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Rev. Dr. Steven H. Koski

“How God Changes Your Brain and How That Can Change the World!”

Psalm 34.8-10; Ephesians 3.14-20

Did you know that when you listen to music you love it expands your blood vessels by 26%? Listening to music that you don't like constricts your blood vessels by 6%. How fascinating...focusing our attention on what inspires us improves our circulation increasing blood flow to our body and brain helping us feel stronger and be more creative.

There is a profound connection between your body, mind and spirit.

Once upon a time, a preacher ran through the streets of the city shouting, “You must put God into your life. You must put God into your life.” Hearing this, there was a monk sitting peacefully in the plaza who rose up and said, “No sir, you are wrong. You see, God is already in our lives. Our task is to awaken and recognize that.”

What if at the very heart of all things, there is goodness, there is love, there is God? What if the spiritual task is to open our hearts to what is already there?

Thomas Merton said, “Because God is present we are able to love. Because we are able to love God is present.”

Today's Bible reading from Ephesians is a prayer...a prayer according to the translation the Message that asks that we might be rooted and grounded in love and somehow grasp the love which is beyond knowledge and reason. What? As reasonable, rational human beings, how can we possibly grasp and know something that is beyond knowledge?

Maybe we should ask child.

A researcher asked a group of 4 to 8 year-olds, “What is love?” Their answers suggest what is really important is beyond our knowledge and reason.

Rebecca, 8 years-old, said, “When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn’t bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis, too. That’s love.”

Billy, aged 5, said, “When some one loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth.”

Cindy, 4 years-old, said, “Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day.”

Nikka, 7 years-old said, “If you want to get really good at love, you should start with some one you hate.” Wow! Imagine if there were a few more Nikka’s in the world who recognized the need for a love beyond logic and reason.

Jesus said, “Unless you become like a child you can not see the wonders of heaven.” These children remind us there is more than one way of knowing.

Imagine coming to a fork in the road and there’s a signpost. One way directs us to hear a lecture about God. The other way points us to God. By God I mean the God beyond god. When people tell me they don’t believe in God. I say, “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in and chances are I don’t believe in that God either.”

Sometimes we settle for the lecture about God and miss the mystery and fullness and beauty of that ultimate reality...of that love that is beyond knowledge and reason.

Our brain has two hemispheres and I am going to grossly oversimplify something that is divinely complex.

The left brain is the logical, reasonable, rational part of your brain that sees in parts and thinks in a linear fashion.

The right brain is the creative, intuitive, imaginative part of your brain that sees the whole and embraces ambiguity and mystery.

Maybe that's what Jesus had in mind when he said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and ALL your mind"...both sides of your brain. Loving God with only one side of your brain is no better than loving God half-hearted.

Daniel Pink wrote a book called [A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule The World](#). He wrote, "The industrial age was built on people's backs. The information age was built on the left hemisphere of the brain. The survival of the world is dependent on the development of the right hemisphere of the brain. We've progressed from a society of farmers to a society of factory workers to a society of knowledge workers. It is time to progress again to a society of creators, empathizers, peace-builders and meaning-makers."

He claims we are moving from the Age of Information to the Age of Intuition..from the head to the heart. When I think of this shift I remember the words of Father Richard Rohr who said, "You can believe all the right things...have all the knowledge in the world and still be a jerk. You can believe all the right things in your head and still be closed off and defended in your heart.

What if we practiced our faith by paying more attention to the right-side of our brain...what if we paid more attention to developing our intuitive wisdom...paid more attention to developing our capacity for compassion?

Let me share a story...a true story that makes me wonder about the implications of this shift from the Age of Information to the Age of Intuition.

Bruce found it hard to sleep one night. He simply couldn't stop thinking of a friend he had neither seen nor heard from in months who lived two hours away. Something nagged at him in a way that suggested that his friend was in deep trouble.

Have you had that experience? I wonder if we have that experience more than we realize but we either ignore it or are too busy to notice.

Every attempt to sleep backfired and he'd find himself sitting up in the bed thinking about his friend. Finally, around 2 in the morning, he sheepishly awakened his wife and told her he needed to visit his friend.

Naturally, she thought he'd gone crazy. For that matter, so did Bruce! But he got in his car and drove out into the night. Arriving at his friend's doorstep at 4am, Bruce felt awkward and foolish: "This is insane. I don't even know if he's home." Gathering his courage, Bruce knocked on the door. No answer. He knocked a little louder. Still no answer. Figuring his friend might be in deep sleep, he knocked a third time even more loudly.

The porch light came on. He could hear footsteps approaching. After a brief pause, the door opened revealing his friend looking a little more than bewildered. 'Bruce?'

Bruce entered his friend's house, explaining what had brought him there. His friend looked no less bewildered saying, "Thanks, but I'm fine." They sat and drank coffee for over an hour.

At last Bruce rose and left. If Bruce had a tail, it would have been solidly between his legs as he returned home, frustrated that he'd been so impulsive. He tried to put the thought out of his mind.

Three months later, Bruce's friend stopped by for an unexpected visit. He'd come to tell Bruce that he hadn't been honest with him the night Bruce showed up on his doorstep. He'd been awake when Bruce knocked. Wide awake. "I was sitting in the dining room in the dark with a loaded revolver in my hand."

What Bruce's friend said next he has never forgotten. "You didn't have to say a word. I knew only one power in the universe could have brought you to my door at that particular moment. I had drifted far from God, but in that moment I knew there was a love at the very heart of the universe that cared about me...that was for me."

Hmmm...my left brain says, 'Come on...really?'" My right brain..."I wonder if there is a love beyond knowledge...beyond reason...a love we are mysteriously connected to and mysteriously connects us to others...a love, as our Bible reading put it, that is gentle and deep working in and through us able to accomplish abundantly more than we can ever imagine."

I recommended to you before Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor's book, [A Stroke of Insight](#). In 1996, Taylor, a neuroscientist, experienced a massive stroke. A blood vessel burst in the left hemisphere of her brain, leaving her in a child-like state. After surgery and 14 years of recovery, she now devotes her life to teaching how to develop both sides of the brain.

The left brain loves details and details within details. It organizes things in a linear, logical manner. The left brain thinks about the past and anticipates the future. It is the judge that evaluates and determines what you like and don't like.

The right brain is that part of your brain that is intuitive, creative, imaginative and the source of wonder.

As the left brain thinks about the past and tries to anticipate the future, the right brain focuses on the gift of the present moment. As the left brain focuses on the details, the right brain sees the big picture. As the left brain separates things, the right brain sees things as "one", unified.

Jill Bolte Taylor's stroke shut down the left hemisphere of her brain but she amazingly was able to maintain awareness of what was happening. When her left hemisphere was shut down, she lost all her ability to communicate, lost any sense of the past or future, lost her ability to identify herself as a separate individual.

This sounds pretty scary, but instead Jill describes it as a rather wonderful, amazing, grace-filled and mystical experience.

With only the right hemisphere working, she was only conscious of the present moment. She felt deep and profound peace and a sense of being at "one" with the universe.

She lost any sense of fear and judgment of others. Can you imagine?

It's interesting, the Dalai Lama said compassion is the key to peace in the world and compassion is developing the capacity to not just see our differences and to see us as separate but be able to see we are mysteriously interconnected, part of a great whole...to see we are all the same.

Since healing and recovering use of her left brain, Dr. Taylor says she misses that capacity to experience the gift of the present moment and to be fully present in the moment...she misses the profound sense of oneness she felt with the universe.

She said, “If I want to cultivate inner peace and love and compassion, I must be willing to insistently and persistently tend the inner garden of my mind, moment by moment. I must be willing to make the decision a thousand times a day to not just value the logic and reason of the left side of my brain but intentionally develop and nurture the right side of my brain through poetry, music, story, art, silence, contemplation, meditation, wonder, compassion, imagination, mystery.”

She said, “I must not only be a scientist. I must also learn to be a poet and story teller and lover. I must not only solve the rational argument. I must be willing to sit in silence and listen, embrace mystery, surrender and trust that love that is at the center of all things.”

The prayer we heard today in Ephesians, “May you grasp and experience with your right brain the mystery of love with a capital L that is beyond the logic and reason of your left brain.”
Here’s where it goes hopeful.

Andrew Newberg in his book How God Changes Your Brain shows through research shows that the daily spiritual practice of contemplating and focusing your attention on God’s unconditional love will literally change the wiring and neural circuitry of your brain helping you become a more compassionate and loving person.

Their research shows that contemplating a loving God strengthens portions of our brain – particularly the frontal lobes and the anterior cingulate – where empathy resides.

Contemplating an angry, judgmental, disapproving, wrathful God empowers the limbic system where fear and aggression reside. Fascinating to think the God we choose to love shapes us into the image of that God.

Newberg did brain scans of Buddhist monks, Franciscan nuns praying, Sikhs chanting. They all described the same oneness with the universe through their spiritual practice which showed up in the same way in their brain scans. When it comes to the brain, it seems the spiritual experience of love is spiritual experience. Newberg says, “There is no Christian, there is no Jewish, there is no Muslim, it’s just all one.”

Now, there’s a little theological dynamite I’ll leave you to contemplate.

What are the implications for us? When you allow yourself to contemplate that love that is beyond reason, that love that is for you, that love that is part of you, that love that connects you to others, it literally changes you, transforms you into a more loving and compassionate person.

The research suggests just 10 minutes a day imagining yourself, imagining those you love, imagining those who are suffering, imagining those you hate filled with love and surrounded in light, will change you and just may change the world.

The left brain says that’s ridiculous.

The right brain intuitively knows there is a Spirit working within us gently and deeply able to accomplish abundantly more than we can ask or imagine.

There's a story of a monk who met an angry powerful bandit in the woods. The monk remained calm and centered as he was face to face with this sword-wielding angry, violent killer.

Just as the bandit lifts his sword to attack the monk, the monk says, "Before you do be good enough to fulfill my dying wish." Cut off the branch of the tree."

One Slash of the sword and it was done! "What now?" asks the bandit.

"Put it back again," says the monk.

The bandit laughs. "You must be crazy to think anyone can do that."

"On the contrary, it is you who are crazy to think that you are mighty because you can wound and control and destroy. That is the task of the unenlightened. The mighty are the ones who have learned how to create and heal and love."

May it be so!