

Lent 4, Year B, 2012 by Lori Mills-Curran

As many of you know, the diocese is sponsoring a new training resource for parishes called the Leadership Development Initiative. We have taken a parish team to it once, and have now fielded a second team. The Episcopal Church is filled with uncertainty these days. The LDI is designed to help parishes achieve helpful change in the face of uncertainty. The LDI makes you think a lot about how and why you do things, and whether you could do them better. It's *wonderful*.

Page |  
1

A recent resource has come my way via a member of our current LDI team. It has really intrigued me. It's an article about how our brains work. The person who wrote the article is a neuroscientist, someone who studies how brains function. The information in the article is relevant for the LDI, and it's relevant for today's scripture.

The scientist writes that they now have good research to show how fear affects creativity. This scientist summarizes some recent research that shows we still have, despite the complexity of the human brain, a lot of old brain functioning left that is similar to any animal trying to survive. Our brain still actually processes information about threat much faster than it processes other kinds of positive information.

The article also says that stimulating a brain to feel threat is much easier than stimulating a brain to feel safe. Threat is apparently the default setting for our brains. The writer uses the term "hyper-vigilance of the amygdala," a primitive part of the brain. Our brains are on red-alert for threat all the time, in order to avoid it.

He then talks about how, when you feel threat, you literally can't think straight. We have all had the experience of standing tongue-tied in front of a frowning boss, struggling to find words to explain something. But we may not be aware of how deeply our default setting of avoiding threat affects our creativity.

The scientist recounts the story of how some people were given the task of solving a puzzle, just a simple paper maze with some pictures on it. In the middle was a picture of a mouse. But there were two different kinds of pictures at the edges of the maze. Some people were given a maze with a mouse in the middle and a cheese on the edge. Other people were given a picture of a maze with a mouse in the middle and an owl on the edge.

Now get this. The subjects of the experiment were told to solve the maze. Some had to steer the mouse towards the owl, and some had to steer the mouse towards the cheese. Afterwards, these people were given a series of problems to solve which required creativity.

The people who had a mouse and an owl had much more problem-solving trouble. They didn't have easy "aha" moments during their problem-solving session. Something in the brains of the people who had to steer the mouse to the owl was different. Their creativity was compromised.

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It's thought-provoking, isn't it? We know that we all are affected by failure to have certainty and safety. This brain research seems to indicate we might be *hard-wired* for it. After they had had an experience of even this kind of minor threat, people seemed compelled to err on the safe side, take fewer creative chances.

John 3:16 is one of those verses that Christians believe give them certainty and safety. We have trumpeted it all over the world: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." This verse promises us a safety beyond our wildest dreams: *we will not die*. So we put this verse on baseball caps and billboards and tattoos and signs that people hold up to the ESPN camera in stadiums. We write songs about it. It's code for the Christian message: we can give you your heart's desire.

No wonder Christians love this verse. It speaks to our deepest needs, calms and consoles us, and is a deep-seated source of our joy. Accepting Christ, believing in him, fills an empty place in our hearts. Accepting Christ, with all the joy that it brings, releases an "ocean depth of happy rest." And creativity? Who here hasn't done their best and most productive and most creative work when their heart has been singing, because they have found "a calling" by God, "the kind of work," as Frederick Buechner puts it, "that you need most to do and the world most needs to have done."

Too bad, isn't it, that John 3:16 has become a weapon to wield against unbelievers; a statement equivalent of "my way or the highway." It was never meant to be a weapon. It was meant to be another invitation, from God to man, to open your eyes to the truth. Jesus's words here are addressed to Nicodemus, a Jewish scholar, who has come to him in the night to verify the truth; he begins his conversation with the words, "We know you are from God."

Jesus does not say to Nicodemus, "Oh yeah, you won't get this because you are an unbelieving Jew." He says to him, "I can't believe you are a teacher of Israel and don't get this!" Jesus says that Nicodemus must believe in Jesus because Jesus will help him live in the truth that his tradition already values, the truth Nicodemus has already been taught to love. Jesus even gives an example from their joint heritage: he draws Nicodemus's attention to the truth that Moses told, when Moses held up the serpent on the pole, demanding that the Jews in the wilderness acknowledge God's power to feed and heal.

Thus Jesus says in John 3:16, "I am the *same light* that has been trying since the beginning of time to enable you to see who you really are." Jesus does not condemn unbelievers because they don't believe in him per se. He points out the obvious; that they condemn themselves when they prefer to live in world of lies. *That* is the world the scripture refers to as "darkness," the world in which evil does not come to the light and can't be exposed. The condemned are *people who prefer it like that*.

I doubt Christ worries about *why* we prefer evil sometimes. He knows we have reasons why we do it, why we are cruel and snappish and greedy and gossipy and controlling. He knows we are not God, not perfectible, and can only do so much as we try to be the best little people in the world. I bet he knows about our hypervigilant amygdalas, screaming 24/7: "Danger! Danger, Will Robinson!" I bet he knows we lash out before we can even stop ourselves, reading threat into every uncertainty. Page | 3

But God has "created [us], as Ephesians says today, "in Christ for good works, which [he] prepared beforehand for our way of life." He *wants* us to choose truth. So assent to Christ does not entail assent to every jot and tittle of the fallible historical record we have available to us, to recount the story of this amazing man among us. That kind of assent is simple: you check your intellect at the door and ease on down the road your amygdala is demanding. Put John 3:16 on your sign and head out to the ball game.

Genuine assent to Christ is much, much harder. It is assent to the demand that your amygdala no longer be in charge. It is assent to living in the truth, about yourself and others, as best you can. It is assent to allowing God to put tape over your mouthful of excuses so he can put his arm around your shoulder. It is assent to the hard work of developing an awareness of the needs of others, by letting the threat alarms cycle off. It is assent to living in honest community, not because you can't find God in the forest, but because trees can't tell you the truth about yourself, when you go off track, as articulately as people can.

It is assent to the proposition that life in Christ is not just about comfort, it's also about challenge.

The glory of God is the flourishing of the human being, St. Thomas Aquinas says. God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that we might not perish. Perish at all in the hereafter. Or perish from fear, in the here and now.

The LDI has it right. Uncertainty and fear stifle creativity.

In the life of a parish, and in our own hearts.