

MORE THAN ENOUGH

SHERARD EDINGTON

Mark 10:32-41

The human brain is a complex organism—so complex that we are nowhere close to understanding it. In the 1970s, one scientist—an American physician and neuroscientist named Paul MacLean—put forth a theory to describe the evolution of brains of humans and other vertebrate mammals. MacLean proposed that the brain consists of three independent consciousnesses that were added one at a time over the course of evolution. He identified these parts as the reptilian brain, the limbic system, and the neocortex. It is important to point out that MacLean's theory is no longer held by the majority of neuroscientists. For one thing, we now know that all of the brain works in unison and not in three independent parts.

However, MacLean's ideas have been adopted by some psychiatrists to help explain human behavior. So, with that in mind, let's take a look at the triune brain theory.

According to MacLean, the most recent addition to our brains is the neocortex which governs language, abstraction, reasoning, and planning. This part enables human culture.

The second oldest part of the mammal brain is the limbic system and is the center of our motivation, emotions, and memory, including behavior such as parenting.

But the part that interests me today is the part that MacLean says is the oldest part of our brain—what he called the reptilian brain. Some call it our lizard brain. Here, we find our primitive drives related to hunger, thirst, reproduction, and territoriality. It also governs our habits and our procedural memory (you know, like putting your keys in the same place every day without thinking about it). The reptile brain is our base code. It can be rigid and compulsive.

Imagine, someone cuts you off in traffic and you react angrily, or there is one last cookie and you grab it, or a balloon pops and you jump: These are the responses of our reptilian brain. These actions protect us and helped us survive the dangers of nature and animals and enemies. The reptilian brain doesn't waste time in thoughts. It reacts. It hijacks our thinking brain and throws us into a fight or flight reflex. As I said, MacLean's theory has largely been dismissed. But his ideas have been used as a model to explain human behavior. Who among us hasn't felt the overwhelming drive of the reptile brain when we've been wronged or are frightened?

Scripture

In the tenth chapter of the gospel of Mark, Jesus and his disciples are traveling toward Jerusalem for the Passover festival. For the past three years, Jesus has been preaching throughout the region of Galilee. In this time, he has developed a substantial following.

Along this journey, Jesus tells his disciples what is going to happen to him when they get to Jerusalem. He says:

See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.

As Christians, we identify these warnings as “Passion Predictions.” He tells them once. He tells them twice. And then, in our reading, he tells them a third time.

After he tells them of his fate, two of the disciples, the brothers James and John, go up to Jesus with a request. They say to him, *Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.*

Did you hear that? They don’t couch the demand as a favor; they don’t soften their request by saying, *Jesus, we know you’ve got a lot going on right now, but we were wondering, if it’s not too inconvenient, we hope we’re not out of line on this...* No, they say straight up: *We want you to do whatever we ask of you.*

Jesus says, *What is it that you want?*

And the brothers answer, *Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.*

And Jesus says to them, *You have no idea what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink? Are you able to be baptized with the same baptism that am baptized with?* This is sacramental language—the cup and the baptism. What Jesus is asking is simple: Do you think that you can walk in my shoes? And they say, “Yes, we can do that. And Jesus tells them it will be as they demand.

Traditionally, we come down pretty hard on the two sons of Zebedee. We label them as clueless for not comprehending Jesus’ dire warnings of his fate in Jerusalem. We ridicule their arrogance at bossing Jesus around. We say that they are looking for the fame and celebrity they believe that Jesus will find when he hits the bright lights of downtown Jerusalem. And they want to be part of that. He’s been a hit in Galilee—the home crowds adore him—just think how it will be in Jerusalem.

As I said, traditionally, we come down hard on James and John. But I think they knew what they were doing. They understood that the end was near, that

Jesus would be taken by the authorities. They sensed their time with him was short.

They asked for those seats riding shotgun with Jesus not because they were clueless but because they were scared. They made their demand because they want to be first in line. They were afraid that there would not be enough for everyone.

Enough of what? Well, enough of Jesus, enough of Jesus' radiance, his being, his glory.

I believe they were afraid that Jesus' glory might run out. This becomes a time of crisis—fight or flight. Their reptile brains took over. They wanted to grab what they could before it ran out.

The other disciples caught wind of this discussion between Jesus and the Zebedees and they, as we know, were less than pleased. The brothers had jumped the line. What should have been an even 12-way split was now unbalanced. They responded in fury.

Scarcity

There is something in our reptile brain that keeps us in constant fear of not having enough. Enough what? Well, whatever it is that we feel we need to survive. It is our instinct of self-preservation.

It may be food, shelter, money, companionship, love, N95 masks, water chestnuts... We constantly fear that we are going to run out, and that we will die.

Our fear is based on the anxiety of scarcity. We can be surrounded by excess and still be worried that there won't be enough. Scarcity controls our lives more than we are willing to admit.

Some years back, in an article in the *Christian Century* magazine, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman wrote scarcity. He said:

“We never feel that we have enough; we have to have more and more, and this insatiable desire destroys us... Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians, we must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity — a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly.”¹

¹ *Christian Century* (March 24-31, 1999)

In our nation today, as more and more power drifts to the extremes, those in the middle feel the imagined squeeze of scarcity—that there is not enough for all, that there is not enough for me. Or worse, that someone is going to take it from me. And so, we reach out and grab what we can. Meanwhile, the other person is doing the same, and this only fuels our anxiety.

What are we afraid of today? A scarcity of jobs, food, water, guns? That someone will take away what I have worked hard to acquire? That we will lose relevance, power, prestige, our lives?

For the reptile brain in self-preservation mode (which is where it always is), these are its primary concerns. The reptilian response is to keep what you have, preserve and protect it from others, and get more at the expense of others. Get more than you need. Get more than you will ever need.

As we can read in Brueggeman's article: "The myth of scarcity that can drive an economy is not based on economic analysis but on anxiety. It produces and justifies violence against the neighbor. The myth of scarcity makes each an agent of acquisitiveness in the face of all the others who pursue acquisitiveness..."

But aren't we more than that? More than the sum of our fears? Aren't we more than our reptile brains? And the answer is yes, through Christ in God, we ARE more than that.

Abundance

The antidote to the anxiety of scarcity is abundance. Our Holy Scriptures open with the greatest act of abundance of all time—the act of creation. The first chapter of Genesis is a litany of abundance in which God creates and, *And God saw that it was good.*

Where in scripture does God ever say there won't be enough? Even the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness had enough. For forty years, God rained manna on them. It was an abundance and never a scarcity. We all know the wonderful story of Jesus feeding thousands with what appeared to be scarcity. It was an abundance.

James and John viewed Jesus' glory as being limited and so they coveted it for themselves. There was no need. His glory was infinite. It is our reptile brain—our sin—to question the abundance of God's love.

Mission

Just yesterday, you, as a congregation, denied scarcity a seat at the table as you proclaimed the abundance of God's love. As a congregation, you created food to go to those who are the true victims of scarcity. You donated and you worked to create 10,000 meals for people you will never meet. Yesterday, you embodied the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth when he said, *And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having*

enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work (2 Corinthians 9.8).

Conclude

God's blessing to us in Jesus is not power or glory, it is not food or wealth, it, quite simply, is love, shared in abundance. God is love, and that love is infinite. We should never fear that it will run out or be held from us. It exists in abundance. It should be our mission to show the world the gracious abundance that we find in our God.

Lastly, I would like to close with these words from Psalm 72:

May there be abundance of grain in the land; may it wave on the tops of the mountains; may its fruit be like Lebanon; and may people blossom in the cities like the grass of the field.

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things.

Amen.