

STUPID IS AS STUPID DOES


A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Sunday, August 3, 2014

Blasting for Ducks, Sinks a Navigator

I've been preaching on fairly heavy subjects for the last few months, so I wanted to lighten things up a bit this Sunday. Today's sermon is therefore pretty much unprecedented in my career, being on the topic of Stupidity. We'll find out shortly whether that subject was ill-advised or not.

A) Let me begin with a story, a true story from northern Wisconsin last winter. A pair of guys, otherwise reasonable, prudent gentlemen, decided to go duck hunting. Now at that time of year in northern Wisconsin, the lakes are frozen over, so their plan was to drive out onto the lake. Somehow or other they had managed to procure a stick of dynamite with the intention of using it to blast a big enough hole in the ice so that the expanse of open water would entice the ducks with an attractive place to come in and land. They couldn't do that with an ice auger.

One of the guys, by the way, had purchased a brand-new Lincoln Navigator for 43 or 44 thousand dollars or so. So they drive out onto the ice with their stick of dynamite, which had a 40-second fuse. They light the fuse and toss it out onto the middle of the frozen lake as far as they possibly can. All is going according to plan at this point except for their dog, which jumped out of the vehicle at the same time.

The men being duck hunters, their dog happened to be a Lab, and don't you know, the full name of this breed is Labrador Retriever. So the dog takes off like a streak of lightning after the stick of dynamite, retrieves it promptly, and starts to bring it back with the lit fuse  sputtering out of the Lab's mouth. At this point our duck hunters, those prudent gentlemen, have a problem.

What does a reasonable person do now? You don't have a lot of time to think about it. One of hunters actually shoots toward the dog at long range, but it's only bird shot, and it's not going to stop a Lab. Might make it mad. Might confuse it. But those tiny pellets are not going to stop it. So despite having been shot at, the dog keeps coming. They shoot again, this time at closer range. The Labrador is a little disconcerted now, completely confused because the owners, who otherwise love dogs, are acting strangely rather than with the expected praise.

And what does a reasonable dog do now? Look for cover. And where do you find cover on an open lake except underneath this new car? So the dog, with the stick of dynamite still sputtering, crawls under the car. At this point many seconds have ticked away, and the duck hunters decide to run for it. Underneath this vehicle, however, the dog apparently sensed very hot air from the exhaust system, was uncomfortable where it was, dropped the ominously sputtering dynamite, and took off after the hunters without it.

All of this took about 40 seconds. **ka-BOOOOM!!** In the silence of the wilderness, a tremendous explosion ripped that brand-new Lincoln Navigator apart and plunged it to the bottom of the lake.

The conclusion of the story is that the dog ended up in fine shape. The hunters took the Lab to a veterinarian, and the bird-shot pellets were easily removed. The insurance company was not amused, however. Unfair though it may seem, it turns out that blowing up your own car with an illegal stick of dynamite isn't covered. And the duck hunters, though seriously chagrined, are somewhat the wiser.

Never Don't Give Up

So that's my opening story on stupidity. If you Google "people doing stupid things" or "people being stupid," wonderful things come up. Things that can hook you for hours simply for the enjoyment. If you click on the "Images" portion of the website, one of the first things that will come up is a picture of a good-old-boy country bumpkin leaning against his pickup truck sporting a greasy mullet haircut.

I saw many tattoos. One example: the words "Never Don't Give Up" proudly displayed on a person's arm. There are classic stories of people needing technical help on their computers, such as the alarmed call for help because "My computer won't turn on." It turns out that power had gone off for the whole building. There weren't any lights, and nothing worked. But still the computer operator had the stubborn presence of mind to call Technical Support because the computer wouldn't turn on.

You probably know that, if you install software, sometimes you will get a message saying, "Press any key to continue." So you look at your keyboard and there's no key labeled "Any." And you call Technical Support wondering why there's no such key. There are Facebook postings that aren't very smart and that can get people fired. You wonder what someone was thinking when this was done.

The Darwin Award Is a Killer

There are stupid images, and this one appears pretty much on an annual basis: Children touching their tongues to an icy metal flagpole in the wintertime. Every year without fail, you see it happen – kids stuck helplessly by their tongues to a flagpole. Speaking of kids, you see them

doing things on skateboards, bicycles, and motorcycles. Sadly, a few of these kids do not live to tell the tale, and some of them may not be able to have children.

B) You've heard of the annual Darwin Award, haven't you? The reason it's named the Darwin Award is that you have to do something stupid enough that it actually kills you. So you cannot survive your stupidity in order to win this award. What is humorous are the stories of those who actually live to tell the tales of their inanity. They're like runners-up for the Darwin Award.

One that caught my attention is about the gentleman who had a pet rattlesnake. It was a baby, not a big rattlesnake just a little one, and like all pit vipers, it liked warmth. So the owner fell asleep on the couch with the rattlesnake on his bare stomach. Okay, time to get up, go to bed, TV show's over. In the process of getting up, however, he rattled his rattlesnake, and it bit him on the lip.

Now this guy had read somewhere that the way to neutralize snake venom is by running an electric current through it. This of course is not true. But he had read it somewhere, which of course makes it undeniably true. Well, where do you get electric current in the middle of the night? So he decided to go out to his car and use the jumper cables.

End of story: The doctors weren't able to save the lip, but they were able to save the guy's life. Therefore, he qualifies only as a runner-up for the Darwin Award.

There are people who missed the first question of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire." Ponder that for a moment. And finally you can see examples of stupid criminals. Like the guy who robbed a convenience store, and right there by the cash register were the candy bars. So he grabs a bunch and chomps on them all the way back to his apartment, tossing away the litter as he goes. All the police had to do was to follow the candy wrappers to the thief's apartment.

The Brains Behind Stupidity: Mostly Reptilian

Now I want you to get a feeling for these examples, which are really representative of categories, and there are multiple stupidities within each one of these categories. Now you might ask, Is there any scholarly literature out there on stupidity? I asked myself that question and was amazed at what I was able to find. There is a wonderful body of scholarly literature on the stupidity of human beings. Here are a few things to share with you on this subject.

One of the discoveries is that we think on different brain levels. Researchers have isolated three different levels of mental activity that we use to solve problems:

- 1) The Reptilian Brain.** Deep inside our brain is what's called the reptilian brain. Suppose that a tiger has pounced out at us. We don't have time to think about it. What are we going to do? Climb a tree? Jump in a lake? What can we do? Well,

that deep, inner, instinctual core, called the reptilian brain, makes decisions for us at that level.

- 2) **The Rational Brain.** But if we have more time and want to expend the energy, we can think about it. Which do you think would be better? To run and jump in the lake or to climb a tree or to ponder our options? Now rational thinking can kick in, but only if we have the time and energy for the effort.
- 3) **The Reflective Brain.** There is a still-higher level of brain activity that is more like reflective thought. Suppose you're given to reflect on the nature of a tiger. What is the respective value of fleeing versus fighting? Which is the best, overall, for our culture and humanity? You may want to be philosophical about it, but that requires even more time and energy for reflection.

Take This Pop Quiz

Here's a pop quiz to give you a feeling for the three basic levels of brain activity. Three people are involved:

Jack is looking at Ann; Ann is looking at George; Jack is married; George is not. The question: Is a married person looking at an unmarried person? The possible answers: Yes. No. Cannot be determined. Eighty percent of the population will answer "Cannot be determined" because we don't know about Ann.

However, if you step outside of the reptilian, knee-jerk, instinctual answer and begin pondering your options, you'll think: Okay, if Ann is married, she's looking at George, and Jack is looking at her, so the answer is "Yes." If she's unmarried – think about it – the answer is also "Yes." And that's the difference between the reptilian mind and the rational mind. Rational thought takes a moment to ponder the options.

The Baneful Effects of "Framing" and "Anchoring"

Two other insights from the scholarly literature on Stupidity:

- 1) **The Framing Effect.** One insight that I'm sure you're all familiar with is called the "framing effect." How you are asked a question will determine how you answer. This is one of the ways in which people manipulate other people and make us all look stupid.

Again, make these suppositions: There's a disease outbreak that's expected to kill 600 people if no action is taken, but doctors have come up with two treatment options: Option A will save 200 people. But option B gives a one-third probability that 600 people will be saved and a two-thirds probability that no one will be saved.

Eighty percent of the population will choose Option A, with 200 hundred people guaranteed to be saved.

But if the question is asked a different way, Option A guarantees that 400 people will die, and Option B gives a one-third probability that no one will die. This way eighty percent will choose Option B.

The trick, literally, is that the two options are identical. Your answer is manipulated by framing the question to produce the desired answer. Think politics and the polls that come to you on the phone.

- 2) **The Anchoring Effect.** Another insight is called the “anchoring effect.” It’s fascinating. The target is asked a question to which he or she basically just doesn’t know the answer.

The particular question in this case is: How many African countries are recognized by the UN? The guess: Twenty, thirty, forty? I don’t know. What the operator did was to build a wheel similar to the one on “Wheel of Fortune,” but it was preprogrammed to land only on either ten or sixty-five.

So if the wheel comes up ten, the above question is asked, and you will not answer with a average. Instead you will answer closer to ten. And if sixty-five comes up, you will answer closer to sixty-five.

The kicker is that, if a meaningless number is presented to you prior to the question being asked, that number will influence you to guess near it. People seem to understand this notion but nevertheless they tend to guess according to the intention of the questioner.

Even though this is not the most serious sermon, if I were to make one suggestion that would help preserve our culture and make us a more civil nation, it would be to pay no attention to political ads. Ignore them all because they operate almost entirely at the level of the reptilian brain.

You are expected to decide on the basis of a framing or anchoring political ad that so-and-so is bad for the economy. You are a target for someone aiming at your reptilian brain. You know that this other guy is good for the economy because you’ve been given a pretense of a rationale to fool yourself into believing that you’ve thought about it. You think you’ve used your rational brain. You’ve even been reflective about it. Therefore, you’re going to vote as desired because the other person is bad for the economy.

It’s all BS. You’re being manipulated, and it’s bad for our country.

The Pastor's Bag of Blunders

This sermon wouldn't be fair if I spent all of my time making fun of other stupid people. Therefore, here are two examples from my own bag of blunders:

- C) Some of you know that we have a hot tub in our backyard, given to us by my dad on our 25th anniversary. We really like it and use it a lot. It was one of those days when Tracy was out of town, and I generally make worse decisions in life if she's not around. A big storm was coming up, and I like storms. This was forecast to be a doozy, one of those really bad ones with lots of thunder and lightning.

So I'm watching TV, and a little red banner scrolls across the screen that says . . . **STORM . . . WARNING . . . COMING. . .** It was bad enough that the counties and towns were listed with doomsday excitement. It was bad enough that warnings were given sequentially for every town lying in the path of the storm. . . . **THIS . . . STORM . . . WILL BE . . . AT OWEGO . . . AT 0:00 P.M. . . . IT WILL . . . HIT APALACHIN . . . AT 0:00 P.M. . . . IT WILL . . . STRIKE ENDICOTT . . . AT 0:00 P.M. . . . AND THEN . . . IT'S GOING TO . . . SLAM INTO . . . BINGHAMTON . . . AT 0:00 P.M. . . .**

I looked at the clock and realized I had ten minutes before the storm would hit home.

So I did what any reasonable person would do. I jumped into my swimsuit, flipped on a baseball cap for protection against the rain, mixed a martini, went outside, and sat in the hot tub to await the storm.

As I sit there, the wind starts to blow. I'm enjoying my martini, and the wind blows with increasing force. Then the rain starts pouring down in sheets and the next thing you know, a huge storm is slamming full bore into Binghamton.

Lightning strikes with tremendous flashes, and thunderclaps resound everywhere. Suddenly, lightning and thunder occur simultaneously, with no delay between the bolt and the blast. Thirty seconds later lightning strikes again only a hundred yards away at the other end of the street.

And there I am sitting in a huge tub of water. It's dawning on me that maybe this isn't a good idea.

The rain is coming at me sideways when there's a bolt of lightning accompanied by a deafening *r-o-o-A-A-R-R!!* right above me. If lightning had struck the tub, I would have been like black toast in a toaster. I thought I was going to meet my Maker right then and there, but it was one of those bolts of lightning that goes from cloud to cloud, and it went *z z z z z z T!!* right above my house.

The rain is still pouring down like a waterfall. I'm getting more and more fearful that I might be struck by lightning and drowned in the tub at the same time. Definitely not good.

Then the rain turned to hail. Pea size at first. It stings. Then marble size. It hurts. I can testify truthfully that a baseball cap is no damn good for protection against hail.

So I prayed and then gave up on the martini. With that, I hunkered down in the water as low as possible and rode out the storm, never thinking to run into the house because there's nothing I could do at this point.

So that's one on me. I lived to tell the tale. The martini, by the way, still had two olives in the bottom, but it looked like a snow cone, having filled up with hail. The glass didn't break, which amazed me.

I learned a lesson on that one, and it is to pray and run like hell to safety. My behavior was stupid, I admit, but there's stupid and then there's a more profound stupid. Here's another example:

D) It goes back to this same hot tub, when we first got it. Now I fancy myself to be a bit of a handyman. I can do roofing; I can do painting; I can do a little carpentry; I like wiring and plumbing, sort of. So I decided to wire in this new hot tub myself. It uses 220 volts rather than 110 volts, so you don't just plug it in.

Down in the basement, I'm looking at the fuse box, and it's all very old. The prudent thing to do would have been to call NYSEG and schedule an appointment for an electrician to come and turn off the power to my house. Then an electrical cord could be run over to the neighbor's house so that I could turn on a light and wire the hot tub in safely.

But not being all that bright at the moment, I'm down in the basement thinking I can do this. I have a light shining into the box as I attempt to attach the tub's wiring onto a live 220v circuit. What followed was not smart at all. I didn't anticipate that, if you touch the wire or your pliers to the wrong terminal, you get an arc of electricity that is **unbelievably bright**. So just as you do something wrong, **you're blinded**. I didn't think about that.

Then, at the same moment when you touched the wrong terminal and you can't see, the arc of electricity will also weld your pliers into the wrong place. I didn't think about that either. And so I'm down there trying to wire the tub in, and all this stuff happened at the same instant: the arc, the blindness, the pliers getting welded into the wrong place. Now I can't get my pliers back to try to solve the problem that I can't see anyway.

I eventually got the tub correctly wired and lived to tell the tale. But it was profoundly stupid, the kind of thing that is dangerous enough that it might have cost my life.

Now Let Me Recap

We have duck hunters and their poor Labrador Retriever. We have people with mullet haircuts. And tattoos like “Never Don’t Give Up.” We have people who needlessly call for Technical Support. And we have people who make Facebook postings. Little kids touching their tongues to a frozen flagpole. And kids on skateboards and bicycles and motorcycles, trying to pick up some speed.

One little detail I left out is that, of kids who have suffered some sort of significant fall, somewhere between 30 and 40 percent of them were wearing either a Batman or a Superman costume when they arrived in the ER. You have the annual Darwin Awards. You have people who missed the first question in “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire.” Then you have stupid criminals. And now you’ve got a stupid pastor. Some people may actually think I’m smart. After all, I studied physics. I’ve got advanced degrees. Well after this sermon they’re entitled to think otherwise.

What’s My Point?

May I suggest to you that what I have confessed about myself and what I have told you about these other stories are basically true of every single one of us. Therefore, be kind to one another, always. Be forgiving when you’re on the road and somebody cuts you off. Be merciful. Be gentle. Be forbearing.

Above all be loving because these foibles are the common lot of all humanity.

Amen.