

Truth, Skepticism, and Conspiracy Theories

A Zoom discussion
on facts vs opinions

Agenda

Land Acknowledgement

Prayer

Introduction: Women of the ELCA and Jennifer Hockenbery

THE PRESENTATION:

- *The topic at hand: How can we know what to trust? * The history of the question
- *Where we are now and what is at stake?
- * Some practical tips in navigating the search for knowledge
- *Some practical tips for talking to others in our search
- * Our faithful foundation as Christians:

A TIME FOR QUESTIONS:

Final Prayer

Land Acknowledgement

The churchwide office of Women of the ELCA is located on the original and ancestral lands of the Kickapoo, Peoria, Potawatomi, Miami, Ho-Chunk, and Sioux people.

We give thanks for these tribal nations. We also recognize and honor all Indigenous siblings who have and continue to call these lands their home.

I live in Wisconsin, on the ancestral home of the Menomonee Nation for whom this land on which I live has historical, cultural, and sacred significance.

God, you are the Truth, you are Wisdom, you are the Way. From you, Solomon asked for insight which is more precious than silver and more valuable than gold. Tonight, we gather wondering anew—how do we know what is true? Who can we trust? When should we be confident to speak what we believe? Guide us, God, and remind us that all who ask, will receive, all who search will find, all who knock will have the door opened. Let us remember that you are on our side, searching us out and guiding our steps. May we not despair when we have a God who makes such promises. AMEN!

Introductions:

- What is Women of the ELCA?

We are the women in thousands of congregations across the U.S. and the Caribbean, who gather in community to grow in faith and live out that faith through ministry and action. Come join us!

As a congregation:

[Get Involved - Women of the ELCA](#)

As an individual:

[Belong - Women of the ELCA](#)

- **OUR MISSION**

Mobilizing women to act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ.

- **NUESTRA MISSION**

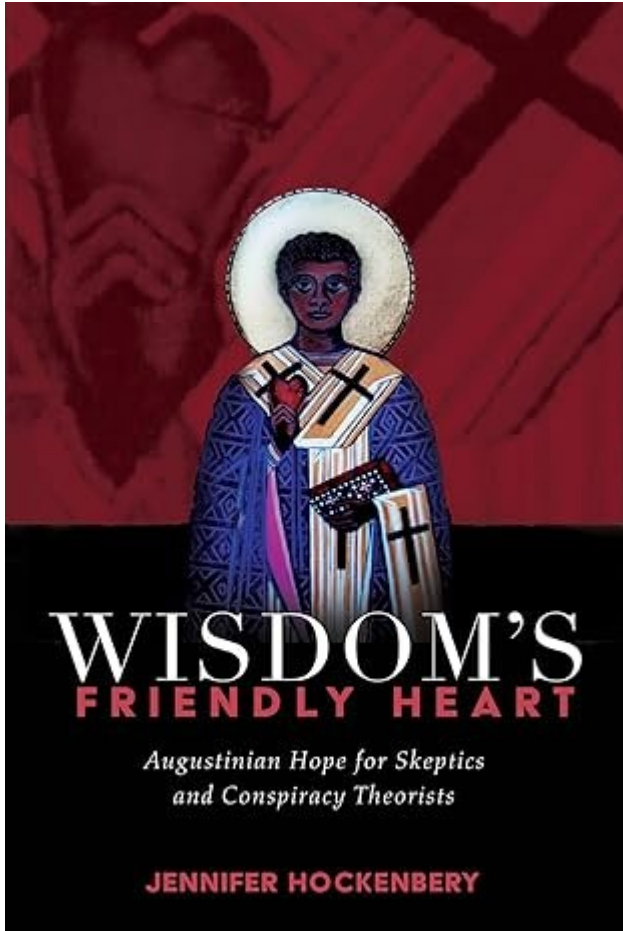
Movilizar a mujeres a actuar con valentía en su fe en Jesucristo.



Belong - Women of the ELCA



Who is Jennifer Hockenbery?



- I am a philosopher.
 - I want to know what is true.
 - I do not want to be deceived.
-
- Philosophy is the friendly love of wisdom—the desire to be friends with Wisdom. I found St. Augustine (the African Doctor of Grace whose theology influenced greatly Martin Luther) to be very helpful with my questions about this.



The
Epistemological
Crisis

As a community
we are not in agreement

*On “the facts”

- On who is a trustworthy authority
 - On whom we should believe
- or what we should deem as true.

The Homo Sapiens = the knowing person

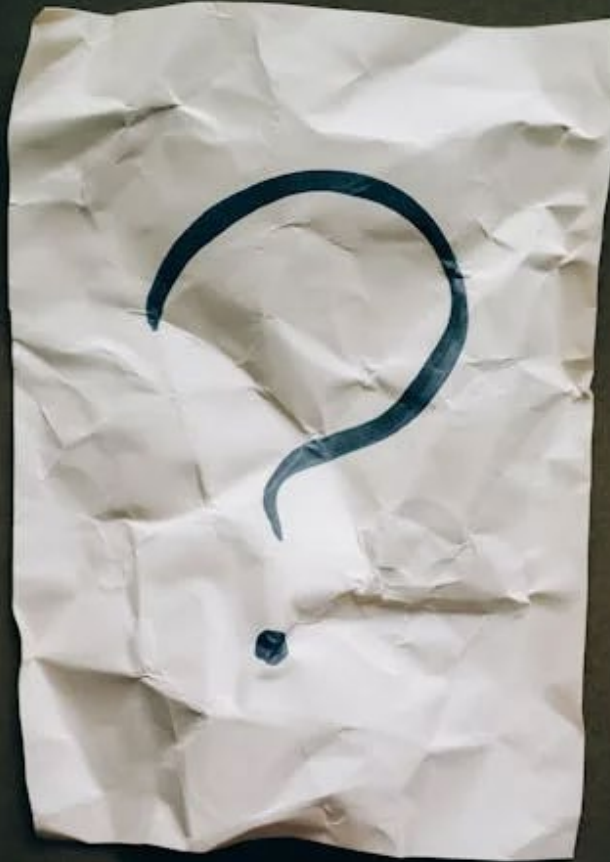


This is a practical question:

- How do I act—right now—if I don't know what is true and what is false and if I do not know whom to trust?



But what do I really KNOW?



- Could I be dreaming?
- Is my mom lying to me?
- Is my teacher sure she is right?
- Why should I trust this book?

Rene Descartes' Answer (abridged!)

- Start with this tenet of faith:

The God who created you and the world is a GOOD, BENEVOLENT, and NON-DECEPTIVE GOD. GOD is the GOD OF TRUTH and WANTS FOR YOU TO KNOW TRUTH and not be deceived or tricked.

* Then obey some rules of mind.

- Use reason and logic and math, rather than making assumptions.
- Keep your eyes open; Examine your own experiences.
- Don't let emotion get too involved.
- Check your work at least twice.

Descartes' World

- PROTESTANT REFORMATION

- Political wars

- Copernican Revolution

- “Discovery” of the New World

--no longer a monolithic church, and no longer consensus on politics or science!

Our World:

WHAT ARE WE NO LONGER IN CONSENSUS ABOUT TODAY?

Science?

Religion?

Culture?

Politics?

Do we have any **FACTS** we all hold in common?

Psalm 9 (NIV)

Wisdom

WISDOM HAS BUILT HER HOUSE . . .

She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine, She has also set her table

She has sent out her servants, and she calls from the highest point in the city

“Let all who are simple come to my house”

To those who have no sense she says

“Come eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways and you will live. Walk in the way of insight”

Folly

FOLLY is an unruly woman, she is simple and knows nothing

She sits at the door of her house on a seat at the highest point of the city calling out to those who pass by who go straight on their way.

“Let all who are simple come to my house!”

To those who have no sense she says

“Stolen Water is sweet. Food eaten in secret is delicious”

But little do they know that the dead are there; that her guests are deep in the realm of the dead.

Both Call Out from the highest point!

Wisdom

- Out in the open!
- For Everyone
- Leads to Life

Folly

- In Secret
- Leads to Death

Following Folly. . . Into a cult or conspiracy theory.

What makes a conspiracy theory tempting?

- --EVERYONE LOVES A SECRET
- --Makes you feel smart and special
- --Gives you a dopamine rush
“Dopamine makes you curious about ideas and fuels your search for information.”

(“Why we are all addicted to Texts, Twitter, and Google” *Psychology Today* 09-2012)

What makes a conspiracy theory hard to leave?

- --Because it is a secret and you are special you are encouraged not to talk to those who disagree with you.
- --You are increasingly isolated.
- --”The brain is hardwired to receive information that harmonizes with existing views and beliefs. . . To accept or reject, to misremember or distort information based on what affirms or threatens existing beliefs.” –Dr. Mark Whitmore. “Why We Believe Fake News” technologynetworks.com 8-13-2018

So is it better to just be skeptical?

Augustine said yes!

- Cults are dangerous!
- Believing lies makes you feel bad!
- No reason to ever give assent
- Being Openminded is the best we can do

Augustine said no!

- Without trust you can't live
- Job feels meaningless
- Loving relationship is impossible
- DESPAIR!!!!
- More susceptible to new conspiracy theories.



RADICAL DOUBT/ CONSPIRACY THEORIES

- 2 sides/One Coin
- WHICH SIDE DO YOU THINK YOU ARE MOST TEMPTED TOWARDS?

TO CURE DESPAIRING SKEPTICISM

- FAITH: God is the Truth, the Creator, the Teacher.

God promises those who seek will find.

APOLOGY for the FAITH:

Think of how much you do know! Think of all the math you can do! Think of the words you know! Think of how you can express yourself to others! Think of the animals you know about! Think of all you remember. Think of realizations you have had. You may not know everything. You may not know even a whole lot. But you know something. Do not despair—you are a homo sapiens—designed to learn.



BUT HOW DO I AVOID ERROR?

WAKE UP! GOD GAVE YOU EYES IN YOUR HEAD AND REASON IN YOUR HEART! Arouse your reason! Look out of the windows of your eyes and inspect God's creation. God made you a rational animal. Set your power of rational observation on its feet, use your eyes like a human being, look at the sky and earth!

- --Augustine Sermon 126

In other words:

USE YOUR SENSES! Do your own empirical research!

USE YOUR REASON to consider what makes sense.

Don't jump to conclusions, but don't ignore conclusions that are

EMPIRICALLY ADEQUATE

PARSIMONIOUS

Trust others—but also seek to verify.

TALK TO OTHER PEOPLE

- NO ONE can verify everything on one's own.
- Talk to your neighbors. Read! Discuss what you read!
- Yes, some people may be lying—so talk to lots and lots of people.
- Trust yourself to be able to see through lies, Trust the Spirit to help you as long as you keep seeking!

Things not to do:

- Shout “STOP TELLING LIES!” and shut your ears.

(UNLESS SOMEONE IS TELLING YOU THAT YOU ARE NOT WORTHY!)

- Shut down the conversation and only talk to those you agree with

(Unless you are in physical danger or are being abused!)

- Ignore your own reason and experience because someone else disagrees.

(Unless you are convinced you are not worthy and someone else is preaching the Gospel of love)

THINGS TO DO

- SPEAK OUT ABOUT WHAT YOU BELIVE IS
- *True, Necessary, and Kind
- LISTEN TO OTHERS WHO ARE SPEAKING AND USE REASON AND YOUR OWN RESEARCH TO DECIDE IF THEY ARE SAYING
- *True things, Necessary facts, Kind words.

You will make mistakes

- YOU WILL ALSO LEARN NEW THINGS.

made a
mistake.

Mistakes help
me learn.

Q & A ? !

Closing prayer

Jesus promised us that all who ask, will receive. Help us trust you, our divine teacher, is on our side. Help us not despair when we do not know the answer. Help us not hate when we hear an answer different than our opinion. Help us not back down when we are sure we have something important to contribute. Help us listen when another voice is speaking. Help us to discern what is true, what is needful, and what is kind and loving. Dear God, for this help we pray,

AMEN