

**5/5/2019**

God of love, who calls us to live and to love, may the time we spend listening for your still, small voice, awaken an awareness of how we can put love into action, how we can care for all our relationships. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

The Brain is an amazing thing. For a long time, we believed that Brain cells began to die off as we aged and once the brain was damaged, due to injury, illness, or addiction, it was permanent. We now know that this is not necessarily true.

Nine years ago, a man named, Sean Maloney, was sitting pretty, and things looked like they could only get better. He was the executive vice president of Intel and widely considered the next in line to be CEO. He had a wife and family and maintained an active lifestyle that included running, rowing and skiing. And although he had high blood pressure, he addressed that by eating a healthy diet.

Then, in February 2010, he had a massive stroke. A blocked artery paralyzed the right side of his body and severely impaired his speech.

He underwent six months of intensive rehabilitation to regain movement and the ability to talk. He had to learn to let speech originate from the other side of his brain, and while not everything returned, he was able to get enough back to function not only without relying on caregivers, but even to return to work, move to Beijing and lead Intel's business with China, its largest market. He retired from Intel in 2013, but he was able to take up cycling, and in 2015, he founded Heart Across America, a 5,000-mile, cross-country bicycle ride from Palo Alto, California, to New York City to raise money and awareness for heart disease and stroke prevention.

We have heard similar stories. People who were able to regain function and learning after a stroke or addiction. This is due to a process called neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity allows the nerve cells in the brain to compensate for injury and disease and to adjust their activities in response to new situations or to changes in their environment.

Unfortunately, plasticity can also cause problems as it does with PTSD and addiction where the brain changes to adapt to trauma. Then new learning needs to take place.

Back in the early part of the 20th century, thinking ahead of his colleagues, psychologist William James wrote that “the plasticity of the living nervous system is the reason why we do a thing with difficulty the first time, but soon do it more easily.” So, we can learn and re-learn essentially at any age.

For most of us, this learning comes at a slower and deliberate pace. That was the case with Peter and the disciples. They learned and re-learned constantly, while Jesus was with them physically and in the Resurrected state. This learning continued with the arrival of the Holy Spirit and with their experiences after. But the Holy Spirit usually speeds up the process and changes the wiring in the brain and the heart.

Paul falling to the ground in the presence of Jesus was much more dramatic as we know. His brain re-wiring was nothing short of a miracle.

Think about from whence he came. Before that encounter, he was a vicious persecutor of those who followed Jesus. He was a zealous and devout Jew. In Galatians he writes: “You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism, I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors” (Galatians 1:13-14).

In Philippians he writes, “Circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Philippians 3:5-6). And Luke was more direct in our reading this morning: “Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem”. To say that he was dedicated to a way of life was putting it mildly. It is thought that by allowing Saul to go to Damascus to find the followers of Jesus and bring them back to Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders themselves were somewhat isolated from blame as only Rome could order anyone put to death. Nevertheless, early Christians were persecuted and beaten. Some killed.

Saul was a witness to, and apparently condoned, the death of the first martyr of the church, Stephen. We know that Saul was a very intelligent and intellectual person. He had been trained for years in Jewish Law and Tradition. He lived it and was zealous in practicing it. Things were very black and white for him.

Saul was someone the early followers of Christ were very scared of. And rightfully so. As we read today, when Jesus appeared to Ananias in a dream and asked him to go and lay hands on Saul to heal him, he basically said; "Are you kidding me?" or something to that effect. Saul was blind and could not see after his experience with Jesus. This was physical as well as spiritual for him. He sat in darkness for three days until his healing.

Paul's brain had been totally and radically changed. How many times have we wished that God would do the same for us? For most of us, Life in the Spirit comes quietly and sometimes is overshadowed by exterior events in our lives. We have lost the ability to be quiet and still, to hear the voice of God. Too much else going on. Too many distractions. Yes, we are certainly busy, and on the move, but not in the work that we have been called to do by Jesus. Our brain changes happen slowly and take a lot of work. No one who has undergone a stroke and needing to learn how to speak or even how to walk again, will deny the huge amount of effort that is required to learn these tasks. But through the grace of God, the brain often can readapt.

The hardest thing that I had to do in my line of work with those experiencing PTSD, was to convince folks that healing was possible but would take a lot of energy and effort to change the effects that the brain had sustained in their trauma. Certainly not easy, and sadly, many feared to even try.

Last week, I attended one of the Epiphany conferences on How to plan a good Funeral. It was given by Author and Poet, Thomas Lynch. His opening question to us was, "How did you come to be the one you are." And he was not just talking solely about our lives since birth but our ancestry. Who were those ancestors that played an important part in who we are today? Was it a parent, grandparent, or relative that we closely identified with or, for good or for bad, helped to shape what we believe? My parents did not attend church a lot when I was young. When we moved from Lansing to Michigan Center, they placed me and my siblings in Our Lady of Fatima Catholic school. This had a very direct effect on who I am

today. I spent a lot of time with the Sisters of St Joseph helping out at the church and the convent. I started working at the church when I was 14. I knew during that timeframe that I wanted to be a priest even to the point of applying for the PIME Missionaries (Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions) who wanted to me to start the Seminary process by entering their high school in Ohio. Unfortunately, I liked girls too much. But my parents did sacrifice to get myself and my brother into a Catholic high school. Strange as it may seem, the most intimate experience that I had with Jesus, was when the rock opera, Jesus Christ Superstar came out in 1970. I listened to this record over and over again. These experiences, and many more, helped me to begin to answer the question; How did I come to be who I am? It is a question we all need to answer because it affects where we are going. We are all going somewhere. To stop moving forward is slowly die and even in then, we are still going somewhere. All of this certainly happens as individuals but also as a Congregation. I am not telling you anything you don't already know. Who we are today is greatly affected by who Christ Church was in the past. Successes and failures, tragedies and rebirth. PTSD as a congregation and as a Diocese is very real and also takes a lot of work to put into perspective and to move on. This process is never easy but must be done because to **not move forward is to die**. It would be fantastic if Jesus would come to us as a brilliant light causing us to fall on the floor. And after a few days of living in the dark with fasting and prayer, to emerge as a new person, filled with the Holy Spirit and fire. But for most of us, this is not the case. It takes patience, practice and a lot of prayer. Just as Ananias was sent to Paul by Jesus to help, we need to rely on those around us to help us. I firmly believe that this process cannot be done without help.

I certainly don't have all of the answers. I continue to have a need to work through issues as each of you do. Life goes on and we want to be part of it. I am hopeful that you will take some time to consider; How did you come to be who you are today? And where are you going? Then to look at how Christ Church came to be where we are at today, and where are we going? No bright lights, no from heaven, just the quiet whispers of the Holy Spirit. Not as exciting, but just as real.

AMEN