

NON-COMPETITIVE OPPOSITES
Sermon for Pentecost 1A (Trinity)—Gen. 1:1-2:4a
LPC, 6/11/17

One of the points I explored in my doctoral thesis is whether or not spirituality is hardwired into the human brain. I found two neuroscientists who agreed that yes, spirituality is neurologically based.

Both authorities hold that human beings have evolved in such a way that those individuals who had the capacity to conceive of a higher reality than themselves were better equipped to deal constructively with the knowledge of their mortality and therefore survive to breeding age. Thus, through the process of natural selection, these spiritually gifted individuals passed on their genes to subsequent generations, until such point as the capacity to conceptualize higher reality became as human as language or walking upright. The capacity to conceptualize higher reality, I found, is the most general definition of spirituality,

Thus the two authorities I consulted reached the same conclusion that spirituality has a neurological basis. But they disagreed on whether or not this finding disproves the objective existence of a highest reality, which for ease of reference, they both call “God.”

One authority, whose name is Matthew Alper, holds that God is basically a projection of the human imagination which has served its evolutionary purpose. At this stage of human evolution, Alper contends, the cultural baggage that has accrued to the concept of God does more harm than good, and it is time for human beings to toss out religion and focus on maximizing human potential.

The other authority, a team led by Andrew Newberg, says that just because “God” can be proven to exist in human consciousness does not mean that God exists only in human consciousness. In other words, positing a neurological basis to spirituality does not disprove the objective existence God. Guess which of these two neuroscientists I agree with?

The Newberg team goes on to suggest that a cross-disciplinary study called “neurotheology” be undertaken to explore more fully the intersection of neuroscience and theology. The Newberg team emphasize that the so-called dichotomy between science and religion is artificial. Both are matters of faith. Religionists place faith in revelation whereas scientist place their faith in the scientific method and reproducible data.

If this is true, why have human beings placed such a wedge between religion and science? There are many cultural reasons for this. Human beings like definitions. Definitions are discreet. Definitions are reliable. Definitions allow us to learn cumulatively about our environment and therefore survive. When definitions become exclusive of other definitions they become distinctions, which likewise help us survive. This plant is poisonous and this plant is good to eat. This tribe is friendly and this tribe would as soon kill you as look at you.

Distinctions are helpful and necessary, but must they be competitive?

The book of Genesis suggests they don’t. In preparing today’s sermon, what struck me about these familiar opening lines of the Bible was the distinctions: the pairing of opposites. Each day of God’s Creation of the world features such a pairing:

Day 1: Light and darkness

Day 2: Sky and not-sky

Day 3: Land and sea

Day 4: Sun, and moon and stars

Day 5: Fish of the sea and birds of the air

Day 6: Wildlife and domestic animals

Finally: Male and female human beings

What is overwhelmingly apparent is that God created it all, and it was all very good.

This is remarkable in comparison with the foundation myths of other cultures. Many myths from other cultures place the creation of the world in the fulcrum of some conflict: a great cataclysm or war or murder or rape.

My point is that the ancient Hebrews had a particular vision of the foundation of the universe that is far from universal. The particular vision evoked in Genesis underlies the entire scope of Judeo-Christian cosmology.

The foundation of Judeo-Christian cosmology lies in the mutual goodness of apparent distinctions, which I have chosen to call “non-competitive opposites.” Creation, in Judeo-Christian tradition, is a matter of divinely ordained non-competitive opposites: light and dark, sea and land, wet and dry, day and night, wild and domestic, male and female. What does this tell us about the distinctions that human beings insist upon – such as the distinction between religion and science?

It is worth noting, as a sidebar, that besides presenting us with apparent opposites that are both good, Genesis also tells us that God imposed order upon these non-competitive opposites. Christians of good faith may differ about the form that order is to take in human society. But it remains that the Bible tells us that God’s good plan for creation was both multiplicity and harmony.

This is the first Sunday after Pentecost, when Christians traditionally celebrate the Trinity: our formula of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the Trinity, we have yet another example of non-competitive opposites—human and God, three and one, eternal creator and God-with-us in time and space. Our modern minds, conditioned in the methods of the Enlightenment, rebel against the idea that if A is not B, then A and B cannot be one and the same. It may be helpful to remember, as Dr. Newberg suggests, that this kind of exclusive thinking is as much a matter of cultural conditioning as religious belief.

Whether we can grasp this or not, Trinity Sunday invites us, people of faith and people of science, to consider that our very model of God is one of non-competitive opposites: both multiplicity and unity, difference and oneness, distinctions in ultimate harmony.

Harmony in distinctions... Distinctions in ultimate harmony... that could be a definition for love.