

February 2nd: Disinformation

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help For Heavy Times”. This is our new series, and over the next year we’ve been shifting into a different style of sermons and a different kind of topic. We’ve still been looking at passages from all parts of our Bible, but we’ve been doing it with a new intention, and that intention revolves around our desire to see this congregation continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

To that end, we will be continuing to discuss a wide range of topics related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. This month, we’ll be entering a mini series focused on social media and its effects on our souls, so whether you’re on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, or all of the above, we will have something for you to reflect on. And even if you’re not big on social media, we invite you to think about ways that you interact with others, or ways in which your perception of other people has been skewed—this too can have a deep impact on our souls and the souls of our neighbors.

So before we dig a little deeper, let’s take a deep breath together and pray.

God of Truth, we long for clarity in our world of distraction. We long for something solid to hold onto when the culture around us seems to constantly shift. We come to you in search of wisdom, and so as we enter into your presence, we ask for guidance about how to live our lives with faith and trust. Speak to us now, through these words of scripture and the meditations of our hearts, we pray. Amen.

Imagine with me for a second, that we’ve stepped back in time. The year is 1991, and a man named Tim Berners-Lee has just created the first web browser for the new World Wide Web that debuted in 1989. It’s a brand new technology, and it feels like the future of the Jetsons has arrived. Do you remember what it felt like to log onto the internet for the first time?

Let's time travel again, now to the year 2006, and the world wide web is now the place to be. It's where many people learn about what is happening across the globe—events both large and small, local and international. In this adolescent age of the internet, there is so much information at our disposal, so much connection that is possible. And in 2006, Time Magazine announced that the Person of the Year was...you. Yes, you. All of us. The subheading read: "You control the information age. Welcome to your world." It really did feel like the world was at our fingertips—didn't it? It really did feel like we were in control of the world's information, right? I think collectively, we imagined that the information age would be an explosion of knowledge, used for all kinds of social and cultural good, with very little drawbacks to such open and unrestricted communication. When you look at the internet now, is that we're we've ended up? I'm not so sure.

Now, in 2025, many sociologists and political scientists argue that we've entered a new era. And rather than being in an information age, they think we've begun a time when misinformation and disinformation are the norm in our digital spaces—both in traditional media and social platforms. A surplus of Information might be readily accessible to all of us, but the reality is that it is more difficult than ever to know what is right and legitimate.

Before we dig into how this might be affecting our souls, let's talk about the difference between misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation is simply inaccurate or wrong information—meaning that the facts have been messed up or shared incorrectly. At some point or another, we've all been misinformed—we've said something that isn't totally true or we've repeated a piece of information that we didn't confirm with a first hand source. That happens because we're human, and we can own up to those mistakes and take accountability for our actions, or at least we should. But disinformation is a very different situation—disinformation is deliberately false information that is intended to mislead or deceive, and it puts us in real danger. In our short time together, we don't have time to discuss all of the ways that disinformation can hurt us, but I'd like to touch on two—and if this topic resonates with you maybe we can come back to it at another point.

Let's take a look at the first way that this could harm us—our physical well being. When you scroll through your Facebook feed, or swipe through reels on Instagram, you'll find all kinds of people posing as experts—claiming to have the truth that you need to hear. And rarely is this “truth” the nuanced and scientific recommendations that we might have found in decades past. Lately, we've seen a rise in content like anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, unlicensed trainers showing dubious exercises in the gym, influencers pushing extreme diets and the elimination of certain ingredients or foods, and even creators who champion hazardous products like raw milk. We've seen incorrect messages about COVID-19, rejections of public health measures like masks and social distancing, and even unproven cancer treatments that promise to restore you back to health using the power of juice cleanses.

On some level, is this misinformation, it might be misapplied or misconstrued from actual data. But on another level, this is disinformation, designed to prey upon vulnerable people who might be struggling with certain health conditions or searching for solutions to their current symptoms. This kind of broad and generalized advice isn't tailored to our unique situations, and it slowly teaches us to distrust the real experts in our lives—doctors and nurses, scientists, registered dietitians, physical therapists, virologists, pharmacists, and more. And look, I get it. Our healthcare system is far from perfect. Many of us have gone through difficult circumstances with medical professionals—not being trusted, not being heard, not being helped—but that doesn't mean that turning to random opinions on social media or the internet is the right answer.

Here's another way that disinformation can wreak havoc on our lives—it can destroy our social connections that we rely upon for our emotional and mental health. Sure, social media started as a way to catch up with friends and family members, but as the internet has grown, it's been shaped by new technology that has changed how we engage with others online. At the dawn of Facebook, the news feed was chronological, meaning that you saw the posts in the order that they were shared, but in 2007, the platform introduced their first algorithm, designed to rank posts and content based upon what it decided was

most important to you. And since then, algorithms have determined basically everything you see online—from your Google search results, to your TikTok For You Page, to how often you see your cousin’s vacation pictures on Facebook. And the algorithms keep changing constantly—becoming better and better at showing you the things you’re most likely to interact with, which sounds good, right? In theory, yes, but in practice, I think we’ve seen that algorithms can pose a threat—and that is because these self-curated feeds reinforce our existing beliefs without exposing us to new ideas or more accurate information. And this isn’t fully our fault—it’s intentionally part of these platforms.

In his book, *Breaking the Social Media Prism: How to Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing*, author Chris Bail argues that these algorithms that are at the core of our digital experience are designed to separate us into echo chambers. Bail writes, “Social media should enable better competition of ideas, but what I discovered is that it actually creates a battle of identities.” And in this battle of identities, when we adopt more and more extreme views in our information silos, we begin to look at each other differently. We start to see each other with hostility and aggression, and our interactions revolve around distrust and arguments. In the end, we’re no longer neighbors, fellow citizens, friends, colleagues, or family, instead we become enemies—cut off from each other with little hope of reconciliation. Again, I get it, differences in opinions and values are real, and it makes sense to want to distance ourselves from people with whom we disagree.

But, my friends, this has big consequences, because this interpersonal animosity distracts us from the real enemies in our midst, and the real battles worth fighting. When we see each other as enemies, we don’t have the time or energy to stand up against ongoing issues like poverty, homelessness, addiction, racial injustice, political corruption, genocide, and climate change. We won’t be able to work together to fix any of those situations if all we’re able or willing to do is verbally abuse each other from behind a computer screen. We won’t reach any solutions if we stay focused on winning social media arguments.

So our question for today is this: how do we know who to trust? How do we know what is fact and what is fiction when we're engaging online?

Well, I think our text for today might be able to help us, and I think we might be surprised to find that our spiritual ancestors also struggled with the same questions.

Our passage for this morning also takes us into the past, this time two thousand years before Google became a verb. It's the first century CE, and communities of new Christians around the Mediterranean are just figuring out how to carry out their mission as disciples of Jesus. It's an exhilarating time, but also a confusing time, because there is so much that they don't know. These new believers don't have a set of Gospels to read, they don't have a church hierarchy with Bishops or Popes to listen to, and they don't have a standardized creed or set of beliefs to follow. All they have is Jesus—and the people who were closest to him during his ministry. And this puts them in a tricky situation, because without any kind of structure or formal leadership, there is ongoing conflict and division that is emerging in these local congregations.

The Apostle Paul, one of the missionaries who is spreading the good news of Jesus and traveling between these churches, writes letters to his new friends in the cities that he visited. And here, he is writing to the church in the city of Corinth in Greece—a group of believers who are struggling with this lack of information that we talked about, and so Paul tries to offer some necessary wisdom. Starting in verse 11, Paul writes, My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

Paul is hearing that within the Corinthian church, there are these factions developing in the community—with each faction dedicated to a specific leader or person. Paul himself has a following, as does Peter, one of the original twelve disciples, and so does a man named Apollos. Each faction clearly sees

their leader as the most authoritative, so there are disagreements about whose leadership is the most accurate reflection of Jesus's beliefs and practices.

Now, I'm not saying that these early leaders are engaging in misinformation or disinformation, but they were very clearly not on the same page. They might be saying slightly different things, or have different aspects of Jesus' ministry that they are emphasizing, or be leading their faction in a specific style of ritual that they think is most appropriate. They are actively disagreeing about things like circumcision, and food purity laws, and the participation of non-Jews in these Christian gatherings. Paul seems to be aware that these factions are creating larger issues within the congregation, causing disruption and disharmony to ripple through these important relationships.

So what does Paul do? He reminds these new Christians of what's truly important. He says, "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized in my name." Basically, he points them back to Jesus, the one person whose words and actions are to be considered above all else. Only Jesus baptized in his name. Only Jesus was crucified. Only Jesus was resurrected. Jesus came to bring hope and reconciliation to the world, not to lead a movement for his own power and ego. Jesus came to speak the truth of love and forgiveness, not to condemn those he disagreed with. Jesus came to serve, not to be served as a king.

Perhaps this can be a guide for us as we develop our own spirituality and media literacy during these polarizing times, both to protect our own wellbeing, and to protect the important work that is ours to do as people of faith.

When we encounter information on social media, it might be good for us to ask questions like these:

Where am I getting most of my information—is it from people and accounts that are as unbiased as possible?

If I'm sure about a source or piece of information, where can I look to verify it?

Where might I find nuance and dissenting opinions?

If bias exists, is there a hidden agenda behind the information?

If someone is claiming to be an expert, are they speaking in the context of their credentials, or are they offering advice that is outside the scope of their practice?

Is someone using their platform for their own gain or using my engagement to further their own power and influence?

If something has “gone viral,” why do you think that is?

Is this information playing into a divisive narrative or a sensationalist issue?

Even if I believe I am right about a particular topic or issue, how can I engage others with kindness and dignity?

How can I demonstrate God's love to others even when we disagree, so that we can find common ground?

Are these interactions distracting me from serving people and my community in the way that I am gifted and called?

My friends, social media is now part of our daily routine, it's not going away. Platforms might change, and trends might shift, but this is now a big part of our lives, and so it has to be part of our discipleship. If we want to be followers of Jesus, or just spiritually curious people in general, we need to be thinking critically about misinformation and disinformation. We need to be thinking about how we engage online and in person, because the wellbeing of our bodies and souls are at risk. We need to be thinking about our echo chambers, because we are not enemies, we are all beloveds of God.

Our world needs healing and truth more than ever, so let it begin with us today. Amen.