

Nehemiah 8:1-3

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

Luke 4:14

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

“I Have A Bright Idea”

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Sometimes it's good to put a text in a context. Actually, never is it not good. But what you have in Luke's Gospel is sort of interesting, when you look at it, because you've got Jesus and his birth, baptism, and so on, and then he's in the wilderness, and then the next thing you see, preachers kind of see this, the next thing is, he's preaching in his home church and they get angry with him, because of a sermon, and they try to kill him. And then there's this section that's in between the wilderness and the preaching where they try to kill him, where he teaches in the synagogue, proving once and for all what we preachers have always known. It's easier to be a teacher than a preacher. Many of you are teachers. You've got it easy.

There's this text, different from most. It says something important, understated, yes, and subtle. Jesus taught in the synagogue and everyone praised him. He opened his ministry teaching, and people not only listened, they liked it. They liked what they heard, and I think we know what he taught. We understand why he was praised. He taught them to think. He taught them the power of reason. If he'd been a French philosopher like Descartes, he would have said to them, "You think, therefore you are." If he'd been a United Methodist (you know, I think some people think he was) he would have said to them, "Reason is a resource of faith." He would have said, "Don't you know, it's part of the quadrilateral. By reason, we determine whether our witness is clear, by reason we ask questions of faith and seek to understand God's will, and by reason we read and interpret Scripture."

If he taught in our church school, like the teacher who told the story of Lot's wife, and how she looked back and turned into a pillar of salt, and one of the students responded, "My mother looked back while she was driving and turned into a telephone pole." If he had told the story of the Good Samaritan, and if he had said to the children in our Sunday School, "If you saw a person lying on the side of the road, wounded, and bleeding, what would you do?" and if in the hushed silence one of our children would have said, "I think I'd throw up," Jesus would have laughed, because it is as little children that we're part of

the Kingdom of God. And then I think he would have said, "But never forget, love the Lord your God with all you mind as well as your heart and soul." Thinking is close to praying, when it comes to faith. Reason is part of God's revelation, when it comes to religion. We think, therefore we are.

This morning, we think about how we think. This morning, reason and religion and the importance it has for us. Basically, question authority. Never let someone tell you what to think. Doubt the established truth, because if it's true, it can withstand our suspicion of it. A new idea may be the right idea, but it will never be a bright idea if we think it and let it languish in the dormant slumber. We've got to say it if we think it. Reason is a gift from God. We don't check our brains at the door of the synagogue or the temple or the chapel. Jesus taught in the synagogue, and everyone praised him. Reason is a gift from God.

What prevents us from using it proudly? Lots of it's personal, first of all. Lots of it's personal. I think therefore I am, and if I don't imagine that I'm much, then I will lose confidence in my thought. It's personal. It's Willie Loman. Arthur Miller's play, *Death of a Salesman*. He was a little tugboat in a big harbor. He always felt a little temporary about himself. Robert Frost once said, "Something we were withholding made us weak, until we found it was ourselves." We do not withhold our thoughts, no matter how trivial they may seem, no matter how inconsequential they may sound, no matter how much we would rather put our light under a basket, put our thoughts under cover.

Emily Dickinson, one of the most brilliant people our nation has produced, in the opinion of many, I included, didn't think she had anything to say, so she never put herself forward, and if it hadn't been for the pastor of her church, her words would never have been read. How many Emily Dickinsons are there in this town... in this church? It's a matter of confidence. Part of our problem with the way we think goes back to the way we feel about ourselves. Someone asked, "What's the best way to get to Atlanta?" and the answer says a great deal about the person giving the answer. "No matter which way you take, you'll wish you had taken the other." I really love the signs on the bulletin board at Christ United Methodist Church in this town. I often go out of my way to see them, to read them. There's one this week that says, "It wasn't raining when Noah built the ark." He thought about the flood before it came. In a similar train of thought, I like to remember that Saul's soldiers thought Goliath was too big to fight, but David thought the giant was too big a target to miss. And a good architect can improve the looks of an old house by discussing the cost of the new one. Think about it.

I went to see a member of the church last week. She'd just lost her husband, but she hasn't given up on life. She's still thinking. She handed me this little piece of wood. On one end of the piece of wood is a gavel, it looks like a gavel. On the other end of the piece of wood is a quarter that's been glued to the board. She told me she made it. She asked me if I knew what it was. I didn't. A piece of wood, gavel on one end, twenty-five cent piece glued to the other. Know what it is? It's a quarter-pounder without cheese. A quarter-pounder without cheese. She's gonna be fine, because she's thinking. She'll be at the 10:45 service. I can hardly wait to tell this story and watch her. She'll be sitting right over there, behind the Andersons.

Every problem is an opportunity - take it. Every crisis is prelude to resolution. Every conflict is part of the power of the creative force. No need to be timid, no need to be afraid. If it's a cross, we carry it. If it's a burden, we bear it. If it's a hard time, we tell ourselves it will get better, and if it doesn't get better, what doesn't get better makes us stronger inside. Defeat, never. Despair, no way.

Barbara Johnson was thinking about her life as she was preparing to undergo minor surgery. The doctor said the anesthesia would leave her a little goofy, even a couple of hours after the surgery had finished, and she thought to herself, "I wonder if the people who know me, who already think I'm goofy, will notice." Goofy or not, here we come. Goofy or not, here we think. Mike Mason was right with his book, *Practicing the Presence of People*, when he said "None of us can be perfect, but every one of us can be free." We can be free to reason, we can be free to think. Sometimes, the only way we can find ourselves again is to begin to think and then to realize our thoughts are good. It's personal. Sometimes it's the lack of confidence that blocks. God gave us minds. We must use them.

Secondly, what keeps us from reason, sometimes, is other people. Other people put us down. They don't often, sometimes don't even know they're doing it. I bet Jesus taught those people in Galilee, when everybody praised him, that we don't need to listen to other people putting us down. Sue Monk Kidd felt this way about her church. She said it was run by men. What kind of church is that? Run by men. And women were told to keep silent. I tell you, it wasn't a Methodist church. But anyway... And she writes this in *Dance of the Dissident Daughter*. "I began to reflect on the ways I had withheld my opinion, muzzled disconcerting thoughts, refrained from expressing my true feelings, squelched my riskier ideas, and when I did that I was living out the script of a silent woman." People put us down. God gave us reason. We let people tell us our ideas are not good, and we can't. Joel Barker in his book *Future Edge*, tells about Chester Carlson. Chester had an idea. It was 1940. He walked in to a photography lab at a major corporation with an invention for a new type of photography. It was a read box and it was a shiny steel plate, and it was a charging device and a light bulb and a separate container with some kind of black powder, and people laughed at him. They rejected his idea. They put him down. "We couldn't possibly be interested in this," they said. "It's not even photography. There's no film. There's no developer fluid. There's no darkroom." And he was turned away and he was rejected. But Chester Carlson knew a good idea is a good idea, no matter what people think. He invented a new process. Finally, someone listened, someone saw value in his red box with the black powder. It's called Xerox.

Friday we had a bunch of people out in the parking lot, getting ready to go on the ski trip. It was interesting. I was out there listening to the parents giving advice to the children, some of you are here. "Now, be sure and wear your helmet, because it's no good to you if you just put it on the back of your head." Someone said, "When you're skiing, go down the middle of the slope, not over near the trees, because if you hit a tree, you lose." One of the girls said to me something very strange. She said, "Have you ever been in a place where people didn't like you?" I didn't know if she knew about my last pastoral

appointment, where I followed somebody who had been there 34 years and some thought I'd made too many changes too soon. Or maybe she knew about the one before that, where there were a thousand members, and the previous church, the one I was in had only three hundred, and I was interviewing with the committee and somebody said, "Well, the church you're in only has three hundred and we've got a thousand members, how are you going to know how to manage a thousand members when all you know how to do is three hundred?" And I said, "We'll just run off seven hundred of them, get it down to what I can handle." Which was pretty much what we did.

I said, "Yeah, it's hard when people don't like you, but you can't let them put you down, you've got to dig into your own confidence in your own thought." That discussion began to draw a crowd, and here they are ready to go skiing and all of a sudden four or five of them are around talking about that. Because you know you're teenagers and you're real fragile when it comes to people putting you down. One of them said, "You've just got to think is through and reason it out. It's their problem, not yours." When other people put down our ideas, when they laugh at us, we just can't give up. We just can't give in. We don't let people tell us who they think we are.

I love the story of the five-year-old noticing her father, who was a preacher. Before he would begin his sermon, he would bow his head and close his eyes and she said to him one day, "Daddy, why do you do that? Why do you bow your head and close you eyes before you give your sermon every Sunday? I notice you do that." He was pleased that she noticed, and he said, "Well, honey, I'm asking the Lord to help me preach a good sermon." And she said to him, "How come he never answers that?" Tell you what, you preach it anyway. You do the best you can. We just finished looking over the questionnaires with the congregation over two hundred people I think there's one in the bulletin today. Fill it out, tell us what you think. Most of comments are kind, and many are extravagantly praising, but there are a few that are not so pleased. And I tell you, if our preachers read those and that's all we thought, we'd have to pack up our commentaries. But you know you can't let other people put you down. If they don't like your thoughts, you can't stop thinking. If we allow the critics to convince us that it's all been said and done, nothing new will be said and precious little will be done. God gave us reason. Jesus encouraged us to think. We think, therefore we are. Our thoughts are precious.

Third thing, that keeps us from using our minds and reason. Sometimes it's personal, self-confidence, and sometimes it's people, other people, severe criticism. And sometimes it's providence. Things beyond our control, is what I mean. The cartoon says it all. The woman in the doctor's office, she's explaining to the doctor, "I have these metal fillings in my teeth and my refrigerator magnets keep pulling me into the kitchen, that's why I can't lose weight." That's beyond our control. I have a book, it's called *Worst Case Scenario*. It tries to prepare us for various things, like getting bitten by a tarantula, things like that. A camel running out of control and you're on it, things like that. And it reminds me of the book of Nihemiah, it reminds me of Ezra standing at the water gate, reading the law, because I think the Torah is Israel's worst-case scenario, and what to do when the worst happens.

A man and woman in a restaurant, sitting at the end of a long counter. He looks down the length of the counter. He says to her, "Look at those old people at the other end of the counter. That's pathetic. But you know, Honey, ten years from now, that's what we're going to look like." And she said to him, "Do you realize what you're looking at? At the other end of that counter, there's a mirror. You're looking at us." Providence, fate, the inevitable. Things over which we have no control, like age. It can shut us down if we let it.

Marsha was on the transplant list for a liver, and had been for years. She was twenty-two at the time. She got the call. She went to the hospital late at night. The surgery was to begin at midnight. She was there, she was ready. At 12:10 it was cancelled, because the liver they had was too big, and they sent her home. And so I called her the next day, I expected to find her discouraged, but I found something else. Her thoughts had taken over her emotions. Her mind had spoken to her soul, and she was positive. She was upbeat, she was grateful. She was grateful for her family, for her friends and all the support she had gotten from her church. She was grateful for her faith, and she thought it thorough. She said, "No, I haven't been given the transplanted liver I had hoped for, but you know, someone else did. Someone who was more ill than I. A life was saved last night."

God gave us minds with which to think and reason, to put what is out of our control in perspective. Charlie Brown, speaking to Linus, "There's a class I saw on the list. I want to take it." "What's the name of the class," Linus said. "The name of the class - and I've got to take it - the name of the class, it's called Remedial Living." We all need a class sometimes on remedial living, to help us find ourselves when things are out of control. Maybe that's what the child understood. Maybe it really wasn't a mistake when he stepped up to the microphone, having proudly memorized the 23rd Psalm, where it says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," and he said, "The Lord is my shepherd, that's all I need to know." Isn't that what Mitch Albom meant in his book, *Have a Little Faith*, when he said, and he writes, "There's profound comfort in believing in something bigger than ourselves"? It's remedial living, it's looking for the blessing. It's always thinking. It's belief in reason when there isn't a lot that looks reasonable. It's trusting the foundation of the universe. God gave us a mind to think. We love the Lord with all of our mind. Jesus taught in the synagogue, he taught them to trust their reason. He taught them to use their minds. Paul the Apostle would later write, "We are troubled on every side, but not distressed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are persecuted, but not destroyed." When we lose control, we have our reason, we have our thoughts. They're our gift from God. Personal self-doubt can be overcome. People putting us down can be overlooked. Providential things beyond our control often are over soon. But we must not give up reason. We worship God with all our mind, as well as our hearts and soul. It's what Jesus taught. It's what John Wesley thought. It's what we know. We think, and if we think, we are, and always will be.