

Sermon: The Brain Proclaims the Greatness of God

By the Rev. Dr. Carmelo Santos, M.Div., Ph.D.

“Cuando veo tus cielos, obra de tus dedos,
La luna y las estrellas que tú formaste,
Digo: ¿Qué es el hombre, para que tengas de él memoria,
Y el hijo del hombre, para que lo visites?
Le has hecho poco menor que los ángeles,
Y lo coronaste de gloria y de honra.
Le hiciste señorear sobre las obras de tus manos;
Todo lo pusiste debajo de sus pies” (Salmos 8:3-6 RV 1960)

The heavens and the earth proclaim the glory of God and all creatures within them are evidence of the creative power of the divine Spirit and of the exuberant generosity of the Creator’s love. But perhaps of all of God’s creations the most amazing one is the human brain. With palpable emotion the psalmist wonders why our heavenly creator has made us, human beings, “a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor” and “given them dominion over the works of your [God’s] hands; and have put all things under their feet” (Psalm 8:6 NRSV). It is because of the brain that God has given humans that we are capable of the things that made the psalmist exult in amazement and that allow us to carry out the vocation that our Creator has entrusted us, namely, to tend to our fellow creatures in the same way that God tends to us.

The human brain is an amazing feat of divine engineering. There are more connections among the brain’s neurons than there are known stars in the universe! Through the fascinating alchemy of the brain sound and light waves are woven together with smells, flavors, sensations, memories and emotions to create the world that we experience from moment to moment. And it does so in such a seamless way that we don’t even notice! Yet, when something goes wrong then it becomes obvious how much we owe to the brain. For example, injuries to certain parts of the brain can cause symptoms such loss of memory (amnesia), loss of the ability to speak coherently (like when someone has a stroke) or to understand speech (aphasia), and more rare things like the inability to recognize people they once knew intimately and loved.

A famous story in psychology is what happened to Phineas Gage. An accident at work sent a metal rod flying through his skull and brain. It didn't kill him but the brain injury drastically changed his personality. He went from being a responsible worker and an affable man to being irresponsible, foul, and a very different man than the one he used to be. By studying how different injuries (called lesions) to specific regions of the brain affect people's behaviors and cognitive abilities neuroscientists are able to gain deeper knowledge on how the brain works, which in turn is leading to life changing treatments and medicines to help alleviate mental illnesses and to help people improve their mental health in general. Additionally, advances in technology now allow brain scientists and psychologists to observe how the brain works almost in real time by way of brain scans, electroencephalograms (that measures changes in the electrical waves generated by the brain when people think or act) and other instruments. It is truly amazing how God designed the human brain in such a way that it is capable of studying and understanding such complex things as the universe and the brain itself and that that knowledge is being used to bring healing to countless people suffering from various mental maladies and psychological conditions.

Unfortunately, misunderstandings and prejudices about the relationship between science and faith have led to confusion about how believers ought to understand those developments in brain science and in psychology. Some forget that science is a gift from God and think that to be a good believer they must reject science. Others believe that if they have a mental illness, such as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, etc., they should trust that if their faith is strong enough then God will heal them without the need for any medical or psychological treatment. That way of thinking is dangerous. It keeps people from receiving the healing and succor that God intends for them. It also sins of wanting to tell God how to be God, like when the tempter told Jesus:

“If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written:

‘He shall give His angels charge over you,’

And, ‘In *their* hands they shall bear you up,

Lest you dash your foot against a stone.’ ” [But]

Jesus said to him, “It is written again, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God.’ ” (Matthew 7:6-7 KJV).

Or like Naaman, who became irritated because God wanted to heal him by having him bathe in the Jordan river but he had a different idea of how God was supposed to heal him:

“But Naaman became furious, and went away and said, ‘Indeed, I said to myself, ‘He will surely come out *to me*, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place, and heal the leprosy.’ *Are* not the Abanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?’ So he turned and went away in a rage” (2 Kings 5:11-12 KJV).

If God has chosen to make available to our generation all this scientific knowledge and to make it possible for medicines and treatments to be developed that are effective in healing people’s ailments and improving the quality of life of so many, why should we oppose the divine will? God works in manifold and mysterious ways. Jesus healed some with saliva and mud, and others with words, but both acts of healing were the work of the same Lord. Likewise, some are healed through prayer and faith alone, others through medicines and therapy, but always the glory belongs to God who has given us prayer, faith, science, and technology. We should not be afraid to receive the blessings that God wants to bestow upon us via science and technology.

However, brain scientists have not limited themselves to just studying how the brain and the mind works and to producing new medicines and therapies. A few have also used the tools of neuroscience to search for evidence of God’s work in the brain. The results have been fascinating but the research is still ongoing. Using tools such as fMRI and PET scans, scientists have been able to observe how the brain is changed when people pray, meditate and invite the divine Spirit to dwell in them. Some refer to this field as Neurotheology. There is still much work that needs to be done but it is amazing to have scientific evidence that there are concrete and specific changes in the brain when we are imbued by the Spirit of God. The changes in the brain result in a feeling of unity with God and the universe, and of love for our fellow humanity and other creatures. Research has also shown the nocive effects of thinking of God as a punitive judge rather than as loving, compassionate, and patient, etc. This research does not prove the existence of God, but it suggests that the human brain is “wired”

for faith, and for transcending our egotistical self in search for the divine. The thirst for God is written deep in our very brains!

God's grace is amazing. Not only has God given us the gift of existence and sent God's only Son for our salvation. God has also given us the gift of knowledge capable of fathoming these mysteries and probing the secrets of how creation works, even our own brains! Let us thank God for the gift of our brains and for the vocation of those who dedicate their lives to studying its mysteries and developing ways to provide succor to those suffering from mental illnesses. And may God grant us the ability to recognize his fingers at work there too.

Y que la paz de Dios, que sobrepasa todo entendimiento guarde vuestras mentes y corazones en Cristo Jesus, Señor y redentor nuestro. Amen.

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