

The Rt. Rev. J. Scott Mayer - Closing Holy Eucharist
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Today's Gospel is known as "Peter's Confession." Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, and others Elijah, and still others one of the prophets." Jesus says, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answers, "You are the Messiah."

I want to suggest this morning that Peter's response is NOT the intellectual, logical conclusion to investigation or research. It's not, "Well, you are the messiah, after all. After spending all this time with you, and after witnessing miracles and hearing parables, I've decided that you are the long-awaited messiah. The scribes and Pharisees who are watching your every move have not yet arrived at my logical conclusion. I am now persuaded that you are the messiah." It's not that kind of moment.

We could say, and would be correct in saying, that this event is for Peter an epiphany. That which was true all along is made known to Peter. It is an "aha" experience, a stroke of insight.

According to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus even says, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." In other words, Peter does not arrive at this statement of belief – this confession – through logic or by way of thorough investigation, but rather from another realm, a higher realm, a deeper realm, a realm beyond the tangible realm of flesh and blood.

That's what I want to look at this morning – that realm beyond flesh and blood, the realm of Peter's stroke of insight. And I'm going to begin by telling the story about a Harvard trained brain scientist named Dr. Jill Taylor. At the age of 37, Jill Taylor, a brain scientist, experienced a massive stroke when a blood vessel exploded in the left side of her brain. Now her story is unique. It's the perfect convergence of factors in that as a brain scientist, she can observe her own stroke. And it is the right kind of stroke to observe. She even says that during her stroke, she thinks to herself: "Wow! How many scientists have the opportunity to study their own brain function and mental deterioration from the inside out? ... This is so cool!" So, we can agree that her stroke is unique.

It is significant that the stroke happened in the left side of her brain. The brain has a left side which performs certain functions in life, and a right side which performs very different functions, but they are literally 2 sides, connected by a sort of information highway, giving us a seamless perception of the world, a seamless perception of reality.

The left side of your brain is the rational side. It's the detail oriented side; the time oriented side; the logical side. It does math. Hearing. Speech. Vision. Motor skills. The perception of physical boundaries. It's the left brain which organizes and compares. In our left brain moments are organized into linear time – each moment divided into past, present, and future. Socks go on first. Shoes go on second.

Obviously we need our left brain. You can see that a massive stroke in the left side of our brain is going to have a negative affect on those skills and abilities – maybe debilitating.

The right side of the brain has a different function. “The right brain perceives in pictures, and perceives the big picture of the present moment. To the right mind, NO time exists other than the present moment.”

“Our perception and experience of connection with something greater than ourselves occurs in the present moment. To our right brain, the moment of NOW is timeless and abundant.”

It's our right brain which thinks intuitively outside the box. The right brain is spontaneous, carefree, creative, imaginative. It allows the artistic juices to flow freely without judgment or inhibition.

While the left brain compares and contrasts and categorizes, the right brain identifies similarities and recognizes relationships. The right brain perceives the big picture, and how all is joined together to make up a whole – how everything and everyone is connected as ONE.

So a fascinating thing happens when Jill Taylor suffers this massive stroke in the left side of her brain. As she loses motor skills, and the ability to speak, and the ability to perceive boundaries, and the ability to perceive linear time – as she loses her left brain functions, her right brain continues to operate.

She wonders, “What is happening in my brain?”

She says, “Instead of finding answers and information, I met a growing sense of peace. In place of that constant chatter that had attached me to the details of my life, I felt enfolded by a blanket of tranquil euphoria ... comforted by an expanded sense of grace. In this void of higher cognition and details pertaining to my normal life, my consciousness soared into an all-knowingness, a 'being at one' with the universe, if you will.”

“In the absence of my left hemisphere's analytical judgment, I was completely entranced by feelings of tranquility, safety, blessedness, and euphoria.”

It took 8 hard years for Jill Taylor to fully recover from her massive stroke. Her experience illuminates for us the 2 sides of the brain, and 2 perceptions of reality, which when healthy the brain perceives seamlessly. Her story tells us how we use both sides of our brains.

Peter's confession in today's Gospel, I'm suggesting, is a right brain experience. It's not a sudden decision based on methodical research. (That's left brain.) “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God,” is the sudden experience, the sudden perception of another realm. Peter is at one.

This is like falling in love, like when time is suspended, and the stars are aligned, and all shall be well – euphoric. It's outside day to day preoccupations, and beyond past guilts and future worries. It's the experience of another realm. It's a right brain moment for Peter. It's an epiphany, a stroke of insight.

A stroke of insight. The title of Jill Taylor's book (the brain scientist's book) is entitled, “My Stroke of Insight.” She didn't write the book solely to tell her experience, or solely to explain how the brain works. She had what she calls a stroke of insight, and she's downright evangelical about it. It's what she wants to tell the world, and so she's written this book, and gone on speaking tours and television, and you can find her on the internet.

She says, “My stroke of insight is that at the core of my right hemisphere consciousness is a character that is directly connected to my feeling of deep inner peace. It is completely committed to the expression of peace, love, joy, and compassion in the world.”

And furthermore [and THIS is her insight], she says, we can decide to “step to the right.” We can choose to step into our right brain.

When she was in recovery Taylor wondered, “Would it be possible for me to recover my perception of myself ... without recovering the cells associated with my ego, ... and my need to be right, or my fear of separation and death? Could I value money without hooking into the neurological loops of lack, greed, and selfishness? Could I regain my personal power in the world, ... and yet not lose my sense of compassion or perception of equality with all people? Could I retain my newfound sense of connection with the universe in the presence of my left brain individuality?”

Her stroke of insight is that we can. We can step to the right. We have to practice letting go of our left brain programming and negative loops of thought. We have to choose not to hook into circuits of thought running through our left brain which separate us from the universe. We have to – and we can – choose to step to the right. Much of what we did yesterday was a step to the right.

I’m not sure that Dr. Taylor understands God in orthodox terms; I don’t know. But she’s not far from describing what our religious exercises and practices do. By God’s grace, they transform us. Prayer. Worship. Outreach. Service. Giving away our money. Contemplative prayer. They are all practices in letting go, of surrendering our egos, of dropping our defenses. They are practices in offering ourselves to Someone greater than ourselves.

It’s not simply so I can have deep inner peace or a feeling of euphoria, as wonderful as that is. Dr. Taylor says, “I believe the more time we spend running our inner peace and compassion circuitry (in the brain), the more peace and compassion we will PROJECT into the world, and the more peace and compassion we will have on the planet.” The more we run that right brain circuitry, “the more choice we have in how we think, feel, and behave not just as individuals, but as collaborating members of the human family.”

That’s Dr. Jill Taylor’s stroke of insight. We can step into another realm. We can step from the obviously important left brain of day to day survival into the right brain of what we might call eternal life. We can step out of an individualistic mode of existence into another reality, a reality described by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans: “we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”

There are those who would claim that the left brain is in touch with reality – the tangible, logical, real world which can be separated and measured.

Well, it is real. The other night as I was gazing upon the sunset and pondering the mysteries of the universe in a right brain moment, the mosquito which landed on my arm was real. No longer feeling at one with the universe, I killed it.

But just as the left brain receives and perceives a part of reality, so, too, does the right. What the right brain perceives is real. The realm beyond this physical universe is real. Call it spiritual. Call it Divine. Call it the Kingdom of Heaven. Call it Eternal Life. Call it Real Presence.

Once a week we give up a Sunday morning and gather together, and process to the Altar for a bite of bread and a sip of wine. That’s not logical. That’s not left brain. That’s stepping to the right.

Peter says, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Like Peter, we are stepping into another realm, a realm beyond flesh and blood, into the realm of the Messiah, at one with the Son of the Living God.