

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

The Rev. Dr. Scott Couper

Sunday, January 24, 2021

Third Sunday after Epiphany

“Spiritual Habits Imprinted on Our Brains”

Third in a series of six entitled “The Season of Light and Knowledge”

Romans 12:1-5



“Massive Head Wound Harry” is one of my favorite skits on Saturday Night Live”. Have you ever seen it? No worries if you have not. Matthew has a short episode queued-up. Though it is a bit gross, I think it is a beautiful and humorous lead-in to our message this this morning about psychology, more specifically, neurobiology, and how it can contribute to the growth and deepening of our spiritual lives.

<https://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/massive-head-wound-harry/3505897>

I hope you liked the video. “Massive Head Wound Harry” poses a crucial question for us as people of faith: Which are we? Bodies or Souls? Stated in other words, are we ‘material’ beings or are we ‘spiritual’ beings?



Some people are under the false impression that science has proved the “Nothing Buttery” theory. The “Nothing Buttery” theory states that we are ‘nothing but’ our physical selves. The “Nothing Buttery” theory says that we are ‘nothing but’ a collection of atoms, molecules, complex compounds, bones, sinews, muscles, nerves, and tissue.¹ Indeed, I had this feeling last Tuesday as I watched and listened to my heart beat for forty minutes during an echocardiogram. I watched valves open and close, walls pulse, and blood being pumped on a shockingly consistent basis. Watching, I wondered, am I just a miraculous mechanical machine?

On the other hand, another theory says that we are all spiritual beings. Our bodies are but shells, places we inhabit for a short time and eventually discard. Sometimes this view is expressed with phrases such as ‘mind over matter’ or ‘home is where your heart is’.

¹ John Ortberg, “Can Neuroscience Help Us Disciple Anyone: Brain Science and the Renewal of Your Mind”, *Christianity Today*, July 2014. Found at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2014/summer/can-neuroscience-help-us-disciple-anyone.html>, accessed on January 23, 2021.



Descartes once said, “I think, therefore I am”. In other words, we are ethereal beings and our bodies are irrelevant and disposable dwellings. If we think about it, “Massive Head Wound Harry” suggests that we are spiritual more than we are material. Notice Harry’s personality, actions, naïveté, emotions, and demeanor are unchanged by the physical damage caused by his injury.



Even the Golden Retriever tugging at his scalp fails to cause him any pain. Wouldn’t you agree that “Massive Head Wound Harry” definitely ascribes to the ‘mind over matter” philosophy? I think so. Harry could be considered a modern-day Gnostic.

Our faith tradition, Christianity, does not agree with either philosophy. Or, rather, it agrees with both!



Therefore, we are what one might call 'dualists'. We believe we are both physical and spiritual – and both are important! Genesis says so when God breathed life into Adam. Ezekiel said so when in the valley the Spirit reconstituted the dry bones of God's people. Jesus proved so by the example of his resurrection. Paul said so when he lamented 'the thorn' that tested him. Indeed, we say so, when we celebrate Christ's incarnation in Jesus at the Lord's Table each month.

You may be surprised to learn that psychology, more specifically, neuroscience, agrees with our faith tradition.



“Neuroscience studies the nervous system in general and the brain in particular. Neurobiology looks at the chemistry of cells and their interactions.”²

In my research for this message, I learned that neuroscience teaches us something very important about the mind: the intellect and will (the capacity to have abstract thought and to choose) are immaterial.³ That the intellect and will are immaterial were proved by two experiments.



In order to treat epilepsy, a Noble Prize-winning neurosurgeon severed a bundle of brain fibers called the *corpus callosum* and by doing so separated one half of the brain from the other. Despite severing the brain in two, the patients remained one person. “The persons’ intellect and will – what we might call the soul – remained undivided”.⁴

In another experiment, a surgeon did brain surgery with patients awake

² John Ortberg, “Can Neuroscience Help Us Disciple Anyone: Brain Science and the Renewal of Your Mind”, *Christianity Today*, July 2014. Found at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2014/summer/can-neuroscience-help-us-disciple-anyone.html>, accessed on January 23, 2021.

³ Michael Egnor, “More than Material Minds”, *Christianity Today*, September 14, 2018. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/september-web-only/more-than-material-minds-neuroscience-souls.html>, accessed January 23, 2021.

⁴ Michael Egnor, “More than Material Minds”, *Christianity Today*, September 14, 2018. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/september-web-only/more-than-material-minds-neuroscience-souls.html>, accessed January 23, 2021.

(you can do that because the brain itself does not feel pain). The surgeon realized that by stimulating certain parts of the brain, he could cause reactions (such as seizures or reflexes) or sensations (such as tingling) thus proving that we are in part material and mechanical. Yet, the surgeon realized he could never cause or stimulate reason, or thought. In fact, when the surgeon stimulated a reflex, the patients always knew that something that was being done *to them* rather than *by them*. The conclusion was: the intellect and the will – that are not the brain – cannot be stimulated with the brain. This dismisses the materialist point of view that says we are simply mechanical and affirms the dualist perspective: we are “material beings with immaterial souls”.⁵



Now all of this is just fascinating from an intellectual perspective, but how does it relate to our faith? Well, let us think about something. When typing this sermon, I am not looking at the keyboard. Instead, I am almost instinctively, without thinking, typing words. And even if you can't type, like Bill McCarty, most of us can tie our shoes automatically, without overt conscious

⁵ Michael Egnor, “More than Material Minds”, *Christianity Today*, September 14, 2018. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/september-web-only/more-than-material-minds-neuroscience-souls.html>, accessed January 23, 2021.

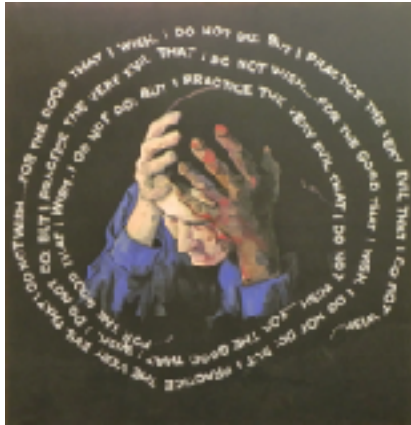
thought. Most of us are able to have a conversation with a passenger and be totally fine driving a vehicle, operating the gas and brake almost without conscious thought. These realizations lead us to conclude that most of our behaviour is governed by habits imprinted on our brains. Indeed, neuroscience teaches that most of our behaviors are actually habitual.



Neuroscientists call the process whereby a brain converts a sequence of action into a routine activity 'chunking'. If leading a faithful and moral life is a goal of our Christian faith, it follows then that that which is desirable has to be made into a habit or a routine. To avoid sin and to foster discipleship, we need to 'chunk' our faith – practice it regularly, routinely, and habitually.



The apostle Paul, other than being an amazing theologian, was perhaps a better psychologist. Paul really understood human behavioral idiosyncrasies. In Romans 7:15-20, the apostle Paul stated:



“I do not understand what I do [...] For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it”. Paul is saying that we are often guided by terrible habits. In an extreme form, these habits are called ‘addictions’. Sin gets into our habits. Sin gets into our neuropathways.



I worked in a homeless shelter for three years before working in Africa. I attended many 12-step groups with my clients. I noticed that the 12-step groups appeal to forming new habits, and not to willpower. One Presbyterian

minister states aptly, “Habits eat willpower for breakfast”.⁶ Think about it this way.



I have run the Comrades ultramarathon seven times. It is a twelve-hour race. One cannot complete the race with willpower alone. Never. One has to train for months, acquire what is known as ‘muscle memory’. One’s body learns through habit and strengthening to run the race. Same goes for playing the cello. We can’t will ourselves to play the cello. We need to develop habits over years to master the mind and body.



Discipleship, or a life of faith, is similar to running a marathon or playing the cello. It has to be a habit imprinted on our brains. We must develop spiritual practices to develop positive spiritual habits. Catholics are especially attuned to the neuroscience of spirituality whereas we as Protestants are

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especially weak. Meditation, prayer, worship, service, silence, contemplation, devotions: all of these are spiritual habits that must be practiced, honed, and allowed to encompass our lives.



As a first step toward your spiritual habit, may I ask that you read Romans 12:1-5 several times this week. Thereafter, answer for yourself, ‘what spiritual habit will enable me to offer my body as a living sacrifice and thus be *transformed by the renewal of my mind*’?

This is the word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.