

Acts 2: 1-4, John 20: 19-22 "The Conspiracy to Breathe" Rev. Janet W. Chapman 5/31/20

I knew him as Bill, the denomination knew him as the Rev. Dr. William K. Fox Sr. He and his wife Reubena, who would hate that I'm wearing yellow today and would tell me so- God love her; they were active members at Raymore Christian Church in the Kansas City region where I was Associate Minister back in the early 2000's. He was an Executive leader instrumental in breathing life into the Black Convocation of Disciples of Christ in its early years. The congregation was inundated with retired ministers, but Bill didn't act like the average retired minister. Whereas several were quick to tell you how it was done in their time, Bill was patient and encouraging, always looking for ways to support his ministers. When he was chair of the elders, he instigated giving plaques to my colleague and myself during Pastor Appreciation Month one year, something I'd never seen done before. He would bring me stories to read of Convocation churches and the important ministry they were doing in the poorest communities in the nation. Bill often spoke of breaking the cycle of violence and racism through everyday interactions. He became a translator for people who couldn't understand the language of systemic racism, he was a window through which white folks like me could begin to see institutionalized racism like never before. As I listened to Houston PD's Sgt. Deandre Hutchinson, leader of the Afro American Police League, address the killing of George Floyd this week, I was reminded of Bill as the Sergeant began to question what if that had been his brother, his father under that repressive knee, unable to breathe. Deandre noted how those Minneapolis officers violated their basic oath to protect and serve and there is no department in this nation where such tactics are taught. The sergeant questioned where the commanding officers were that had failed to investigate previous allegations against the

offending officer, why would anyone consider this behavior acceptable? Then he shared how for him and every other black man in America the words, “I can’t breathe,” and the violence unleashed on George had opened up a gaping wound, like PTSD, that has never been healed. Studies show that whereas 75% of whites believe police use appropriate force, only 33% of blacks believe the same. And at that moment, I heard Bill speaking to me through the TV. It was in a language I had never fully learned but struggled to understand since a young child, so that somehow I might help ease the pain and suffering, somehow I could do something more than just be sorry or ashamed.

For a people who are divided in so many ways, we need this day of Pentecost. We need the stories to break through and into us so that we might understand the language of the Spirit birthed among us once more. These are hard and difficult times, not just because of COVID, but also because of what we saw in Minneapolis, and Central Park where police are called on a black man simply requesting a dog be put on a leash, and Georgia where another is shot jogging through a neighborhood. So many places in society where white supremacy is revealed and the language shapes the narrative. On this day, we hear of 2 Pentecost stories, each with their own slant but both integral to what it means to be the church in hard and difficult times. As we prepare to listen and respond, I want to stop now and give us a moment to take a deep breath, breathing in deep for all those who can no longer do so, those who cannot breathe because of physical or prejudicial constraints, those who cannot breathe because of the illness which seizes our lungs and takes away its ability to function, or those who cannot breathe because of the illness which judges them expendable, being taught even unconsciously. Breathe deeply in this moment before we recall these important stories. Now blow it out again.... Did you know the

word “conspire” means to breathe together? When we take a breath and blow it out again, we have just launched a conspiracy. Barbara Brown Taylor points out that if you listen carefully, you will hear the word “spirit” in “conspire”. To conspire is to be filled with the same spirit, to be enlivened by the same breath or wind. This is what happens to us when we come together virtually and in person to worship God. The Holy Spirit swoops in and out among us, knitting us together through the prayers we pray, the songs we hear, the breaths we breathe. It can happen with 2 people gathered in a small room and it can happen with 2000 people gathered over the internet. It can scare us or comfort us, confuse us or clarify things for us, but one thing it never does is bully us. We are always free to choose whether or how we will respond to the conspiracy which is forming.

This is what happened to a few disciples behind locked doors in the Gospel of John. They are frightened. Their terror has been passed from generation to generation because their race has been enslaved and killed for lesser things than an outspoken prophet. They speak with a common language tainted by a form of PTSD as they wonder, “What is going to happen to us?” Then suddenly Christ is with them and he shows them his wounds, still not healed. Among other things, he does a strange thing – Christ breathes on them. It is not a big violent wind as in Acts but it is a human breath, and then we hear the human words, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” John describes the event with overtones to Genesis 2, “God breathed into their nostrils and they became living souls.” After God had made everything else, the duck-billed platypus, the squirrels, the snakes and spiders, the elephants and giraffes, and all the things growing in your garden; after all those things, God made a person and breathed life into that being. So John reminds us that on that day behind locked doors, when those disciples were so scared

they could hardly breathe, God gave them breath once more. This time Christ offers a very important blessing to them, “As the Father sent me, now I send you. What I have done in my life is now up to you to continue; you will have to keep it going.” With that Holy Breath, again and again, we must keep the conspiracy going.

Then we see the story in Acts, where the Spirit blows in and prompts the followers to speak in other languages, ones they did not know before. It made such a ruckus, like a room full of bagpipes all going at once. People from all over the world came leaning in the windows and pushing through the doors, surprised to hear someone speaking their own language so far from home, saying “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is that we hear, each of us, in our own native tongue?” They had sucked in God’s own breath and had been transformed by it, so that they might use their own bodies now to pass the gift on. They understood beyond their own experiences and limitations changing the world as they did. Is it any wonder some to this day still call it a conspiracy?

When people used to tell my friend Bill they weren’t racist, he used to gently say, “Here is the problem. By saying as much, we admit we aren’t willing to examine how living in this society makes us racist. The hard part is working to dismantle the way we were raised and how we experienced our world in connection with the color of our skin.” One day Bill was pulled over by a local police officer. Bill was terrified, remembering many experiences from the past that happened not just to him, but to people like him. It was a fear passed from generation to generation. The officer asked him to step out of the car and as Bill did with much fear and trembling, he recognized one of our church folks driving by slowly. Bill breathed a sigh of relief; a friend would stop and stand nearby in case things got out of hand. But instead the friend kept

on driving, not wanting to embarrass Bill at being recognized for being pulled over. The friend did what he thought was the kindest response and just wouldn't mention it. But to Bill it was devastating. He felt like he couldn't breathe as he watched the car keep going and with it, his assurance of protection and accountability on the officer's part. With tears in his eyes, he told me this story and I held my breath. Like the friend, I might have done the same and was ashamed. It didn't occur to me the danger Bill faced – I didn't understand the language with which he was speaking. Maybe I didn't want to, because if I did, it meant that my childhood desire to ease the suffering would mean I had to start by changing my unconscious tendencies and perceptions first. It wasn't as much about the officer's demeanor in Bill's case and everything to do with the predominance of this society's judgments based on color, and I, like you, am a member of this society. So I took a deep breath... I suggest you do the same. And let's fully give ourselves to the conspiracy, being the church in hard and difficult times, so that all might be freed to breathe of justice and abundant life. Dear friends, "Receive the Holy Spirit."