

**33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 13, 2011
10 & 5:30 Liturgies**

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Bookshelves are groaning under the weight of new tomes on the human brain and how it functions. The field of neurobiology grows daily with new and fascinating discoveries about us and about just how we experience our world. Some of these findings, I suggest, are also relevant to how we experience God, the gospels and the church.

Nobel prize-winning economist David Kahneman has a brand new book out called *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. In it he describes two different systems of thinking we all use: one fast, one slow. System I is largely unconscious, makes snap judgments based on the memory of similar events; it is easily swayed by emotion and is often just wrong. But it is intuitive and quick. System II, on the other hand, is painfully slow, consciously checks facts and thinks carefully and rationally; unfortunately it is also easily distracted and hard to engage for many of us.

Kahneman uses this pithy example. (Just play along with me for a minute. I have not completely “lost it” yet.) A bat and a ball

together cost \$1.10. The bat costs \$1.00 more than the ball. How much does the ball cost?

Just go with your initial intuitive guess. Many people say the ball costs 10 cents. Some say maybe the ball costs a dollar. What did you say? The correct answer is 5 cents. If the ball costs 10 cents the whole price would be \$1.20. The ball has to be 5 cents.

Kahneman comments, “this easy puzzle evokes an answer that is intuitive, appealing, and wrong.”

This is an example of System I at work. Many of us are very quick with our judgments, easily swayed by previous experiences we may have had, and just take the short-cut out of puzzles. It’s quick and intuitive. This may bring back memories of how the brain and the visual cortex also can be quite selective even in something as basic as what we see. Remember the “Invisible Gorilla” from homilies a few months back? Selective attention is not just a conscious choice; it is hard-wired into our brains.

The humorist and newspaper guy H. L. Menken, without benefit of modern psychology, said it more simply years ago: “For every complex human problem there is a solution that is clear, simple—and wrong!”

(Some of you might find it interesting to know that many thousands of university students have answered this same ball and bat puzzle, and the results are shocking. More than 50% of students at Harvard, MIT, and Princeton gave the intuitive—incorrect—answer.” At less select universities, the rate rose to over 80%. I don’t know if Boston College was ever included in the data.)

What’s this all about? Today’s readings offer an example as plain as the bat and ball. What did you hear in today’s scriptures? Are you feeling slightly depressed or bored by the Gospel reading (that’s the last thing you heard and is usually the easiest thing to remember)? Can you remember feeling slightly guilty as a child hearing simple sermons on this foolish slave? I can. They usually went something like this: “Carefully invest the talents God has given you or you, too, will be cast out into the darkness. Be industrious and cautious with God’s gifts.” This kind of quick thinking is quite intuitive for many.

The irony is that these conclusions are the exact opposite of what St. Matthew intended to tell his community. This parable is not a lesson in free-market economics. It is not about the

contemporary metaphorical use of the word “talent.” The Greek word “*talentum*” has no such metaphorical connotation; a “*talentum*” is simply a large sum of money—not your singing or dancing prowess. Nor is this meant to be a lesson in capitalist economics; theirs was not a capitalist system!

The message of this parable, like the other two parables in this chapter of Matthew’s gospel is about the end-times, the *eschaton*, the final coming of Jesus. How should Matthew’s community wait for that great event? What should they be doing? Matthew urges the community not to be timid or fearful, but to take risks, to bet on long shots. Matthew knows it is easy to let fear govern our lives. So he urges his community—and our church, us—to be people of foresight, initiative, and independence.

Like that remarkable—yet nameless—“Wonder-Woman” in the book of Proverbs. Or like those “children of the light” that Paul extols today. Did our System I thinking block them out today? Did we even hear and celebrate with those folks? That is important because they are us!

I’ve always felt that many people come to church expecting to feel depressed. Seriously. We’ve heard so many depressing stories

and sermons that System I thinking kicks right in. But, in fact, all three readings today are about celebrating creativity, initiative and spontaneity in response to God's gifts to each of us. The readings are, indeed, good news today!

And the gospel, I repeat, is not a recommendation about usury or capitalism. Although I admit the final verses sound do sound strangely familiar; I've heard similar sentiment coming from members of the U.S. Congress lately: "To those who have, more will be given; from those who have nothing, even more will be taken away." But I won't go any further there. We don't want to confuse politics and religion. Or do we?

Sometimes neurobiology can be helpful in exegesis. Let's think slower about the good news. And let's remember that every gift of God offered to each one of us carries with it a mandate to bear fruit in God's vineyard.

For those of you still thinking about the bat and ball: the ball only costs 5 cents. I promise.

Go! And be adventurous with your gifts!