Mexico, from the green hills of Pennsylvania to the quiet lakes of Vermont, from the sandy shores of Santa Monica to the rocky coast of Massachusetts, from sea to shining sea, there is more love, more hope, and more joy because of them, and because of you, and because of this church, and for that I am profoundly grateful.

May it be so.