

Sunday, January 24, 2016

Nehemiah 9:1-6, 8-10

Luke 4:14-21

Brain Stretching

Let's stretch our brains a little bit this morning! There are two mothers and two daughters fishing. At the end of their day of fishing they have caught 3 fish and all present have caught one. Explain. (3 generations of women- grandmother, mother and child)

Another one. A plane is full of people and crashes out west on the US = Canada border. Where do they bury the survivors? (Not dead-no burial)

Last one: Mr. Smith works at a butcher shop. He's 6'2" tall and wears size 14 shoes. What does he weigh? (Meat)

In each of these stories we have to really listen and hear the words which are spoken so that we might understand the problem, the question and then make a response. They are called brain teasers because they cause us to think quickly and then respond. Yet often our first response is what? Say that again- or you might get it right away and feel good about yourself for having solved the problem successfully.

Through much research into brain functions and changes in a lifetime, it is now known that as we age the ability to respond to such problems or questions slows down. So it is important to stretch our brains on a regular basis by doing riddles, crossword puzzles and games. Maybe this is why television shows like Wheel of Fortune and Jeopardy are so popular- they are a prescription to follow ordered by doctors around the world! And the largest fan base is seniors. Just like we stretch our muscles of every part of our bodies we need to stretch our brains and be alert to what is around us and even to hear what God is calling us to hear and to do.

Our story from Nehemiah 8 is a story of faith testing and endurance of the Israelites. In this story the Israelites had settled in their towns with Nehemiah as their governor. On the first day of the 7th month they all gathered together near the gate. Ezra the priest brought the Law of the Lord before the assembly made up of men and women and those old enough to understand. Ezra then prepared to read it aloud by facing the people. He was standing on top of a platform built for the occasion and those on the platform with him were the different leaders of the Israelites. When Ezra opened the book all the people stood up. He read from daybreak till noon and the people listened. Then Ezra praised the Lord and people shouted Amen. They bowed down and worshiped God with their faces to the ground. Then the Levites moved amongst the people and made clear what had been read so that they all understood.

After a long while Nehemiah, Ezra, the Levites then spoke again to the crowd. This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep. Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and share. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve. For the joy of the Lord is your strength.

It was a special day for this group of believers. They listened to the Book of the law, understood it and celebrated in food and drink and with joy.

How often do you celebrate learning something new or something made clear to you?

Just imagine someone was explaining to you the complexities of the orbiting moon, or algebra or even verb translations in another language and what the differences are. The person sharing the idea is talking at a reasonable rate and you have given them your full attention. You ask clarifying questions, you get an explanation and then you test your understanding with an example. Then there is a moment when the explanation reaches your brain as it stretches and receives new information which is understood. You fully understand and you smile—because the AHA moment has arrived and you are great with the new idea. What was not understood before is clear. Your brain has received it and you now can move on to complex information. But what if you didn't get it? A further explanation would be needed and the process would repeat until you can say AHA! Or I get it.

This is the season of Epiphany when we hear the stories of how Jesus was revealed as God's Son—when he was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist it was God's voice which spoke and said this is my beloved Son. At the wedding where he was a guest, it was his mother, Mary, who told Jesus to do something because they had run out of wine. He turned water to wine but only the servants and Mary knew how this had happened. And then we get to this story of Ezra reading God's words for about 6 hours. And with Jesus, he goes back to Nazareth his home town and went to his home synagogue as this was what he did regularly on the Sabbath. The worship time was different as a lot of time was spent in prayer, reading the scriptures (Old Testament) and people would share in what they thought the text meant. Jesus decided he was going to read at the synagogue on this particular day and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. He unrolled it and he found the place where it is written (ch.61) The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind to release the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

He read well and no doubt some of the people in the synagogue who were listening were so glad to see Jesus home for the weekend and spending time with his mother and siblings. Some of the people would remember Jesus as a good student in the scriptures and was so well behaved. Some might wonder what he will say that about the prophet Isaiah and how this helps him. It is always good to see Jesus.

Jesus then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He had chosen to read chapter 61 not 1. The crowd was quiet and attentive. He then spoke, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

The people are silenced. They say nothing. They then say, "How well he read that passage and how gracious he read these words. This is Joseph's son. Then the words of Jesus connects to their brains and an AHA moment occurs. A question for clarification. What did he say? What did he mean? And again but how dare he say this?

What occurs next is simply horrible. Jesus speaks and tells them that no one would believe him to be anyone or anything but a son of a carpenter. Yet why not? Because they could not believe it. Their capacity to go beyond what is safe and normal has been reached. How could Jesus be the anointed one to save his people? How come they were never told before? How dare he tease us and blaspheme against God?

If we continue the story we learn that the people in the synagogue become furious. They get up from their places and literally escort him out of Nazareth by to a hill in order to have him fall off a cliff and kill him. Yet Jesus walked through the crowd unharmed and continued on his way.

The people in the synagogue thought it was just going to be an ordinary day at the gathering place. It was great the Jesus was home. Mary told them that he had gone away for a while- to find himself in the wilderness or for further training in wood techniques. Now he was back. And here he was going to read from the prophet. How nice. But how could Jesus say what he did? This scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

What did he mean? Let us explore this a moment. Why did Jesus pick this particular passage from Isaiah? Why not another one like ch 9 about the people walking in darkness and about the child who was born and will be called Wonderful Counsellor...Mighty God Prince of peace.” Why not talk about John the Baptist as the one who was in the desert preparing the people for His coming? (ch. 40) Or even how the servant will suffer? (ch 52-53). No Jesus picks the one passage that they could relate to in that moment and this passage outlines Jesus purpose in coming to earth, and how God will fulfil his plan through Jesus. Jesus purpose was clearly written by Isaiah and he understood. Now as he began his ministry with the people, they just did not understand. They were not willing to hear, learn and respond to Jesus words in that moment in the synagogue. They did not know what to say or do but acted primarily out of fear- They were frightened that what was a certainty in their life—someday a person would save them; they weren’t prepared for the day to happen. They were afraid- how come they weren’t in on the plan. Had they known Jesus was the messiah would they have behaved differently around him while he was growing up? Would Jesus have lived a ‘normal’ life?

They needed to stretch their brains a bit about all this. They needed to sit and think and wonder. Jesus was a different child. He was born in Bethlehem; Mary had told them that. But what else did they really know about Jesus? He was getting old and a good match—he had a respected skill but another sibling did take over the shop when he was away for 40 days for his wilderness experience. Could he be the messiah?

But they did not stretch their minds around this. They reacted out of fear, out of anger’- how dare he? He was such a good boy. And now they were prepared to kill him. On the Sabbath even!

Who is this Jesus?

Often in our workplaces or in school there are many instructions shared that need clarification or explanation in order to complete a task. Sometimes the task is really easy but it is the precise process which has to be followed or the special equipment which needs to be used. Yet when all is made clear—the task may be done fully and properly.

God’s promise to the people was off to a rocky start already. How was Jesus going to cope? The people in his home town would not and could not believe him to be the Son of God, the one anointed by the Spirit of God. But just why couldn’t he be? Fear, anxiety, anger—why were they so angry? Because they had to absorb the statement of the prophet becoming real right in front of them. Jesus was a boy they knew who grew up in their midst. He could not be the anointed one of God could he? Really?

Until an explanation with further revelations and teachings are completed by Jesus, the people in Nazareth do not and cannot understand Jesus’ purpose. And this is still the same today. There are

many people who cannot fathom God sending a baby into the world to experience the hurt and hate of others in order to bring about salvation for all. It just does not make sense. Yet there is so much in our world yet to be discovered, understood, why not? We just cannot make sense and fully understand everything in our world. There are so many riddles and questions yet to be answered. Why can't we believe this baby, grown up to be a teacher came to change the world?

Maybe we need to do more brain stretching and study God and his word so that we can know and understand and fit into the story of Jesus revealing himself not only to his home town, but to each of us. Maybe we need to do more brain stretching so that God will enable us to say Aha- I understand but my next question is... this is brain stretching as we learn and love and reach out to Jesus for he is the one who came to preach the good news, proclaim freedom and recovery and release the oppressed. This too needs prayer for understanding.

Let us pray

God you sent Jesus to teach us, love us and die for us. Reveal him to us again as we seek to understand heart and mind what it means to know him. Hear us O God as we share with you our thoughts in this moment and cause us to stretch our thinking about Jesus in our lives. Amen.