A couple of years ago on the Science Channel, Morgan Freeman narrated an episode of “Through the Wormhole,” on how prayer and meditation affect brain activity. Dr. Andrew Newberg has studied for decades this “neuroscientific” effect of religious and spiritual experiences.

Dr. Newberg injects volunteers with a harmless radioactive dye that follows the blood flow in the brain. After taking a baseline image of a volunteer’s brain, the volunteer then prays or meditates depending on their beliefs. Christians tended to pray. Buddhists would meditate. Atheists would be asked to “contemplate God.”

While they are praying or meditating, Dr. Newberg takes another image of the volunteer’s brain. The radioactive dye in the bloodstream tended to congregate in areas of the brain which seem the most active when a volunteer was praying or meditating.

A Presbyterian minister was a part of this study and during prayer, the greatest brain activity was observed in the frontal lobes and language centers of the brain.
The differences that Buddhist meditation created were found in the visual parts of a monk’s brain. There was no difference between the two scans of the atheist’s brain.

Dr. Newberg theorizes that for religious people, God is real and praying to God is like talking to your friend here in the physical world. “This experience is at least neurologically real.” says Dr. Newberg.

For science, the “reality” of God is mind-based. It is your brain that processes your interactions with the world. But there is where God stops, at the edges of the brain.

However, the incarnational being of Jesus – God – makes it possible to sit down with Him, have some coffee, pray, and talk to one another. It allows for the “neurologically real” experience of God to exist.

In Buddhism, one has to shed their humanity. In Islam, Allah remains in heaven but sends the words of God to a prophet. Jews have the Law, but no YHWH in human form.

With Jesus, the line between the sacred and the temporal is shattered. The Creator at last comes to the creation again. Instead of walking in the Garden of Eden, God now walked on dusty roads and marbled temple floors. God is no longer out there but here, cloaked in humanity and all of our experiences – birth, family, friends, enemies, successes, failures, and death.

The incarnational character of Christianity, sacralizes once more, the Earth and human existence and experiences. Jesus’ birth into human form while still maintaining His divinity, has reaffirmed in humanity and all of creation a sacredness that defies “scientific” calculation.

If we are a truly incarnational people, then coming together to care for and work on the problems that God calls out to us, is a sacred activity. Whether it is the inclusion of all peoples in our midst, comforting those who risk their lives for strangers, feeding the hungry or educating the laity, tangible human action is needed and is sacred.

“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Mark 1:15
The Divine is all around us. Jesus made it so. If we believed that, how would we act differently, with one another, with ourselves, with creation?

The 19 endowments of the UMC Foundation are one of the many ways that we can walk with others and share our experience. It is this belief that helps The United Methodist Church to deal with real issues, in real times and places for all humans. We can continue drawing the kingdom of God nearer to us all.

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