



HOW DO YOU KNOW - 2008

UUFSA Sermon 3/2/08

Each week when we recite our Spoken Affirmation we assert that “the quest for truth is the sacrament of this congregation.” I think that is a very true statement. It is something that sets UU congregations apart from others. Other churches will tell you how it is. This church says you have to go find out for yourself. Therefore, the search for truth becomes quite important to us.

As seekers of the truth, we must have some means of knowing the truth when we find it or our search becomes meaningless.

How you will know the truth when you find it? Are you just going to “know?” Will it be so obvious that you blurt out, “Oh, Yeah. that’s it. I should have known that all along.”

Well, you might do that but then you find 50 other UUs in the room looking at you and wondering how you can possibly believe anything so ridiculous.

So how do support your decision of what to believe? We actually have quite a few ways in which we decide what to believe. I am going run through a bunch of them quickly before I get on to the main discussion points.

I will start with wishful thinking. Wishful thinking is a very popular way of determining what we believe. The human mind has an uncanny ability to shut out all sorts of evidence to the contrary so we can ignore it and believe whatever we darn well feel like believing.

Along with wishful thinking comes rationalization. Rationalization gives us excuses to believe the things we wanted to believe anyway.

Intuition often gets the call on at times like that. Intuition can fill in where rationalization fails. If you can’t imagine evidence for something, you can just go with your gut feeling and believe it anyway.

Then there is superstition. Superstition has many facets and degrees. These range from wearing your lucky hat when you go fishing to revered traditions that have been passed down for generations.

The lucky hat kind of superstitions are kind of like agnosticism. You don’t really know if it matters but you are going to do it just in case, like the St. Christopher medal I carry. St. Christopher is the patron saint of travelers. My mother gave me this medal over 40 years ago. And, I take it with me whenever I travel. I don’t believe in it, of course.

Sometimes our beliefs come to us from channeled sources, such as through a medium or a prophet. They may be from some departed soul or directly from God. This

channeled information may give us a revelation, a sudden new understanding or awareness that changes our lives and affects our perception and interpretation of both past and future events.

Some revelations that have been passed along for generations and even some brand new ideas may become doctrine, dogma, or ideology which you are taught by an authority figure to believe is truth. At times, this “truth” may appear to not agree with what you observe around you but you know it true because you have faith. **Faith is very powerful and it affects even the most hardened UU more than we usually realize.**

Logic provides standards by which valid reasoning can be tested. It clarifies the reasoning process and provides a means for analyzing the consistency of inputs into the process. Logic can give absolute answers insofar as its processes are concerned. A statement either meets a logical test or it doesn't. However, logic does not necessarily test the truth of the input information. The results of valid logical reasoning still depend on the validity of the basic premises.

We often combine logic with empiricism to validate the starting premise. Empiricism is different from logic in that it does not yield absolute answers. Empiricism by itself cannot guarantee that an experiment that has yielded the same results on a thousand consecutive occasions will do the same on the thousand and first.

That brings us to the Scientific method and its components. The scientific method includes logic, empiricism, theory, and natural laws.

The combination of logic and empiricism is very powerful but still produces only disconnected bits of information. Theories are what pull all the information together and make the scientific method useful. A theory is a statement that explains how myriad pieces of information relate to each other. A good theory is supported by many experiments, observations, and logical conclusions.

A well substantiated theory is a very strong statement and may be the basis for understanding how natural laws relate to each other. Natural laws are statements that tell us how the universe works. They are both a criterion for the truth and an end product of other criteria.

But neither theory nor natural law as developed by the scientific method is inviolate. As our body of empirical knowledge grows we may learn new things which cause us to modify or abandon old theories and laws in favor of new ones. Regardless of how thoroughly a theory is demonstrated to be correct, the possibility of new information relegating the theory to obsolescence always remains.

It is rather ironic that the scientific method, an approach that does not avow to produce absolute truths, has been so effective at producing useful information. We have built great technologies on the functional truths which come from the scientific method with full knowledge that they are susceptible to being disproven by the same method.

The uncertainties of science are clearly recognized by its trained practitioners. In many branches of science we now depend on statistics to give us probabilities for things being true when we realize that it is not possible to generate a stronger basis for telling whether something is true or not.

Regardless of which criteria we use to determine what is true, from wishful thinking to a to the scientific method, we must be careful of mind set. Mind set is the tendency to see, hear, or otherwise experience what we expect to happen rather than what really happens. In reacting to mind set we may eliminate all or part of what our senses otherwise would have perceived to only notice what we expected to notice. Mind set decides what is true regardless of the available information.

That gets us through most my catalog of ways to determine what is true. There are more but they are not relevant to what I want to say.

Now, let's look at some of the implications of using those different criteria. Given these alternatives to work with, how can a UU dependably determine what is true? Can a UU determine what is true? Or do we become something else once we figure that out?

Most of us are quite strong believers in the scientific method. But the Scientific method has some major shortcomings. First, it can never give us certainty or absolute answers. There is always the possibility that new data will make an old truth obsolete and a new truth will emerge, as we have seen in physics from Newton to Einstein to Hawking. Second, the scientific method is not even capable of addressing philosophical or theological questions. And those are the ones for which we are here look for answers.

So, how are we to deal with questions that the scientific method cannot address? Well, we either don't answer them or we use some other method. But it is very difficult for someone who believes firmly in the Scientific Method to admit to themselves that other means to determine the truth may be valid because none of those alternative or competing methods meet the criteria of the scientific method. The other ways of determining what is real or true generally are not susceptible to testing or replication.

I have been using the scientific method to pass judgment on its competitors for most of my life. I now question the wisdom of that approach because I have realized that it is intrinsically prejudiced.

The scientific method is like a messianic religion. It excludes all of the competition from having any possible validity. The scientific method discredits all competing sources of knowledge and thereby discredits everything that can be learned from other sources. If you want to know what is really happening out there in the world, you have to use the scientific method. And you know that because the scientific method tells you that. You shall take no other god but this one.

But is it valid to believe that claim? If we test any particular system of knowledge by its own standards, it will appear to be valid. If we test it by the standards of a competitor, it is likely

to appear to be invalid. This makes it very difficult for us to change our belief system once we are committed to one. Or in the case of the scientific method, to augment it with another means for the questions that the scientific method cannot answer.

I said that it is very difficult for someone who believes firmly in the scientific method to admit to themselves that other means to determine the truth may be valid. Notice I said "to admit to themselves." I did not say that it is difficult for us to use other methods. The truth is that we do it all the time.

Very little of our knowledge is obtained first hand. There is too much to know and many things are beyond our individual means to observe or test. So, we take the word of our teachers or perceived experts in their fields. Basically we believe most of what we know simply because someone told us. We are taking the word of authority.

Want to know about astrophysics? We look to what St. Albert Einstein or St. Stephen Hawking says. We trust them. We have faith in them.

When scientist disagree, we take the word of the most respected authority or whom we believe has the best science. The one we have the most faith in.

We may say that they are backed up by the work of many other people and many, many observations and experiments as the scientific method requires. But, we really have no way of testing first hand for ourselves if what they say is true. We get the information second hand with no way to directly prove or disprove it for ourselves. We are taking the word of these authorities because we have faith in them.

And, what is really amazing is that we do it even though we know they are fallible. They can not only make mistakes but sometimes even just change their minds about what is true. Scientists give us the best answer they can with the currently available data and that data may be wrong or inadequate.

I have scientists working for me at the water management district. We make sure that they always use the best available data. We even have an acronym for best available data, BAD.

I think faith in science is actually less logical than faith in God. Christians know that God is infallible. God can do no wrong. It is quite reasonable to have faith in someone that. But I take the word of scientists that I know can be wrong. An regardless how good of a job the scientists have done, answers that are derived from their methods are intrinsically probable rather than certain.

Science tells me that this lectern is made of little tiny things called atoms that I can't even see, vibrating or flying around with space in between them. Neither my senses nor my logic can support that. (Walk around lectern and knock on the front.) I don't see any atoms. Do you see atoms? Looks solid to me. Man, those scientists have to be full of it. How cold anybody believe that? Nothing in my entire lifetime of experience

can support the belief that this lectern and everything else we see is made of a bunch of atoms flying around.

I would have a hard time believing it if I had not been indoctrinated with atomic theory since I was in elementary school. It is an act of faith based on the word of authority to believe that this thing is made of atoms, yet probably everybody here believes it. We learned it from our teachers when we were young enough not to question them. When we had faith in the authority of their knowledge.

I look up at the night sky and I see little white specks. Scientists tell me they are really huge masses of hot gas, millions or billions of light years away and that what I am looking at isn't even there right now because it takes so long for its light to get to earth. All I can demonstrate for myself is that there are little white specks up there in the night sky and they don't really seem all that far away. I am taking the word of authority on faith that those are great big hot fusion reactors at incomprehensible distances.

How can we criticize people for taking the word of their religious leaders on faith when we take the word of other people on faith? It is not a big jump from having faith in the authority of scientists to believing in divine inspiration, channeling or intuition. So you can believe in the sanctity of the scientific method and still believe in acquiring knowledge through other means. We all do it all of the time. We all do it all of the time.

In two weeks I will be giving the talk downstairs on having water supply utilities taking water out of the St. Johns River that I was originally scheduled to do two weeks ago but had to postpone. Those of you who attend probably will have enough faith in me to believe what I say. You think I am knowledgeable and trustworthy enough to be an authority on this topic.

If I were to give the same presentation to the Jacksonville city council, I would have much less credibility. Their reaction to me saying "Don't worry, the water management district is protecting your river." would be like having an al queda show up at the airport and say, "Don't worry, I won't mess with your airplanes."

What we believe depends very much on whom we believe. Do you have faith in the source or not?

So now we face the possibility that our commitment to logic and empiricism is based on faith in authority and that we have developed so much faith in the correctness of this path so we cannot accept anything to the contrary. If that is true, then we also can be unwittingly yielding to wishful thinking and rationalization to justify our faith.

I have been a firm believer in the scientific method and an equally firm disbeliever in other means of obtaining knowledge for as long as I can remember but for the past eight years I have been married to someone who believes in science as much as I do but is far more flexible about accepting information from other sources.

A couple of years ago Dottie joined a group called the Esoteric Order of the Golden Dawn. They practice a combination of Christian, ancient Hebrew, and ancient Egyptian beliefs and rituals. They call on archangels to connect with the power of the universe. Their practices are generally aimed at purifying the soul and raising their level of consciousness above the mundane level of the physical universe. However, some of what they do has more practical applications, such as speeding up the healing of injuries and recovery from diseases.

The Esoteric Order of the Golden Dawn is a pretty small group, significantly fewer members than the UUA . The nearest temple to attend group gatherings is near Asheville, NC and Dottie likes to go there a few times a year to participate in group rituals.

We were getting ready on a Thursday night to drive there on Friday so she could attend their meeting on Saturday when Dottie had an altercation with our cat that resulted in her falling and hurting her hand. The hand hurt quite badly in spite of the morphine that she was already on for her back pain. She believed there to be a fracture. She considered going to the emergency room but decided that might prevent us from getting started on our trip the next morning and she decided to address the issue in the Golden Dawn temple on Saturday instead.

I cannot confirm the pain or fracture but I did see what the hand looked like externally. In spite of immediately icing and wrapping the hand, she quickly developed a big, nasty looking hematoma. The entire back of her hand, extending partly into her fingers was black. It was the kind of bruise that would usually take two weeks to fully fade away.

We went to NC and participated in the group rituals on Saturday night with me thoroughly bored and constantly rolling my eyes. Prior to going to the meeting, Dottie's hand was starting to turn from black to purple around the edges but was still quite dark and nasty looking and she said it still hurt quite badly.

In the course of the evening, Dottie went through a supposedly healing experience in one particular ritual. The next morning her hand was better. I saw for myself that the hematoma had disappeared overnight. She said the pain was gone too. I have no way of confirming how bad the pain was or if there had really been a fracture but I could see that hematoma very well. I have never before seen a bruise even half that bad go away anywhere near that quickly.

This is very embarrassing for me. I can no longer stand there and smugly tell Dottie that her angelic magic is nonsense.

But let's also consider this experience in light of what I said a few minutes ago about this lectern being made of atoms. I now have personally acquired more direct experience to support a belief in magical healing than I have to support a belief that this lectern is made of atoms. I saw the difference in her hand overnight but I have still never seen an atom.

It is completely an act of faith for me or you to believe in atoms but I am so brainwashed that I still believe in them and have a hard time with the idea of magical healing.

So, let's not be too smug about our objectivity and use of logical processes and empiricism for determining the truth. We are not as pure in that regard as we like to think. And, the line between rationality and rationalization is much narrower than we think and very easy to cross over.

Many of you probably remember some years ago seeing bumper stickers that told us to "Question authority." On the heels of that one came another that said, "Question reality." I think that is very good advice even though it may originally have been meant humorously. Now I am telling to not only question reality but to question the very means by which you determine what reality is. You may find that your sacred cow is really just hamburger.