

Worship the Lord

No. 79, July 2016



Worship and the Right Brain

By Johnold Strey

"So, Honey, what did you think about that service?" his wife inquired as the family drove home after Ash Wednesday worship. Their congregation included the imposition of ashes for the first time, and it seemed like a natural topic to bring up on the way home.

"I'm not sold on the ashes yet. I mean, I don't think there was anything wrong with it, but it just didn't do much for me. What did you think about it?"

"I loved it! It was so powerful seeing all of God's people come back to their seats with cross-shaped ashes on their foreheads. And I got a little emotional when the pastor said to me, 'Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.' But I thought it was a powerful message of repentance."

Their teenage son chimed in from the back of the car: "I thought it was a little creepy that the pastor was basically telling each one of us that we're going to die. And did you hear him get choked up when his kids came up?"

"It was a little uncomfortable having him stand so close to me to put the ashes on my head, but I liked it," their recently confirmed daughter said.

Their fifth grade son finally added his two cents worth: "I liked that I could participate. It was different, but it was kind of interesting."

The preceding family conversation may be fictitious, but it does reflect some of the different reactions worship leaders will encounter when their congregations enter more deeply into the realm of rite, ritual, ceremony, and symbolism in worship.

Experiences like the imposition of ashes and other worship rituals are often discussed as a dichotomy: Do you like "high church" or "low church"? Do you like artistic expression in worship, or do you prefer the service to be simple and straightforward? To those dichotomies, add discussions about emotions in worship or the concern that some ceremonies might be misunderstood, and you can see how this topic is ripe for debate!

Do you like artistic expression in worship, or do you prefer the service to be simple and straightforward?

There is another way to consider this topic that will avoid false dichotomies and move the discussion into a more profitable sphere. We best understand and appreciate worship's ceremonies, symbols, and rituals when we understand them as forms of communication. Different forms of communication interact

We best understand and appreciate worship's ceremonies, symbols, and rituals when we understand them as forms of communication.

differently with the two hemispheres of our brain. Understanding how the mind processes information, we see how rituals and symbolism in worship are uniquely designed to communicate to the right hemisphere of the brain, while the words of worship communicate to the left hemisphere.

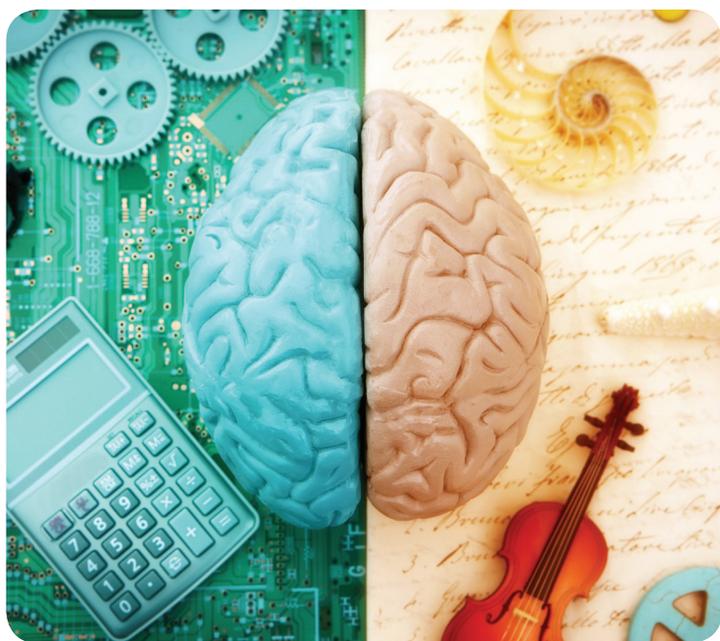
Pastor Strey served congregations in California for 15 years before accepting a call this summer to Crown of Life in Hubertus, WI. A 2001 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, he received a master's degree in Pastoral Liturgy and Liturgical Music from Santa Clara University in 2009. He served as the Arizona-California District Worship Coordinator for ten years, and presently serves as a presenter for the Schools of Worship Enrichment and as a member of the WELS Hymnal Project's Rites Committee. He is currently writing a book on worship to be published by NPH.

Continued on next page

Rituals and symbolism in worship are uniquely designed to communicate to the right hemisphere of the brain.

Two Hemispheres

In popular language, people sometimes speak about the “left brain” and the “right brain.” In reality, of course, we do not have two brains, but two hemispheres that serve unique purposes and that work together to help us function. The psychologist Bessel van der Kock gives a concise summary.



We now know that the two halves of the brain do speak different languages. The right is intuitive, emotional, visual, spatial, and actual, and the left is linguistic, sequential, and analytical. While the left half of the brain does all the talking, the right half of the brain carries the music of experience. It communicates through facial expressions and body language and by making the sounds of love and sorrow: by singing, swearing, crying, dancing, or mimicking. The right brain is the first to develop in the womb, and it carries the nonverbal communication between mothers and infants. We know the left hemisphere has come online when children start to understand language and learn how to speak (*The Body Keeps the Score*, p. 44).

Not only does the right hemisphere begin to develop earlier than the left, but it also reaches its full development much sooner: the right hemisphere reaches its full development around age three, while the left may continue until age 29. In other words, the affective or emotional side is at its full potential long before the cognitive or logical side is even close to half way there. (This

goes a long way to explain toddler temper tantrums and the sometimes illogical choices our teenage children make!) Finally, by God’s design, each gender tends to favor one hemisphere over the other: a woman’s right hemisphere is generally more dominant than the left hemisphere, while the opposite tends to be true for men.

We recognize the importance of engaging both hemispheres in various aspects of our ministries. Seminary students learn to develop Catechism lessons that achieve a cognitive goal (students learned the main point) and an affective goal (students deepened their appreciation for God’s grace). As preachers, we deliver sermons that are not just aimed at the “head” (left brain) but also at the “heart” (right brain). In the same way, worship will best communicate to all of God’s gathered people when it seeks to speak to both the left and right halves of the brain.

Some challenges

We in WELS are blessed with a ministry educational system that is second to none—high standards and rigorous curriculum for future pastors. Four years of Greek, two of Hebrew, and a well-balanced liberal arts education precede our seminary years, where we then hone Greek and Hebrew exegetical skills so that we can say with confidence “Thus saith the Lord.”

As we shape and sharpen our skills, notice which hemisphere of the brain is primarily active: the left. A great deal of our pastoral work involves the left brain—sermon studies and writing, Catechism instruction and Bible classes, reports, newsletter articles, and more. Because so much of our work is left brain activity, it is understandably easy for us to omit consideration of engaging the right brain equally in our worship life.

Our background also leads us to favor left-brain thinking. Past generations of Lutherans often viewed ceremony and ritual as Roman Catholic instead of universal catholic or a tool to engage the right brain in worship. August Pieper’s (d. 1946) rebuttal to the liturgical and ceremonial tendencies of the Missouri Synod shaped synodical thinking: “*Wir sind von dem Wisconsin Synode; wir machen kein ‘show.’*” Ceremony, which engages the right brain, was simply not seen as a part of WELS practice. On a larger scale, post-Enlightenment Western culture tends to value the activity of the left brain over the right. Notice that when public school budget cuts are proposed, music and the arts are the first to take a hit!

Even with these challenges, we still recognize the importance of the right brain in communication and interpersonal interactions. How many friendly conversations over email or social media have taken a turn for the worse because a statement read by the recipient was not interpreted through the emotions of the writer? A winking emoji might help, but typed text is a difficult medium for communicating emotions, and the emotional content of a message carries a great deal of meaning that nuances a literal reading of words. Sometimes it takes a follow-up phone call where voice inflection can be heard, or a meeting over coffee where facial gestures can be seen, to adequately clear

up the confusion. As further evidence, consider the advertising campaign of a Phoenix firm that makes video recordings of court depositions. Three pictures depicting different facial expressions strongly validate the ad's headline: 93% of communication is non-verbal. Why use the firm's recording services? A typed manuscript of a witness's statements gives only a small portion of their overall communication. Their eye rolls, sighs, and shocked looks on a video tell far more than quotations on a sheet of paper.

93% of communication is non-verbal



Right Brain and Everyday Life

Right brain communication can be as simple as a smile. The verbal greeting, "Welcome!" carries more weight accompanied by a smile and a warm tone of voice than the same greeting offered with a monotone voice and an expressionless face. When my children run to the front door and shout "Daddy's home!" or when my wife greets me with a hug and a kiss at the end of the work day, I sense warmth, love, and sincerity far more than if my entrance were met only with words. In fact, if those end-of-day gestures are missing, I might surmise that something is wrong. Every gesture, facial expression, vocal inflection, and simple ritual that is a part of our default daily routine speaks messages that are often louder than words, and these messages are comprehended by the right brain.

Symbols such as the American flag carry great meaning when we view them from the perspective of the right brain. Hardly anyone views the flag's 13 stripes and 50 stars as *only* a statement about 13 original colonies and 50 present states—and if they did, they would be viewing the flag from an exclusively left brain perspective. The veteran sees a symbol of the nation he loves and the ultimate sacrifice fellow soldiers made to defend our nation. The flag in procession in an Independence Day parade may bring that veteran to tears, because the flag says so much more than 13 colonies and 50 states. The immigrant who has begun the path to citizenship sees the flag as a symbol of the freedom that he now enjoys in the United States.

Ceremonies have a way of saying "This is important!" far more powerfully than if we simply *state* "This is important!" When the boyfriend ceremonially gets down on one knee and opens the little box toward his beloved while gazing into her eyes, he will do well *not* to explain the symbolic statement of kneeling or the symbolism implied by diamonds set into a gold circle. If he actually engaged in left brain communication during the marriage proposal, at best he would be accused of being a romantic clod, and at worst he might lose the girl!

We even use ceremonies to express the (relative) importance of a sports championship. Pomp and circumstance surrounds the presentation of the Lombardi Trophy at the end of the Super Bowl. As the appointed "processional music" begins, a previous Super Bowl MVP, often "vested" in his Hall of Fame jacket, processes forward with the symbolic object to the "chancel" (stage), where it is presented to the team owner as a symbol of victory. Imagine the reaction from fans if someone suggested getting rid of the post-game ceremony. I doubt the idea to ditch the ceremony would be well-received! We engage in ceremonies like these to state the significance and importance of the event we are celebrating. Words alone seem insufficient.

Right Brain and Lutheran Worship

If gestures, tone of voice, symbolism, and ceremony are effective right-brain focused methods of communication in secular settings as diverse as public parades, marriage proposals, and sports championships, it goes without saying that all of these things can also be effective means of communication in public worship.

Our Creator God, who designed the human mind, certainly encouraged the proclamation of his gospel message through right-brain communication. Consider the daily sacrifices in the Old Testament and the message those sacrifices proclaimed. Consider especially the Day of Atonement. The bull and the goat that were



slaughtered and whose blood was sprinkled on the atonement cover; the scapegoat that had the people's sins "transferred" to it and then was carried out into the wilderness to die—these God-prescribed ceremonies from Leviticus 16 surely made an emotional impact on the people who witnessed them! The writer to the Hebrews connects the dots and reveals the meaning of this visually impactful ceremony: "[Jesus] did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption" (9:12). Old Testament believers didn't have had the benefit of New Testament 20/20 hindsight, but they did have the vivid and striking visual sermon of the sacrifice whose blood would be shed and the substitute who would take on their sins and be led out of the community to die on their behalf.

Old Testament worship is descriptive for us, not prescriptive. But even though it is only descriptive, it is nevertheless *instructive* for us as we plan worship in ways that will communicate to both head and heart. Permit a personal example to show how we can make a right-brain impact in worship while still faithfully communicating the words and message of the gospel to the left brain.

Old Testament worship is descriptive for us, not prescriptive. But even though it is only descriptive, it is nevertheless instructive.

On June 29, 1997, worship at Grace Lutheran Church in downtown Milwaukee celebrated that day's minor festival, the Commemoration of Saints Peter and Paul. I was there as a guest for the service, which was held in conjunction with a conference sponsored by the Commission on Worship. The order of worship included a bit more liturgical music and ceremony than a typical summer service at Grace. Seeing a procession during the opening hymn and celebrating a minor festival were new experiences to me, and I still remember the day as if it were yesterday.

The recessional hymn, "Lord, When Your Glory I Shall See" (*Christian Worship*, 219), made the most impact on me. With Christ's cross was held up high, we concluded a service that remembered two great saints whose examples of faith were held up for us to emulate. As we sang the hymn, so many elements of the service struck me in a unique way. The closing hymn tune is by Kurt Eggert, under whom I had the privilege to sing in the Lutheran Chorale of Milwaukee during his last year as its director. The hymn brought to mind a pastor whose example I appreciated and wanted to emulate—a fitting personal application on a day when we considered Peter and Paul and their examples of faith. The dignity of the recession, the beauty of the processional cross, the message of the morning, the festive celebration of the Sacrament, and the personal connection of the hymn all combined to create an emotional and memorable moment for me.

The beauty and artistry of the service proclaimed the good news of Christ to my heart affectively even as Scripture, sermon, and song texts proclaimed that same gospel to my head cognitively.

But that moment was more than a modest tear-producing conclusion to a service. With a number of devotional and personal thoughts swirling through my mind as the assembly sang the closing hymn, the beauty and artistry of the service proclaimed the good news of Christ to my heart *affectively* even as Scripture, sermon, and song texts proclaimed that same gospel to my head *cognitively*. The service demonstrated that speaking to the head and heart is not either/or but both/and.

Instead of listing practical ways to add ceremony to your services, I've shared a personal anecdote. Why? Because the focus of this article is not so much on ideas for worship as it is about the impact of right brain communication. Right brain communication in worship is not about following the rubrics as much as it is about confidently using gestures, symbolism, and ceremony, and allowing them to speak for themselves to God's people gathered for worship. How that looks may differ from Citrus Heights to Cedarburg. But when we consider how much of communication is non-verbal (and therefore aimed at the right brain), and when we also consider the large percentage of worshippers who are right-brain dominant, we will be less inclined to view this discussion along old dichotomies and more encouraged to see the beautiful possibilities that lie before us in Lutheran worship.

God bless your left- and right-brain communication efforts to his glory!

2017 Worship Conference

June 13-16, 2017 – Carthage College, Kenosha, WI

With smaller satellite sites later in June and July at Sharpsburg, GA (near Atlanta) and Irvine, CA (Orange County).

See wels.net/events/worshipconference for more information.

Previous Conferences

Resources—presentation outlines, worship folders, photos, audio excerpts—are available at worship.welsrc.net.