

THE SACRAMENT OF BREATHING
PENTECOST SUNDAY – MAY 31, 2020
BECKY ROBBINS-PENNIMAN
CHURCH OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD, DUNEDIN, FL

This version of the coming of the Holy Spirit isn't very exciting, is it?

Unlike the reading from Acts, there's no mighty wind, no tongues of fire.

Jesus just breathes on his disciples.

Of course, this is a deeply symbolic act; God's breath flowed over the void to begin shaping all of Creation.

Jesus' breath flowing over the disciples begins reshaping all of humanity.

Even so, this quiet act has not exactly been a favorite scene for artists over the centuries.

I couldn't find one painting, statue, or even clipart of this event.

Yet breathing is literally life. It is our first independent act after we're born.

Each breath we take enables all of our other living bits and parts work.

A breath enables us to communicate with our mouths and with our fingers.

Whether we're talking, typing, texting, tweeting or having a tantrum, if we can't breathe, we won't live.

Indeed, nearly 370,000 people on this small planet have died in 5 months, about 30% of them here in the United States,

because a disease took away, very specifically, their ability to breathe.

At the same time, we're in the middle of a 2nd terrifying crisis in our civic life

because a human being's life ended with the gasping cry of "**I can't breathe.**"

Ironically, if we CAN breathe, we don't think much about the breaths we take.

I don't know about you, but until a few short weeks ago,

I had no idea that the purely instinctive act of taking a breath

has the potential to kill me, or, just as horrifying, for me to kill someone else just because we happen to be near each other.

My daughter-in-law told a story on Facebook of being in a grocery store, with her mask on, when she felt a sneeze coming – the poor woman has terrible allergies.

She had 3 choices: try to hold in the sneeze – a non-starter;

take off the mask and let 'er rip; or sneeze into the mask.

She chose number 3, sneezing 6 times. The outcome, she lamented, "was disgusting."

But what she didn't do was unload that sneeze's disgusting output

on some innocent bystander who had no choice in the matter.

This Pentecost moment, this intimate scene of Jesus breathing on his disciples, is now weirdly evocative, because all of the sudden breathing on someone else is no longer just a routine body function for any of us.

Now, we ascribe meaning to it, with almost as much intentionality as Jesus.

The very *WAY* we take breaths – do we do so with a mask, or without one? –

for some of us has become a polarizing political declaration.

Let's step back from our anger, our anxiety, our need to be right,

and consider what God has been doing for thousands and thousands of years by using God's breath on, in, with and among God's people.

God is not stingy with the divine breath, the *ruach*, the Hebrew word for Spirit.

God delights in sharing the Holy Spirit with us.

The psalmist exults how in Creation, God breathes all Creation into life.

Evidently, God actually had fun doing it; that verse where God made a Leviathan – just for the sport of it – is one of the most delightful images in the Bible.

Moses asks God to empower and inspire more people, he understands that, like love, giving our spirit to another doesn't diminish what we have, but grows its power for all. Jesus has had a very busy day since before sunrise that Easter Sunday, (the story we read is set on the evening of Easter Sunday), and he now gives his spirit to the same people who had abandoned him in fear just the Friday before. The purpose of this inspiration (to inspire literally means to fill with breath) was not to comfort his distraught disciples; Jesus had already several times given them his peace. The purpose of entrusting them with his Holy Spirit was to commission them. Their mission: to deal with sin, which the Holy Spirit does in two ways. One is to set people free from sin, from enslavement to evil; to release us from bondage to all ways of living that do not bring abundant life to us and to all the earth. In case we need a reminder about how God intends for us to live, Jesus set it out plainly just a few days earlier, on Maundy Thursday. As he was washing the disciples' feet, he said: *I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other.* In the Gospel of John, to love means to lay down one's life for others, just as Jesus, the Good Shepherd, laid down his life for us, his sheep, to protect them from the ravenous wolves that snatch and scatter them. To forgive another means to do for others what Jesus did for us: to do whatever we can to make life abundant for others by laying down our lives to fight off the wolves that destroy them. God's self-giving way of loving us, not condemning us, is the Way of Jesus all of his disciples are called to walk. At the same time, though, Jesus says that if they retain another's sins, those sins are not released. Until now, I've always thought and taught that this means that forgiving was a purposeful, active act and that we needed to be extremely thorough in looking for ways to love the unlovable and forgive the unforgiveable, lest neither we nor others would have the abundant life Jesus gives. But today, given the vicious rhetoric of the many different roving packs of wolves that are attacking and scatter us, I hear Jesus' words differently: *to retain sins* means to tell the truth about what is facing us, to name the divisive forces that are scattering us: the wolves of poverty, racism, despair, the wolves of privilege, selfishness, and greed, and, yes, the wolves of violence and looting. One of those wolves was laid bare by the disease that snatches our breath away. The fact that, *collectively, Black Americans represent 13% of the US population... but have suffered 25% of U.S. deaths*¹ means is something very wrong. Black's face greater risk just in getting sick than do whites or anyone else. Why? If we just shrug and say, "Oh, that's too bad, so sad for the blacks, but whatever," then we are complicit with the wolves snatching and scattering God's sheep. If we are to follow the Way of Jesus, we need to name that sin of inequality and unfairness. We need to find out what is keeping Jesus' sheep from having God's abundant life a life we want for ourselves, and we need to lay down our lives for those sheep until they have it, too. This is the only way to love them the way Jesus loved us. Yeah, it's hard. But sending us out to love as he did is exactly WHY Jesus gives his disciples the Holy Spirit.

¹ *The Color of Coronavirus: COVID-19 Deaths By Race and Ethnicity In the U.S.*
<https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>

Paul assures us that we will each use that gift of the Holy Spirit in our own way,
and EACH PERSON is given *a demonstration of the Spirit*

NOT for their own spiritual joy and fulfillment, though that may come, but *for the common good*.

For the common good of the Body of Christ,
which is everyone, says Paul: Jew, Greek, slave, or free.

A couple of weeks ago, Cindy preached that the Holy Spirit isn't an "it," the Holy Spirit is God,
the very person and being of God.

We state in the Creed that the Holy Spirit *proceeds from the Father and the Son*,
and today's Gospel is about how, quite literally,

God the Son continues the procession of God the Holy Spirit to us, Jesus' followers,
flowing into our being through the breath of life that God gives to all Creation.

We Episcopalians are used to the concept of taking in the person of God, receiving the Body of Christ,
the living presence of Jesus into our very being in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

The consecrated elements are so precious that we keep them in a tabernacle,
under lock and key, so that they are not misused.

But God also gives God's very self to us an average of 16 times a minute
as we take another of our average of 23,000 breaths each day.

Like food, we breathe air into our very being and we are filled with good things,
not because we deserve them, but because our Creator rejoices in doing so,
giving them to us and to all other creatures, including even a Leviathan.

What if we took each breath into our bodies with as much reverence
as when we stretch out our hands to receive the Body of Christ?

Paul teaches us earlier in 1st Corinthians [6:19] that our bodies are the temple, the tabernacle,
of the Holy Spirit, and that we do not belong to ourselves but to God,
and that we should honor God with our bodies.

What if we saw each breath we take as being so precious that we would ensure,
as the breath is placed inside us, a tabernacle of the Holy,
that we never misuse that breath by the way we live?

What if we saw every other person as a tabernacle of the Holy, too?

The Episcopal Church, along with Roman Catholics and other traditions,
defines sacraments *as outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace*,
given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.

What if we could see breathing as a sacrament, a gift of spiritual grace given to us by Christ
with every breath we take, 23,000 times a day?

If we could believe that our very breathing fills us with Christ's grace,
would we keep that grace for ourselves, or give it away?

If we could believe that our very breathing fills us with Christ's grace,
enlivening the bits and parts of our bodies to do what they do,
what would our talk, our typing, our texting and tweeting be full of?

If we have a tantrum, wouldn't it be one that cries out for justice,
for the common good that the Holy Spirit intends for us?

If we believe that our very breathing fills us with Christ's grace,
we must stop the scattering and snatching wolves, we must lay down our lives,
we must heal the divisions in this nation and everywhere.

We must, because in the love of God the Father, the Body of God the Son,
and the breath of God the Holy Spirit, we are all one.

COLLECT OF THE DAY:

O God, on this day you open the hearts of your faithful people by sending into us your Holy Spirit. Direct us by the light of that Spirit, that we may have a right judgment in all things and rejoice at all times in your peace, through Jesus Christ, your Son and our Lord, who live and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

NUMBERS 11:24-29

So Moses went out and told the people the Lord's words. He assembled seventy men from the people's elders and placed them around the tent. The Lord descended in a cloud, spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and placed it on the seventy elders. When the spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but only this once. Two men had remained in the camp, one named Eldad and the second named Medad, and the spirit rested on them. They were among those registered, but they hadn't gone out to the tent, so they prophesied in the camp. A young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp."

Joshua, Nun's son and Moses' assistant since his youth, responded, "My master Moses, stop them!"

Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? If only all the Lord's people were prophets with the Lord placing his spirit on them!"

PSALM 104: 25-35,37

O LORD, how manifold are your works! in wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.

Yonder is the great and wide sea with its living things too many to number, creatures both small and great.

There move the ships, and there is that Leviathan, which you have made for the sport of it.

All of them look to you to give them their food in due season.

You give it to them; they gather it; you open your hand, and they are filled with good things.

You hide your face, and they are terrified; you take away their breath, and they die and return to their dust.

You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; and so you renew the face of the earth.

May the glory of the LORD endure for ever; may the LORD rejoice in all his works.

He looks at the earth and it trembles; he touches the mountains and they smoke.

I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will praise my God while I have my being.

May these words of mine please him; I will rejoice in the LORD.

Bless the LORD, O my soul. Hallelujah!

1 CORINTHIANS 12:3-13

So I want to make it clear to you that no one says, "Jesus is cursed!" when speaking by God's Spirit, and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. There are different spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; and there are different ministries and the same Lord; and there are different activities but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. A demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good. A word of wisdom is given by the Spirit to one person, a word of knowledge to another according to the same Spirit, faith to still another by the same Spirit, gifts of healing to another in the one Spirit, performance of miracles to another, prophecy to another, the ability to tell spirits apart to another, different kinds of tongues to another, and the interpretation of the tongues to another. All these things are produced by the one and same Spirit who gives what he wants to each person.

Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many. We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one Spirit to drink.

JOHN 20:19-23

It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you."

Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven."

SERMON HYMN: *Lead Us, Heavenly Father, Lead Us*

BLESSING: Live without fear: your Creator has made you holy, has always protected you, and loves you unconditionally. Go in peace to follow the Way of Jesus, and as you journey, the blessing of our Triune God, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, be with you now and always.