

Ecclesia Spiritus, Part 2: Ecclesia of Peace
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If you think that living in the modern world is full of difficulty and uncertainty, imagine life in the first century when Paul was writing his letters. In Paul's world, life expectancy was about half of what it is now. Your Social Security was your children. Affordable Healthcare consisted of herbal remedies and prayer. Air conditioning was an open door and window to your 500 square foot hut, and "central heating" was from a fire pit in the middle of that hut stoked with wood or cow dung.

Do you think your taxes are too high? They're a pittance compared to what you would have been doling out in First Century Palestine. And while we may have significant misgivings about our political system, our ancient predecessors lived under tyrants who were worshipped as gods, to whom annual offerings had to be made or you would be sentenced to death. Many believed that living conditions had become so bad in their day that the world would end soon.

Yet amidst these radically depressing conditions in the biblical world, a new religion was emerging. Its practitioners were no less convinced than anyone else that the world was in trouble but they were far less anxious about it. Instead of radiating fear and anxiety, these people loved and cared for one another so deeply, and looked out at the world through the eyes of such compassion and wonder, that outsiders were profoundly attracted to the religion. So the religion grew like wildfire even when its converts were being persecuted and killed. This new religion, of course, was Christianity.

What made these early Christians so happy when the world was in such a mess?

Judging by the way many Christians present themselves to the world these days – with judgment, fear, and warnings of hellfire and damnation that awaits anyone who doesn't believe the way they do – it seems that much of what gave joy to our predecessors has been lost in modern times. But not really. Not for anyone who takes the time, anyway, to look out at the world through the eyes of the ancients.

Much of what gave these people joy can be recovered in such a way that we, like our predecessors, may find a way of being in the world that is characterized more by joy than by sorrow, more by hope than despair, and more by awe and wonder than by anxiety and fear. This is the purpose of our present worship series, *Ecclesia Spiritus* ("Spirit Church") – to look deeply at what made our forebearers so resilient so that we, too, may share in their resiliency – and their hope in troubled times.

Before looking at the world through the eyes of the ancients, however, let's look at it first through the eyes of modern brain science, which throws surprising light on what was happening in the early church.

Have you ever noticed how differently some people react to the same set of circumstances? When faced with illness, job loss, economic downturn, or personal tragedy, some people take a dramatic turn for the worse, absorbed by fear, or anger, or resentment while others project an air of calm and contentment to the world. The same holds true when people are confronted by *positive* events. Some respond with joy and gratitude while others hardly seem to notice that anything positive has happened at all – as if they're finally being paid back for a long-overdue debt that life owed them.

Psychologists used to believe that our basic orientation toward life – such as whether we have a sunny or a gloomy disposition – was pretty much fixed by the time we are three or four years old. There's little we can do to change our basic response to life's vagaries, they told us. The basic assumption was that our basic personality swiftly becomes “hardwired” in our early years, offering us little hope of breaking out of the mold as we grow older. Yet in recent years, neuroscientists – those who study the brain and its functions – have been challenging these classic assumptions.

What neuroscientists have found is that, while much of our brain is, in fact, hardwired in our early childhood, the brain continues to rewire itself throughout our lives in response to various stimuli. Change, even radical change, is possible. If your brain is stuck in a rut, the good news is that you can essentially upscale your brain hardware. You can move from Brain 1.0 to Brain 2.0 and beyond. How this all happens is the focus of the study of “neuroplasticity” – that is, the brain's ability to form and reorganize itself in response to various thoughts and experiences.

Believe it or not, your brain contains some 100 billion nerve cells, called neurons, that are involved in this formation and re-formation. You have so many neurons, in fact, that if they were each sheets of paper stacked one on top of the other, the stack would stretch for 5,000 miles, or the distance from Omaha to Vienna, Austria. Neurons both receive and transmit electrical and chemical signals to the rest of your body. How these neurons are connected to one another governs everything from our feelings to our actions.

To give a very basic example, when I was young I hated cantaloupe. Merely putting my tongue on a slice of cantaloupe produced sensations of revulsion and disgust, causing my face to grimace, my body to pull away, and my throat to gag. But my grandmother changed all that. While she was no neuroscientist, she basically caused the neurons in my brain that recognized cantaloupe to detach from the neurons in my brain that shot chemicals through my body that produced

revulsion and disgust and attach themselves instead to neurons that sent pleasure impulses through me.

How did she do this? She offered to pay me a nickel for every piece of cantaloupe I ate! I loved nickels. I loved nickels more than I was repulsed by cantaloupe. So every time I ate a piece of cantaloupe, the pleasure chemicals that shot through my brain in response to the thought of receiving a nickel overcame the revulsion response that my brain had associated with the cantaloupe. It happened enough times that eventually I didn't need the nickels to produce pleasure while eating cantaloupe. The mere memory of having received nickels produced the same pleasurable experience.

As neuroscientists observe, "neurons that fire together wire together." The neurons in my brain that recognized the look and taste of cantaloupe had ultimately become wired to the pleasure-emitting neurons I used to associate with nickels.

You may be wondering what all this has to do with the early church. Glad you asked!

Remember Jesus's most fundamental message in the gospels, properly translated, is: "The Kingdom of Heaven *is already here*. Change *your whole way of thinking* and believe the good news!" (Matthew 4:17//Mark 1:15)

That "change your whole way of thinking" part kind of jumps out now, doesn't it? Jesus is saying that our experience of God's Realm on earth – our experience of awe and wonder, joy and happiness – is not dependent upon external realities so much as *internal* ones. It involves a change of *thought*, not circumstance.

You remember Jesus's Beatitudes: *Blessed* are the poor; *blessed* are those who mourn, *blessed* are the persecuted; *blessed* are those who wage peace in a time of war; *blessed* are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness in an unrighteous world, and so on. Jesus is not claiming that poverty is a good thing any more than he's claiming that death is pleasurable or that persecution is a happy experience. He's saying that when any of these things are set against the larger context of life, the blessings far outweigh the curses – even for the poor, the persecuted, and those who have experienced loss of one kind or another. God created us in love, even loving the frail and fractured parts of us. Those who have eyes to see discover, therefore, that God surrounds us with blessings beyond number each and every day.

For people who are profoundly convinced of the beneficence of life, they will, when mourning the loss of a loved one, focus far more of their attention on the blessings they received through their beloved, and perhaps even the blessings they are presently receiving through their grief. Those who are convinced that

the universe is a cold, hard, empty place, or who presume that the universe is set against them have a much different experience of the same reality.

Why? Because these people's *brains* are different, not their circumstance. One person's brain has learned to connect daily reality with blessing and gratitude, so they get out of bed each morning expecting to find it. The other person is convinced that "life sucks." So they get out of bed each morning expecting to find their feelings justified. On the whole, each finds pretty much exactly what they are looking for.

It's not that the people who are focused on life's blessings ignore the painful stuff. It's just that they make connections between their struggles and all their other blessings, allowing them to find pathways to blessing even within the pain. Their brains are literally wired for blessing.

For early Christians, Jesus provided them just such a pathway. His life, death, and resurrection showed them that no experience in life – even being hung on a Roman cross – could disconnect them from blessing. And no trespass however great in this world could disconnect a person from God's love and grace provided one chose to seek refuge in it.

Remember, droves of people from around the Mediterranean Basin were being drawn to the early Christian church because Christians were so much happier than the average population. Awe and wonder had replaced gloom and doom, even amidst severe persecution. Neuroscience suggests that for an entire population of people to change in this way, and to remain changed, their brains must have become extensively re-wired. Taking Jesus's central message about the presence of God's Realm on earth is what did it.

In our day, with network news and radio talk shows constantly fixated on what's bad about the world as opposed to what is right about it, our brains have become massively wired to expect the worst from life. Most days, if you get out of bed in the morning without actively planning to receive blessing from the world, and give blessing to the world, you've lost the battle before it has begun. If you get out of bed without thinking about what the day ahead of you will bring, and without active intention to give and receive blessing, you will have missed scores of opportunities to re-wire your brain to what some call Christ Consciousness.

If you are to stand any chance of experiencing the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven that is already here, and living a life that is in any way comparable to that of the early church, you have to be extremely focused on Jesus's core message and the Reality behind it. Put another way, you have to wage war against the world's despair or you will succumb to it.

This week, I suggest you try a little exercise and see what happens. Each morning, remind yourself that God really does exist, really is loving and gracious,

and really seeks to fill your life with blessing despite the fact that you are full of flaws and fractures. Remind yourself, too, that God is just as loving and gracious to whomever you may encounter in your day as God is toward you. Then, enter your day expecting both to receive blessing and to give blessing to others.

As much as possible, try to envision yourself as a healing force in the world. When you encounter those who are as fractured and fragmented as you are – or more so – don't think of them as "bad" or "evil." For however "bad" or "evil" they may actually be, the Cross and Empty Tomb show us that life and our relationship with God is about so much more than good versus evil. Think of those who arouse negative thoughts simply as sick people in need of healing and wholeness. Then focus healing thoughts on them. Imagine that a healing energy surrounds you, and that just being in your presence provides a little more healing than being outside your presence.

At the end of the day, evaluate how well you did with this little exercise, then write down each and every thing you are grateful for about your day. The next day, do the whole thing again.

If you hold true to this exercise long enough, you will gradually move from Brain 1.0 to Brain 2.0. Your thoughts will change your responses to life which, in turn, will wire your brain for blessing. And you will come to know what Paul was getting at when he said, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view ... So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:16-17) And, in Christ, God "created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody." (Ephesians 2:15)