

I Can Feel You Breathe

Third Sunday of Easter

April 18, 2021

Sermon Text, John 20:19-23

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.”

Chorus No. 503, “Let It Breathe on Me” by PD

Congregation will sing this chorus.

Sermon, “I Can Feel You Breathe” by Pastor Dave

For many years now, we in our American society have had a fascination with breath. There are any number of products dedicated to treating bad breath, from toothpastes and dental flosses to specially treated mints and chewing gums. There are even pills you can buy to help you treat bad breath.

Our breath is part of our comfort zone: we don’t want to get so close to someone that we invade one another’s “personal space.” If we do, we might smell their breath. And we don’t want others to get too close to us, either. After all, they might smell our breath.

And that was before Covid! Look at how our society’s attitude toward breath has changed over the past thirteen months! Now, a person’s breath might not only smell bad; it just might put you in the intensive care unit—or even the grave!

I can attest to that fact: I knew a man who was laid to rest after someone breathed on him. As it turned out, the “breather” was a non-symptomatic carrier of the coronavirus. We’ve been living in an environment where, for some, a person’s breath is a death sentence.

I would suggest to you that one of the turning points in the coronavirus pandemic came last year on July 20: that’s when Walmart required all shoppers entering their stores to wear a face covering. People were happy to argue and fight with the government—both state and federal—but nobody wanted to fight with Walmart.

We used to think bad breath was bad, but thanks to the pandemic, now we think all breath is bad.

And yet I think you'd have a hard time convincing Mark and Sylvia Liner that breath is bad. On a camping trip one summer¹, Mark and Sylvia's six-year old son Grady went swimming in a river in Minnesota. Underestimating the flow of the river, Grady swam out further than he should have and got caught in the undertow. He only managed a couple of screams in between gulps of water.

Fortunately, another camper named Hugh McManus heard Grady's cries, looked up and was horrified to see the young boy being swept helplessly downstream. Hugh headed Grady off at the pass and jumped into the river downstream where he was able to pull the six-year-old ashore.

Though he was safe on shore, Grady wasn't breathing. Hugh laid him out, bent over his lifeless body, checked his air passages and then held his nose tightly, and slowly began breathing into his mouth.

After half a dozen breaths or so, Grady coughed and began breathing on his own. The breath of Hugh McManus had saved the young boy's life. Alleluia!

When Jesus breathed on his disciples, it was not merely a case of administering mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. In fact, the breath of Jesus was more life-giving than mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. When Jesus breathed on his disciples, it was a simple, universal gesture intended to teach the disciples something about our faith experience in Christ.

Breathing was both a simple and a universal gesture because everybody breathes. When our breath ceases, the doctor pronounces us dead.

Throughout scripture, "breath" and "spirit" are synonymous, even on a human plane. Breath is spirit and spirit is breath. When we stop breathing, our spirit leaves us. If we have our breath, we have our spirit.

Breathing is as fundamental to life as eating. Just as Jesus ordained Holy Communion as a way to impart himself to believers, so now he chooses breathing as a way to impart the Holy Spirit to his disciples. Breathing along with eating and drinking are the basic building blocks for life. Likewise, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are foundational to life.

When Jesus breathed on his disciples, it called to mind the creation story of Genesis 2. There, God knelt in the soil of the earth and made a mud pie. (Well, it wasn't really a mud pie) But then God breathed into that mud pie and it came to life. And God called the living being Adam! It was the breath of life! Praise the Lord!

Now, in John 20, the Risen Lord breathes on his disciples a second breath bestowing on them a second life. It was intended to harken back to the Creation story in Genesis, only this time, it was the breath of eternal life! Alleluia!

In his gospel, John does not think of the Holy Spirit in terms of spiritual gifts. That teaching will come elsewhere from Luke and Paul. Rather, John's understanding of the Holy Spirit is that the Spirit is essential for the Christian life.

Elsewhere, John compares the Spirit-filled life to a life marked by the presence of Living Water. Like the air we breathe, water is essential for life and the Holy Spirit is essential for the Christian life.

¹ I.e., the Summer of 2000.

It is, after all, the Holy Spirit who sustains us from before birth until after death; from womb to tomb; from cradle to grave until that day when we fully possess eternal life for ourselves.

What happens when you breathe? You internalize something that is outside you—specifically oxygen—so that it nourishes you and becomes a part of you.

When Jesus breathed on his disciples, he was saying, “Here’s something that’s outside of you—the Holy Spirit—but I want the Holy Spirit to nourish you until it becomes a part of you.”

This will have a profound effect on your life, as evidenced by the next phrase in our Gospel lesson:

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.

We have been forgiven and because of God’s act of forgiving us through Jesus Christ, our destiny has been radically transformed. Once we were destined for eternal death; now we are destined for eternal life. Alleluia!

Consequently, forgiveness should be as natural to us as breathing. And yet, how often do we withhold forgiveness?

Have you ever known a child who decided to punish his mom or dad by holding his breath? It doesn’t punish mom or dad; it only punishes the child because it deprives her of oxygen. Fortunately for the child, if she manages to hold her breath long enough, she will pass out--and reflexively resume breathing once again.

When we withhold forgiveness, it’s not much more effective than holding our breath--we punish no one except ourselves. And there is no reflexive action, except that the one who’s caused us to hold our breath--withhold our forgiveness--may very well find forgiveness anyway.

As naturally as you breathe, forgive.

Finally, there’s a certain intimacy associated with breathing. That may be best illustrated by Faith Hill’s song, “Breathe.”

*I can feel you breathe,
It’s washing over me
And suddenly I’m melting into you...
Baby, isn’t that the way that love’s supposed to be?
I can feel you breathe.*

It’s a song in which Faith Hill celebrates the intimacy she shares with her husband, country singer Tim McGraw.

But it’s also a vivid reminder that when Jesus breathed on his disciples, it was an intimate act. Likewise, when Jesus breathes on us, it is also an intimate act. You have to be close to Jesus to feel him breathe on you. Anyone can feel it when God releases a hurricane on you; but you have to be close to Jesus to feel him breathe.

I’m convinced Jesus is still breathing on his disciples. Can you feel him breathe? I believe breath is a call to intimacy for us. Will we live close enough to Jesus that we’ll be able to sense his very breath?