

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Easter 6(A) ~ 10 May 2026
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Acts 17:22-31
Psalm 66:7-9, 14-18
John 14:15-21

I am reading a fascinating and challenging book right now, *The Next Renaissance: AI and the Expansion of Human Potential*. It was written by Jack Kass, an early employee at OpenAI, who argues that “properly harnessed...[AI] could help us tear down barriers that have long constrained human potential...” At the same time, Kass warns,

*For AI truly to serve humanity, we will be forced to solve radical new ethical dilemmas, unprecedented economic disruptions, daunting technical challenges, environmental collapse, dehumanization, the loss of identity, and above all, terrifying uncertainty.*¹

Oh, is that all?

I'm only about 50 pages in so far, and already I find myself grappling with questions of what it means to be human in the Age of AI. What distinguishes us from the machines that promise to expand our potential? Who is “in charge,” ultimately? And does it matter if the answer does *not* turn out to be, “We are”?

Kass gives the example of the ride “Autopia” at Disneyland, which he describes as “loud, smelly, and decidedly not futuristic, despite being located in Tomorrowland.”² (It is 70 years old, after all.) Yet Kass observes that children love the ride “because it lets them ‘drive.’ The thrill of turning a wheel and pressing a pedal outweighs every other factor.”³

¹ Jack Kass, *The Next Renaissance: AI and the Expansion of Human Potential* (Hoboken: Jack Wiley & Sons, 2026), x-xi.

² Kass, 32.

³ Kass, 32.

Why? That's easy to explain, Kass says: "It is not freedom we seek. It is *control*."⁴

It is not freedom we seek. It is control.

If you're wondering about this claim, try this experiment: The next time you're standing in a building lobby waiting for an elevator, having already pushed the "up" button, notice whether anyone else comes along and pushes that button again, maybe more than once, **just in case** – as if that little extra effort somehow will make the elevator materialize more quickly.

I do this all the time. I come bustling on to a group of people waiting and do exactly this – push the elevator button again. It seems perfectly natural – until someone shoots me a withering glance, as if to say, "So my button-pushing wasn't good enough for you, lady?"

Yes, I feel empowered, because I at least made the effort to declare *my* intention to ride, too. I exercised my control.

And I also feel really silly. We humans can be so ridiculous at times.

One of the hallmarks of being human seems to be this hard-wired desire for **agency**, the ability to determine the events and outcomes in our own lives. And this is more than just a psychological phenomenon; it is a spiritual one, too. How often, for example, do we call upon God to bless or endorse plans that *we* have made already? How often do we approach God like a divine elevator – as if we can just push a button and doors will open, literally or metaphorically, for us? Or like a divine vending machine: Pay our money, make our selection, and down the chute drops love or mercy or healing or forgiveness. Instant grace.

This is the mark of a **transaction**, *quid pro quo*: We give something, we get something. Some of you may have heard my rant about transactional relationships before...especially our tendency to use language about "using" people. For example, I have been asked more than once in recent weeks whom St. Dunstan's "used" to replace our roof. If I felt I knew the person asking well enough, I replied, "We use *things*, not people." But you'll be happy to know I mostly just let it go; I do have some sense.

⁴ Kass, 33.

The Bible is full of accounts of humans trying to “push the God button.” One prime example is the disciples James and John, who tell Jesus, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask” (Mk. 10:35).

Wow. Just – wow. It’s a bit cringe-worthy, to be honest.

But is it any wonder they are so bold? After all, just last week Jesus told another disciple, Philip, “If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.” Jesus does kind of encourage Philip to “push the God button,” doesn’t He?

Drop in a coin, make a selection, and *voilà*: Request granted.

So what’s the problem?

Well, for one thing, we know from experience that prayer doesn’t work that way. If it did, then there would be no wars, we and everyone we love would be healthy, and our dealings with other people would always be easy. It’s a beautiful vision, isn’t it? To quote the old John Lennon song,

*You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one.*

If we’re being honest, this is exactly what we all want.

[Pause]

And for another thing, we also know that God is not transactional. God not a divine elevator that we can summon or control with the push of a button, or a vending machine that dispenses love or mercy or healing or forgiveness.

As Paul tells the people of Athens in the Acts reading this morning,

The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

In other words, despite our longing for it, we are not in control! Paul says that God is so much bigger and better than anything we humans might come up with on our own. “We are God’s offspring,” Paul continues, and as such “we ought not to think that the deity is like **gold**, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.” (I encourage you to reflect on this claim in light of recent events in Florida...)

As much as we love our building –and we do, Lord knows, which is why we are investing so much to preserve it – we must remember that it is not God. Neither is a successful capital campaign an end in itself. It is a means to helping us maintain our building as a container, one of *many* places in which we can encounter and know and fall in love with God. We must be clear about that distinction.

I began by sharing Jack Kass’s warnings about dehumanization and loss of identity, and it seems to me that the surest way to forfeit our identity as humans, as God’s offspring, is to lose sight of our *relationship* with God, as revealed to us in Jesus.

The unique claim of Christianity is that, in Jesus, God identifies fully with humans by becoming human. In other words, God dignifies and elevates the human experience by partaking in it. Through Jesus we learn that God longs for nothing so much as to love us and be loved by us. God is mutual, and God is relational.

How can we love an elevator button, or a vending machine? Jack Kass argues that “we have no empathy for a machine,” giving the example of “delivery robots in Los Angeles [that] have been kicked, blocked, even set on fire.”⁵ No doubt this behavior has been or soon will be the subject of a PhD dissertation in psychology. We know from our own sinful past the dire consequences of treating others as less-than-human, as objects to be used rather than loved.

This is *not* how God treats us. In today’s Gospel Jesus rejects a transactional, button-pushing worldview. For Jesus, everything comes down to love – of which machines are incapable. Jesus tells His disciples, “If you **love** me, you will keep my commandments.” This is not a threat – “love Me, or else!” – but a description of fact. When we love another, when we are in relationship with another, we begin to change. I always warn couples in premarital counseling that if they want everything

⁵ Kass, 36.

to stay the same, then they shouldn't bother getting married. They shouldn't be in relationship at all. Because to love is to empathize, to have compassion, to be shaped by life with the other. To love is to grow.

As C.S. Lewis observed,

*Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal... To love is to be vulnerable.*⁶

So it is with God, says Jesus. To love God is to be willing to be cracked open, to allow our behavior to shift and our hearts to be reshaped. No machine can do that.

There is no question but that relationships are messier than transactional arrangements. They take longer to develop, and we don't get instant results – if we even get the results we're looking for, at all. And sometimes we respond to that disappointment with God – or with other people – as we would if an elevator doesn't come or a vending machine is out of order: The temptation is just to walk away.

This implies that, in our minds, God only exists if we get what we want!

But when we take the time to know Jesus, when we allow ourselves to experience His love, when we really are in relationship with Him, it is much more difficult to walk away. There is a compelling, perhaps even “irresistible,” quality to this love.

Love that we do not have to manufacture and that we cannot control.

Love that we receive – love that changes us – love that we then share.

This is what it is to be human. No machine can do that.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York, Mariner Books, 1971).