

Sunday After the Ascension 2017

“As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” (1 St. Peter 4. 10)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) is a medical exam that uses a magnetic field and radio frequencies to generate highly detailed two or three-dimensional images of our internal organs or other body parts. We have all heard descriptions of how people have to lay perfectly still, inside a tunnel-like chamber for the MRI to be effective.

Well, a team of scientists at Princeton University, used an MRI to study the neurological effects of story-telling on our brains. They had a woman tell a story while inside an MRI scanner. They recorded her story on a computer and monitored her brain activity as she spoke. She did this twice, once in English and once in Russian; she was fluent in both languages. Then they had a group of volunteers listen to the stories through headphones while they had their brains scanned. All of the volunteers spoke English, but none understood Russian. After the volunteers heard the story, they were asked some questions to see how much of each story they understood.

When the woman spoke English, the volunteers understood her story, and their brains synchronized. The MRI detected each listener’s brain activity by monitoring blood flow. For example, when a brain region is active it needs more blood to provide oxygen and nutrients; and, the active regions light up on a computer screen. So, in this case, when the story-teller had activity in her insula, an emotional brain region, the listeners did too. When her frontal cortex lit up, so did theirs. By simply telling a story, the woman could plant ideas, thoughts and emotions into the listeners' brains.

The scientist conducting the study also looked at listening comprehension. He found that the more the listeners understood the story, the more their brain activity dovetailed with the speaker's. Amazingly, when you listen to stories and understand them, you experience the exact same brain pattern as the person telling the story.

Of course, the opposite is also true. When the woman spoke Russian, the speaker-listener brain coupling disappeared. The woman tried to communicate something that had happened to her, but the listeners could not understand. Her voice had inflection and emotion, but without comprehensible words to clue them into the action, the listeners could not make sense of her story. Except in the early auditory regions involved in processing sounds, their brains did not have corresponding activity.

When you tell a story to a friend, you can transfer experiences directly to their brain. They feel what you feel. They empathize. What's more, when communicating most effectively, you can get a group of people's brains to synchronize their activity. For example, when trouble develops, they gasp in unison, and when good things happen, they smile together.

For as long as you've got your audience's attention, they are in your mind. When you hear a good story, you develop empathy with the teller because you experience the events for yourself. This makes sense. Stories can be powerful.

I found it helpful to think about today's Epistle and Gospel readings in terms of the findings of this story-telling study. In particular, I was stirred by the deep and direct impact a good story-teller can have on his/her listeners. And yet, the capacity for us to empathize with each other is built into us by God. We know that! There is an invisible connection between the biological and the spiritual which is mysterious but real. As the Psalmist says, "I will give thanks unto Thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (139.13).

In today's Epistle, St. Peter speaks with great urgency about the impact of Charity, and specifically hospitality. He says, "Above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins. Use hospitality one to another without grudging". The charity St. Peter talks about flows directly from the Cross. It is self-less and self-giving – sacrificial. It is to be an imitation/expression of the Love of Christ Jesus Whose precious Blood was shed for us. But, as Matthew Henry, the 17th century, Welsh Bible scholar, points out, the way of charity is radical: "True Christians," he wrote "make the will of God -- not their own lust or desires -- the rule of their lives and actions. And true conversion makes a marvellous change in the heart and life. It alters the mind, judgment, affections, and conversation."

That is an interesting statement: “True conversion makes a marvellous change in heart and life. It alters the mind, judgement, affections and conversation”. In today’s Gospel, the Lord Jesus speaks of this change. He says, “When the Comforter is come, Whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceeds from the Father, He shall testify of Me: and you also shall bear witness...”. The disciples, who abandoned Jesus at the Cross and then hid, full of fear, would soon testify. They would become His courageous messengers! How? By the power of the Comforter Who, Jesus said, He would send to them.

The proof of the disciples’ courage – the evidence of the Holy Spirit’s work among them – is found in today’s Epistle. St. Peter was writing 30 years after the Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ. And what was he speaking about? Charity demonstrated in acts of hospitality. He was urging the Christians throughout the known world to have an impact on their culture. Even though they were in the minority; even though they faced persecution on a daily basis, he encouraged them to look outwards. It was possible for them to have an impact. They were not alone. The Risen Lord was with them and in them by the indwelling of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit.

The story-telling study at Princeton University is simply a modern-day confirmation for us of the possibilities St. Peter was speaking of. It is true: we can, by God’s grace, have a profound impact on others through our words and actions. The Lord has built into us all the capacity to feel love, joy and sadness; and He has made us to be able to empathize, and to bear one another’s burdens. In this week traditionally reserved in the Church for prayer, let us ask God to give us the courage to share His Story – His Good News Story – with others.

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost...