

Breathing All Together
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SCRIPTURE READING- Acts 2: 1-6

The Holy Spirit Comes at Pentecost

2 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.

GOSPEL READING- The Gospel of John 20:19-23

Jesus Appears to His Disciples

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Take a breath. Really, go ahead and take a breath in. Now blow it out. Take another breath in. Blow it out. "Did you know the word "conspire" means to breathe together? When you breathed together, did you know that you launched a conspiracy? The word "conspire" means "to breathe together, to breathe united, to breathe as one." It's interesting to consider our breathing, as it's probably something we don't often reflect on.

There are movements such as yoga that focuses our breathing. It's true for meditation and even for contemplative prayer. There are great spiritual teachers who speak to the power of deeply breathing in and breathing out. Even the "Jesus Prayer" is set to our breathing, where you breathe in and say out loud or silently, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God," and as you breathe out, "Have mercy upon me a sinner." There's something about our breathing. It brings us life energy; it can even bring us peace and calm.

I can remember when Candace and I were practicing our breathing for childbirth. I'm pretty sure I failed on this one. As we were in the delivery room, I didn't know what to say after saying, "Keep breathing and push" a million times. There was a moment where it appeared like Candace stopped breathing though, so I kept reminding her "breathe in and out, breath with me." It was when we started breathing together, in and out, we began to calm down and find peace. It was a conspiracy, well sort of, we were united in our desire for Zechariah to be born healthy and be welcomed in our loving arms. As we held him for the first time, we could feel his

little lungs rising and falling and could feel his breath against our faces. There's nothing more joyful or beautiful than that. There have also been times where I have stood at the bedside of faithful people as they breathed their last. In moments like this, we are united in the experience of the mystery of life and death. Breathing is a miracle, breathing together is a conspiracy.

There are several post-resurrection stories in the Gospels where Jesus appears to Mary, to his followers walking along the road, to the disciples locked behind closed doors and they always seem to be frightened. By the end of John's Gospel we find the disciples safely locked behind closed doors in fear when the resurrected Jesus stood among them and said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Was this a foretaste of Pentecost? Jesus breathed on them his own life giving, Spirit filled breath; moving them from fear to being sent and from breathing ordinary air to breathing in the Holy Spirit. The conspiracy had begun in Jesus' very own breath.

The disciples were all together again, or maybe still, on the fiftieth day, called Pentecost, a Jewish festival. It was a time when they were all together. From the day of resurrection, Easter, they witnessed sightings and interactions with the risen Christ who ascended into heaven after forty days and told them to wait. "Do not leave Jerusalem," Jesus told them, "but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." You have to wonder about how the disciples felt about his command to wait. Were they ready to go, to be sent? Were they still frightened by Roman or the religious authorities? Did they know that by their breathing together, they launched a conspiracy?

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, "There they were, about a hundred and twenty of them, Luke says, all moping around wondering what they were going to do without Jesus, when they heard a holy hurricane headed their way. Before any of them could defend themselves, that mighty wind had blown through the entire house, striking sparks that burst into flames above their heads, and they were filled up with it – every one of them was filled to the gills with God's own breath. Then something clamped down on them and the air came out of them in languages they did not even know they knew."

Pentecost is often called the birthday of the church. It is the day the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and were sent forth from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth sharing the good news of the Gospel of Jesus. The doubting, fearful, stumbling group of disciples became the very people who would change the world. It's when the movement of the church began, but the divine dance had started long before the day of Pentecost. We find the Holy Spirit moving time again throughout the Scriptures. It was given to the doubtful disciples who were too busy being frightened to see it move around them. Too often, we, like the disciples, try to lock the Spirit behind closed doors along with our own God given call. Yet the Holy Spirit moves where it wants and is impossible to define or catch or nail down. That's why we use metaphors for the Holy Spirit such as flame, wind, and breath, things you can't catch or hold down, things that move where they wish.

And what happened on the day of Pentecost was communal, connectional and relational, between God and among people. What the Holy Spirit does is fill the gap of everything. We

often feel like there is a gap or space between us and God. There's a gap between what we believe and what is true, that the Spirit is everywhere and as close to us as our very breaths. There is a gap or divide between people. We see it in our world. There are divisions on almost everything, yet it is the Spirit that brings diversity not division. "The Spirit creates diversity and is the Great Connector of all those very diverse things," writes the Franciscan Friar, Richard Rohr, in his book *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*.

He wrote, "This image [of the Spirit] is stoked as descending tongues of fire, creating mobile temples of people from all nations, speaking a universal language of love that allows them to understand one another's diverse language. Jesus demonstrates God's grace and inclusion of people of all backgrounds. When Jesus' disciples finally came to understand this, they did the same. They saw that all people – whether Jews or Gentiles or foreigners – could enter the circle dance of the Trinity and experience the Spirit poured out upon them." A universal language of love is what they spoke at Pentecost.

Did anyone watch the royal wedding yesterday? Everyone wants to be a prince or princess. I want to be the preacher! What a great gig! I watched for the preaching. The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry, preached a powerful message. I'm sure the Anglicans never heard preaching like that before! Did you see the Royals faces? It was powerful, "When love is the way, there's plenty of room for all God's children."

I hope for a Pentecost time for our United Methodist Church today. I pray for a time when the doors of our safely guarded churches are busted open, where we begin to breathe together again, all together, everyone together, where we lose our fear of the movement of the Holy Spirit and begin to affirm and embrace everyone, where no one, absolutely no one is left out of the divine dance of the Spirit. This Pentecost experience is one that is radically inclusive. They were all together. At the end of Acts Chapter 2, we read, "All the believers were together and had everything in common." There was a sense of unity, of inclusiveness, a sense that when the power of the Holy Spirit moves nothing is impossible. I pray for that sort of movement of the Holy Spirit today.

Father Rohr describes the movement of the Holy Spirit in this way, "It is the Spirit in history that seems to be driving us forward, not giving up on us. The Spirit is God within and in the spaces in between." This can be our Pentecost moment where we begin to see how the Spirit fills the gaps. There's one wind, one language, one church, and one breath at Pentecost. Our Pentecost moment can begin when we see in God a dance of love, as Rohr writes, "Whatever is going on in God is a flow, a radical relatedness, a perfect communion between Three – a circle dance of love." In his book, he invites us into this Divine Dance, where everyone and everything belongs. As we get into the month of June, Steve and I will be preaching on several themes from his book related to the Trinity and how it can transform our faith and our lives. My prayer is that this series will challenge us to grow in our faith, while encouraging and inspiring us to join God in God's divine dance of life and transformation.

If God is truly the life force of everything, as Rohr argues, then what we see at Pentecost, while it seems to be unbelievable, becomes a reminder of the power of the Spirit moving in the disciple's lives and in ours. From "the blowing of a violent wind" to the very breath that we take

every single moment, the Holy Spirit is being poured upon us and is moving deep within us, moment by moment and breath by breath.

There's just something powerful about pausing and breathing in and breathing out. It calms us down when we're in traffic, when we get angry at someone else, when we lose our keys, when we disagree, when the kids are screaming in the back seat, when you read angry comments online, and breathing can give us the chance to pause and consider what action we might take next. Could that very breath be the movement of the Holy Spirit?

Barbara Brown Taylor gives this example, "*Say you have been in a bad mood for the last year. It seems as if all you are doing is moving bricks from one pile to another – at work, at home, in your sleep – just moving bricks until you do not care whether it is day or night. Then one of those nights while you are lying awake in your bed, you hear one bird sing outside – just one. "Why is that bird singing in the middle of the night?" you wonder, and then you realize it is not the middle of the night anymore. It is the edge of morning. The bird chirps again and something inside of you softens. You take a deep breath for the first time in months and your chest opens up. You get a second wind. You can call this anything you want. I call it an act of the Holy Spirit.*"

Take a breath. Now blow it out. Take another breath. Blow it out again. Don't forget to breathe when the challenges of life come. Just think, if breathing in and out can calm us down and bring us to a peaceful place, what would those breaths do for us if we all breathed together? What if the church breathed as one? What if the church universal, the United Methodist Church, and Meridian Street Church breathed together? I think the church forgets to breathe when we face major issues. We allow our anger, our disappointment, and our desire for change to keep us from breathing together as one.

When we discern our future together, may we breathe in and out. As we have conversation on really hard and challenging topics we face as a society and a congregation like race, politics, sexuality and our denomination, maybe we should pause and remember to breathe in and out, share and listen, listen and respect, breath in and out, knowing that the air we breathe is the same air that the disciples experienced as violent wind, it's the same air that the saints before us breathed and it's the same air that filled Jesus' lungs as he breathed on the disciples and on each of us. May we know that it's the Holy Spirit moving in those breathes, which alone is a gift and miracle, and it might just be a conspiracy if we all breathed together as one.

Let's pray.....

Breath of God, Spirit who appeared like a driving wind, blow away our hatred and teach us to value all people.

Spirit of God, who appeared like tongues of flame, burn in us as a passion for justice and a commitment to change.

Spirit of life, who caused the disciples to speak in tongues, speak through us, and fill us with the courage to proclaim your love.

Spirit of truth, who fills us with wonder and awe, inspire us to work for a better world and a future where injustice is swept away and all that is left is joy, peace, love, and hope. May it be so.

Amen.