

October 15, 2023
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Matt Duerr

“Algorithmic Flattery”

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. OK, I'm a former math teacher and our sermon today begins with a little bit of math, hence the title Algorithmic Flattery. You might be asking yourself, ‘what is an algorithm’? Well algorithms are used in the field of mathematics but also in computer science. An algorithm is and I quote, “a finite or limited sequence of instructions to solve a class of specific problems, or to perform a computation.

Let's go back to our days in school. Imagine the teacher is in the front of the classroom, there's a chalkboard or a whiteboard depending on your age; you're going to go with probably one of the two. And the teacher says we are going to learn how to add numbers today. We're going to add 1,234 with 5,678. Now step one is this- write those numbers one above the other with your columns lining up straight beginning with the ones column. Then step two, after you've done this, go to the ones column add the numbers in that column and put the sum below the column. If the sum is greater than 9, take the number in the sum that is in the tens column and move it to the top of the tens column in your addition. Repeat the process for each column. When done you will have the sum or answer at the bottom. Does that sound familiar? I taught it for years. The kids followed it and did just fine and it's a wonderful thing because in math algorithms are designed to get accurate, correct, and truthful answers.

Unfortunately, that's not always the case in computer science. Some computer science algorithms for instance, are used to drive artificial intelligence. And in some cases, they really are designed to get a correct, honest, accurate, truthful answer because; well let's say you're employing artificial intelligence in driverless cars. If you don't get it right, the brakes don't get applied, and there's a crash resulting in

mayhem, injuries, destruction. So, in those areas computer science algorithms, they have got to be accurate.

But then there's the sermon title Algorithmic Flattery. These algorithms are not truth based. They're used primarily by well, on the internet, by corporations, by the government, and even by some church bodies and entities. They are algorithms that are designed to tell us pleasant lies. They want to tell us what we want to hear. Why, because clever people have figured out that they want what you have; and so they want your money, your attention, or maybe your vote. And they want these things so that they can get profit, praise, and maybe power.

These algorithms care nothing about the truth. They are designed to capture your attention for the maximum amount of time so that they can exert a maximum amount of influence over you. They are designed to show reliable attention getters or grabbers. Why, well because of emotion. If you can inspire a person's emotions, things like anger, or adoration, alarm, or satisfaction, you can get their attention. And these algorithms insulate you and will confirm what you've always felt or knew or hoped to be true. Alternately, it all revolves around this simple statement. You deserve better. You deserve better because deep down inside of our hearts, we feel it's all about me, and what I want. And yet the same algorithms that appeal to that, it's all about you, and what you want; they also say, 'and we, the ones who have written the algorithms, are the ones who really care. And so you can trust us trust us to meet your needs and not God.

Unfortunately sometimes, I'm sure you've all had this happen. Maybe on the Internet there was something that grabbed your attention. And you went and you looked and then you saw, and you thought, well that's awesome I think I'm going to buy that and then it comes and it turns out to be what we call a pink Flamingo. But we'll go right back, and we'll get suckered into this stuff again, until we open the good book, the Bible. Because the Bible brings us back to reality. You see the Bible is truth as Jesus said in His high priestly prayer, "Your word is truth, oh Lord." And we are to be sanctified or set apart in God's Word. And what does God's word teach us?

Well, it teaches us this. It is all about you! There is a bright future for you, there is a path to lasting genuine fulfillment and this life is free of the pink flamingos. You just need to... and I want you to think about that, “You just need to what?” And how many of you, in your mind said “Oh, I know what he's getting at, we just need to accept Jesus, right?” Wrong! You need to accept that it is all about *you* and *you* are a sinner. As a result, *you* fall short of the glory of God. *You* are totally incapable of earning salvation. *You* need a solution, and that solution is a Savior.

Then when you, I, we are confronted with the reality of your, mine, our spiritual adultery... What is meant by spiritual adultery? Well, it's putting anything before God. It's the first commandment, you shall have no other gods before me. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. So, what competes with that love? Well ask yourself, what competes with your Sabbath? What can keep you from going to church? We're dealing with another commandment, that we remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. What competes with your tithe? What competes with your call to be a royal priesthood? What competes with your call to prepare as a royal priesthood, prepare to preserve and share the knowledge of God? What competes with your call to declare the glories of Him who has called us out of the darkness and into His marvelous light? Anything that competes and wins is spiritual adultery.

God does not say remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy on the days that you feel like doing that. No, we are to do it and Jesus, Himself made it His custom to go to the synagogue, the church, every Sabbath. So, when you, me, we, realize that we are guilty of spiritual adultery and sin; when we cross any of the other eight commandments that we didn't cross already in the first thing there. Then, we are finally ready to say like that tax collector in the temple in our gospel this morning, “God be merciful to me a sinner.”

Because we realize what Saint Paul was saying in Romans 5, a chapter that inspired Luther tremendously. God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. When we finally see it's all about me, you, us; and we are sinners and we have transgressed

God. We fall short of His glory, that's when we turned to God and say 'help.' Because we need a Savior, a solution, and it's right there in Jesus. While we're sinners and we don't deserve it, He died for us and then the Gospel algorithm starts to go into place. Then true reality begins to sink in and maybe some truth-based emotions even. Because the reality is this; though we don't deserve it, we have been bought. We have been redeemed at a great price, the blood of God's own Son. We don't deserve, it but He did it. And then that might hit that emotion button, and we ask the question, "So what am I going to do about it?"

It hit home on the day of Pentecost when Saint Peter confronted the people with their sin. It was all about them, and they had killed the Messiah. And when they said, 'what should we do?' His answer—"repent, change and be baptized." And then what did they do? They lived for Christ, and they lived to bring glory to His name.

And so, as we now go through this month of October, a month of Reformation, leading up to our Reformation service on October 29th, one of the things that we are going to look at is that response. And part of that response is to order our lives to live in an age of algorithmic flattery where there's so many things trying to get our attention. But to order ourselves, so that we could be like the reformers, like Luther, and truly commit ourselves to not being distracted by all those messages, but to focus on that message of the Gospel and the call that has been given to us. In our Savior's Name, Amen.