

"How do you know that is true?"

Epiphany 4B - January 29, 2012

Today, we are going to talk about the concept of authority....A Department of Water Resources representative stops at a Texas ranch and talks with an old rancher. He tells the rancher, "I need to inspect your ranch for your water allocation." The old rancher says, "Okay, but don't go in that field over there." The Water representative says, "Mister, I have the authority of the Federal Government with me.. See this card? This card means I am allowed to go WHEREVER I WISH on any agricultural land. No questions asked. Have I made myself clear? Do you understand?" The old rancher nods politely and goes about his chores. Later, the old rancher hears loud screams and sees the Water Rep running for his life. And close behind is the rancher's bull. The bull is gaining with every step. The Rep is clearly terrified, so the old rancher immediately throws down his tools, runs to the fence and yells at the top of his lungs....."Your card! Show him your card!"

I have very little doubt that we live in a "post-Christian" culture; while most Americans still say they believe in a god or "higher power," the majority have no particular commitment to or deep passion for that god and the religious institution associated with it. I think it is likely that most of the residents of Park City, if asked, would claim to be Christian, but the power & authority of the Christian tradition & its institution, the Church, are insignificant in the day to day lives of the majority. The authority of Christianity to effectively challenge the selfishness of North American culture, to provide direction & instruction in the areas of morality & ethics, and to powerfully lead society toward policies & habits of greater compassion, love & civility is but a shadow of the Church's authority in earlier times. What happened? Is it that there are no prophets among us or are we simply choosing to ignore their voices? Is this progress or a sign of decline?

There are many layers within this onion & we could spend many weeks working at peeling it. But today, we have time to touch upon only one layer; however, it's one near or at the core. Twenty-first century citizens of the West have a very different notion of authority than those of earlier centuries largely because we have a very different idea of what constitutes trustworthy, reliable human knowledge. The answer to, "how do you know that is true?" has changed over the past few centuries. Imagine a door hinge; one plate represents how this question would have been answered up through the 15th century; the other plate represent how it would have been answered during the last three centuries; the hinge itself represents the 16th & 17th centuries, the turning point in Western civilization's way of thinking about authority, knowledge & truth.

A critical member of the community of thinkers that helped shape the attitudes we hold today was a Christian mathematician who lived & wrote during the first half of the 17th century, Rene Descartes. Descartes lived 100 years after Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Cathedral of Wittenburg initiating the Protestant Reformation. He lived in Europe and witnessed the people of that continent tearing themselves & one another apart over the question of authority;

from where does the authority come to declare that a statement, any statement, religious or scientific is true or false? On what basis will human knowledge be constructed? Now just in case you are sitting there thinking that this has nothing to do with you; which do you think is more likely to be true: that NASA landed a man on the moon or that Jesus' mother was a virgin.....or how about this....which do you think is more likely to be true: the three angles within a triangle always add up to 180 degrees or whenever the Pope speaks ex cathedra, he is speaking infallibly for God?

Descartes saw all that was going on & realized that much that he had been taught by his teachers was wrong or no longer made sense; so he went looking for a whole new basis of knowledge. a whole new way of answering the question, "how do you know that is true?" He came up with the rather ingenious & paradoxical idea of using doubt as the method for uncovering a new foundation for knowledge; "If I can doubt everything that can possibly be doubted, I will eventually get down to that which cannot be doubted & that will be the new foundation." Descartes found that he could doubt everything except his own existence. "I am having these thoughts, I am thinking, therefore I must exist. If I did not exist, I would not be here to think." This insight gave real legs to what would become in successive centuries the movement away from understanding knowledge as the teaching of some higher authority such as the Church toward the new idea that the foundation, the beginning place of all knowledge is human consciousness, human awareness of her capacity to think & reason as an individual.

This movement provided the foundation for the enormous progress in science & technology over the past 300 years. In fact, science has been so successful that today the pendulum has swung too far to the other side. If it is true that prior to the 16th century people placed too much emphasis upon the teachings of the Church, it is equally true that in 2012 too many of us have developed the habit of thinking of knowledge only in scientific & technological terms. Today, our thinking about truth & knowledge, our way of answering the question "how do you know that is true?" is as out of balance & one-sided as it was in 1412. The fruits of this pendulum swing include a cultural & national way of seeing our lives as primarily about: individual comfort & affluence, possessing the next gadget of convenience, & waiting for the next scientific break-through to save us. Meanwhile, we have become increasingly deaf to: wisdom, the prophets living among us calling us to move in a different direction & our own hearts. We have stopped thinking of wisdom as a valid way of knowing. We have moved away from seeing our hearts as legitimate sources of truth. We have ceased to assume that knowledge & truth are found in relationship, in connection, in unity with others.

I close with this thought; it is irrational & unnecessary to pit science against spirituality, to assume that one must choose between wisdom & the development of technology, to give authority to mathematics while ignoring our hearts. Instead, let's commit ourselves to live our lives as whole people, as people of body & spirit, of brain & heart, of mind & soul. Science, technology & mathematics in the hands of wisdom, spirit & soul can make the world a better place for all of us.