One of the terrible effects of social media and the internet in general is that it has allowed us to create artificial relationships that we confuse with real relationships. Let me explain what I mean. Let’s say I am a conspiricist and believe that the Pope is plotting with extraterrestrials to implant microchips in our brains (I am not making this up, it’s a real conspiracy theory). Now in ordinary times I could go down to the local diner and regale everyone with my brilliance and in the process probably be laughed out of the place. Nowadays, though I can simply go online and find any number of individuals who agree with my theory and very soon start to believe that I am the sane one and those who don’t agree with me and my new found friends are the crazy ones. My silliness gets continually validated. Now this is obviously an extreme example but this dynamic plays out in many less dramatic ways. The feeling of validation that we traditionally would have gotten from those we live in close proximity with can now be outsourced around the world. And in the outsourcing we get to pick and choose the members of the group and so end up with only those people who agree with us. And a real problem with this is we ignore the needs of people around us.

I have told this story before but hopefully you have forgotten it by now so it will appear fresh and interesting. Years ago when our kids were little and you still got pictures developed; Amy and I were going through some vacation photos. While we were doing this, our actual children kept interrupting us. Finally, a little flabbergasted we said, “Kids we can’t pay attention to you we are too busy looking at pictures of you.” In that moment we had decided that a representation of our children were more important than the actual children who were right in front of us. This is what the internet has done to so many of us. We think being pundits on our own Facebook show is what is important while ignoring the needs of the people around us. But let’s see for a minute what the Bible says. Today in 2nd Corinthians we hear, “Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” Paul says nothing about sharing our erudition with the world rather he talks about living in peace with the people with whom we are in contact. It is less glamorous and much more difficult than being a Facebook pundit which is probably why it is much less popular. But the fact of the matter is it is the place where we can do the most good. It is the place where we can really have an influence to live in peace as St. Paul tells us today.

One of the hardest lessons that I have had to learn in life is that I am average. What I mean by that is millions of people are never going to hang on my every word, nor are they are not going to tune into see me on the YouTube. I have a very average circle of influence, as do most of us. This means that I am not going to fix every problem of society, but the good news is that God has not called me or any of us to do that. God has called us to make things better in the small areas where we can do something. The fact of the matter is that posting something on the internet also does next to nothing, probably a whole lot less than picking up something at the store for a neighbor or making soup for a shut-in. In our rush to create media empires that celebrate us and our erudition, we are doing less than we could be doing by simply being decent to the very small circle of people we are around. If you don’t believe me ask yourself this question. We are well into our third decade of the preponderance of the virtual world that the Internet has given us, a place where we can shop for people who agree with our point of view. Now here is the question do you feel like our society is really awesome and healthy right now? Or do you feel like we have lost something? Let me just end with a story.

As you know I serve as a chaplain in the Air National Guard. A number of years ago we got a new chaplain who was also Episcopalian. Now to paint things in very broad terms if you were to think of the schism that has ripped apart our church you would say that the other Episcopal chaplain and myself represented very different parts of the church. Now if we had met online where we were surrounded by our chosen posse we would probably have both loudly proclaimed our wisdom and probably would have disliked each other rather strongly. But here is the thing: we did not meet online, we met in person. We got to know each other and understand one another as complete human beings, something online interaction does not allow. And so guess what? She is now one of my closest friends and one of the people I trust most. When I was deploying, she was the first to tell me that anything my family needed she would be there to help. Is our friendship going to change the world? Probably not, but if thousand and thousands of those small friendship emerge it will. It will bring peace among each other. The sooner we realize that yelling at each other over differences of opinion and finding all sorts of fault with each other just makes the world a lousier place. The sooner we can go about rebuilding this world in God’s image in the places where we can, the more we will fulfill the vision of Paul where there is peace amongst us this day and forevermore.