At the end of the day, Truth is (4/20/13)

Amid the euphoria of a city rescued from police siege, and in stark contrast to the fundamentally human neighborliness that appears in a crisis situation when citizens band together for the common good, we read this comment from a relative of the alleged Boston marathon bombers:

“He was a great person,” the woman said of her dead brother. “I thought I knew him. I never would have expected that from him. He is a kind and loving man. The cops took his life away just the same way he took others’ lives away, if that’s even true. At the end of the day, no one knows the truth.”

Really? A great person – whose terroristic acts instigated a manhunt that shut down a major city and captivated the world’s attention? A kind man – who shamelessly killed four people, including a young boy, and wounded hundreds of others and then tried simply to walk away? A loving man – who spent the final hours of his freedom alone in a boat and cowering under a tarp for fear of being found? Have our standards of greatness, kindness, and love really sunk so low?

Anyone with even minimal faculties of reasoning would likely not agree. But there’s the real rub. Notwithstanding the adage that “blood is thicker than water” – which might obviate a sister’s expectations about her brothers – the claim that “no one knows the truth” bears further reflection as a symptom of the failure of education.

Without dismissing the real tragedy in Boston (and elsewhere) whenever innocent blood is shed, the loss of truth also portends a tragedy, this time on a cultural level. As long as nihilism – the belief that we cannot really know anything for sure – characterizes our daily existence, we will continue to think only for ourselves. But the more certainty is in vain, the less meaning and purpose we will find in our lives, individually and collectively. Seinfeld – a still popular television series that exalted “nothing” – may be funny, but its underlying principle can be downright dangerous.

That danger comes from denying something fundamental about human nature. As Blessed John Paul II once wrote:

It is the nature of the human being to seek the truth. This search looks not only to the attainment of truths which are partial, empirical or scientific; nor is it only in individual acts of decision-making that people seek the true good. Their search looks towards an ulterior truth which would explain the meaning of life. And it is therefore a search which can reach its end only in reaching the absolute. Thanks to the inherent capacities of thought, man is able to encounter and recognize a truth of this kind. Such a truth—vital and necessary as it is for life—is attained not only by way of reason but also through trusting acquiescence to other persons who can guarantee the authenticity and certainty of the truth itself. There is no doubt that the
capacity to entrust oneself and one’s life to another person and the decision to do so are among the most significant and expressive human acts. ([*Fides et Ratio*, #33])

In other words, if it is the nature of the human being to seek the truth, then the only way we can live without fear or anxiety is to know. But if we cannot know anything for sure, we will never be able to live life to its fullest. Ultimate questions about meaning and purpose require an ultimate answer, and ultimate answers are necessarily unchanging (eternal).

The nature of human beings as seekers of truth leads then to a consideration of “God” in our lives. But even without the theological end-point of this journey, reality demands truth. Otherwise, we live in a world of fantasy; at the end of the day, the claim that there is no truth and/or that it cannot be known is nothing more than a grand delusion.

In Boston, university students, and the city as a whole, will now resume their daily activities, no doubt still affected by the events of the past week. Many of those students, like others, will soon be graduated from institutions of “higher” education. But will they enter the world knowing any truth? Will they be able to distinguish what greatness and kindness and love really are? If they do not, as some evidently don’t, the failure is ours as educators … and that will be a cultural tragedy beyond arrest.

More hopeful is the vitally necessary lesson to be learned from the vast majority of people in Boston: that the love of neighbor evident in times of tragedy can make the world a better place were it to become a daily routine of entrusting ourselves to those who can provide truth in pursuit of a common good.

*REV. THOMAS F. DAILEY, O.S.F.S., S.T.D.*
*Director*

“Believing means entrusting oneself in full freedom and joyfully to God’s providential plan for history … Faith, then, is an assent with which our mind and our heart say their ‘yes’ to God, confessing that Jesus is Lord. And this ‘yes’ transforms life, unfolds the path toward fullness of meaning, thereby making it new, rich in joy and trustworthy hope.”

(Pope Benedict XVI, 10/24/12)

**BOLD BELIEF** is a daily blog from the faculty at DeSales University, whose mission as an institution of higher education in the tradition of Salesian Spirituality is to foster vital dialogue between Roman Catholic faith and human culture.