

DISCERNMENT IN THE AGE OF INFORMATION

In the age of information, we have access to an unprecedented amount of information from virtually unlimited sources on radio, tv, the internet and in the press. We are lucky to have that access, of course, but along with that flood of information comes the necessity to figure out how to navigate it. It seems information is inseparable from spin these days; everyone is pushing their agenda, sometimes openly, but often not. As the receivers of information, like headlines, articles, anecdotes, advertising, even published research, we are responsible for *discerning* the truth.

For example, we've all been made aware of the click-bait headlines on the internet that sensationalize topics with the sole purpose of generating online revenue. Obviously, these items can't be considered reliable sources of information.

But competing versions of reality are vying for our attention and allegiance in just about every area of our lives, not just politics, but health, religion and culture, to name a few biggies.

So what is discernment, exactly, and how do we apply it? Well, it's defined as keen insight coupled with good judgment, and I think it needs to be in that order. Before we make a judgment call, we need to have applied sharp powers of observation. In this way we can bring critical thinking to our responses rather than a knee jerk reaction.

The Covid-19 outbreak offers a timely example. There are a lot of conflicting opinions about the same data sets, and thus perspectives vary widely. There are political and financial agendas at work. How do we know what's real? What is sensationalized? What is fake? What is manipulative? Or what is straight up disinformation?

Monitoring my own reactions is one important way I apply discernment. Am I reacting with fear? Do I have an habitual allegiance to some source or point of view for which I'm willing to suspend my critical thinking? Am I buying into the click-bait of sensationalism? Am I thinking with my emotions, rather than my reason?

If so, then I am not being discerning. Instead, I'm being reactive, and then jumping to conclusions. I would be better served by the measured approach of first observing keenly, then applying judgment. This will slow things down considerably, and that is a good thing. I am likely to be less rash, and less easily manipulated.

Yes, there is a lot of conflicting information out there, even disinformation. But armed with discernment, we have the tool we need to navigate the choppy waters. Even in the midst of a pandemic. Slow down, apply discernment, and clarity will be the outcome.