

Breathing Together

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

2nd Sunday of Easter - April 11, 2021

Texts: Acts 4:32-35, Psalm 133, 1 John 1:1-7, John 20:19-31

SCRIPTURE READING

Acts 4:32–35

Luke, the author of Acts, describes the ideal community adopted by the first Christians. Their style of life reinforced their verbal message of Jesus' resurrection.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

SCRIPTURE READING

1 John 1:1-7

John, the author of three brief letters toward the end of the Bible, was probably not the gospel writer, though both emphasize the physical revelation of love and life in Jesus. Notice, too, how often in these brief verses he uses the word "fellowship," referring to the community of faith.

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

GOSPEL READING

John 20:19-31

This is one small piece of John's lengthy version of post-resurrection events. For us, a week has passed since Easter Sunday; for the disciples, only a few hours.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

This is the good news which we have received, in which we stand, and by which we are saved. TBTG

Please pray with me:

Breathe in this place, O God, and in all of us united in worship by the power of your Holy Spirit. Open our minds, unlock our hearts, and enliven our faith so that we may welcome the risen one among us. Amen.

Your breath is just about the most intimate thing that happens to you. Air goes in and out of your lungs on average 20,000 times a day, whether you're paying attention or not. Breath carries in the good stuff, the oxygen that feeds every cell in your bodies. Breath carries out the used up stuff, the carbon dioxide, which is toxic if held in. Emotionally and spiritually, breath can carry out the bad stuff like weariness and pain, and carry in the good stuff like rest and health. Jesus breathed on the disciples and they let go of their fear and breathed in his peace and his Spirit.

So breathe with me now. Imagine Jesus, the risen Jesus, in the room with you. Take a deep breath in. Breathe in Jesus' peace. Now breathe out fear. Breathe in comfort; breathe out sorrow. Breathe in rest; breathe out weariness. Whatever toxins have accumulated in you: anger, doubt, frustration, whatever. Let them flow out on your breath; let joy, faith, hope, calm flow in.

Would it seem scary to do this, if we were all locked in a small room together as the disciples were on Easter evening? **Breathing together can be dangerous.** A year ago, we didn't know how covid was transmitted. Now we know: it's through aerosols, tiny particles in the air. They travel in and out of us on our breath. A year ago, we were anxious about being shut up in our own homes, right? Today, imagining all those disciples in one small room breathing the same air makes me nervous. "Open a window!" I want to shout, "Put on your masks!" But as we know, they were huddled together in fear of who might be coming to break down the doors. And, I think, they were still afraid they would have to learn to live without Jesus.

I know a lot of you have had to learn to live without someone you love. Once as a hospice chaplain I had an elderly patient whose diagnosis was simply, "failure to thrive." She had gone into a tailspin when her husband of many years died. It started with pneumonia that lasted way too long. Pneumonia is: A disease of the lungs. It makes it hard to breathe. They finally cured the pneumonia, but she just dwindled away. One day she told me a story. Years before, she and her

husband had sold everything they owned, bought a sailboat, and spent ten years traveling the world. Once their boat capsized in a storm off the Cape of Good Hope, at the southern tip of Africa. In the chaos, her husband was knocked unconscious; she didn't know if he was alive or dead. All alone she had to run the pumps, keep the boat from crashing on the rocks, and radio for help. Somehow, she did it all. She showed me the newspaper article from the town where they were rescued. The next week she told me the same story. And the next week. I realized she was telling herself she could live again on her own. All I did was make the space to breathe with her as she told her own story; as she breathed out despair and breathed in courage. A few months later, she had picked up enough steam to be kicked out of hospice. **Breathing together can be dangerous. But breathing all alone is more dangerous still.**

Because breathing together is essential for life. Jesus breathed on the disciples; breath came out of his own physical body, a body that could be touched and felt, and yet pass through solid walls and locked doors. He breathed his life on them, and they breathed in his peace, his Spirit. He breathed his reality into Thomas, and Thomas breathed out his doubt and believed.

The Spirit came alive in them. They shed their fear. What followed was the early church, the fellowship of believers. We are told in Acts 4 that all the believers were of one heart and soul; they owned everything in common, so that there was not a needy person among them. They breathed the same air, the same ideals. Our reading from First John speaks of tangible evidence of the resurrection, too: "what we have heard and seen, and touched with our hands was life, the life that was from the beginning, which lives with us and in us. We live in fellowship."

Did you notice how often the word, "fellowship," is used in that short passage? Four times. It's an interesting word. Most often it's translated sharing: sharing of resources, sharing in suffering, sharing in service, sharing in joy. Here it's "fellowship," as in being together, united as one body in Christ, seeing and feeling Christ in one another, tangibly. Breathing together.

Yesterday I was privileged to be part of a Zoom call for the Presbytery's anti-racism pilgrimage. The speaker, Alike Galloway, co-pastors with her husband the only Black congregation in the Presbytery: Liberty Church in North Minneapolis. This beautiful mother, grandmother, scholar, teacher, healer told us about their amazing work there, in their community. I hope someday some of us can go and see it in person. In the protests last summer, she said, Liberty and other Black congregations on the North Side, had just a couple of hours to board up their churches and lock themselves in their basements for fear of the armed white supremacists flying Confederate flags and patrolling the neighborhood. They came out of those locked rooms stronger, more committed to their ministry of love and healing. Right now, she says, it's as though everyone is holding their collective breath, waiting for the end of the trial. One person in the mostly white audience asked, "What do you need from us? How can we be with you now?" Tears almost choked the answer: "Oh - we need y'all to *rise up!* Eradicate white supremacy. End voter suppression." In other

words, give people their vote, their voice, their life, their breath. Make space for people to breathe and tell their own story, for their good and ours and for the good of the world. Breathe together! **Breathing together is essential for human life.**

We need to breathe together for human life to flourish; we need to breathe together for the life of the world. One of my most disturbing learnings from this past year is that I mostly share air with people who also share my culture, my economic status, my skin color, my educational level. Don't get me wrong: I love you all. But in our own lovable way, we're sort of locked into our likeness. Who do you breathe with? Who is God calling you to breathe with? Who are we at CPC living without? The disciples waited for Thomas to see Jesus and get with the program before they moved out into the world. Who's waiting for us to get on board?

George Fox, the 17th century Englishman credited with starting the Quaker movement, came to his understanding of God within him when God's love, *"let me see myself as I was without him."* Not a pretty sight. Without God, he could not live. He understood then that God was in everyone, as surely as breath. Three hundred years before that, Julian of Norwich had a similar realization: *"When I look at myself as an individual, I see that I am nothing. It is only in unity with my fellow spiritual seekers that I am anything at all. It is this foundation of unity that will save humanity."*

Yes, and it is this foundation of unity that will save the world: when we realize we are part of one another and also part of the breathing body of creation, as the rain forests are the lungs of the world. Rain forests breathe in the carbon dioxide that we breathe out, and send it forth as oxygen. Amazing but true, at least as long as rain forests last. **We need to breathe together for human flourishing; we need to breathe together with the world for the life of the world.**

We began a few minutes ago by drawing in with our breath God's breath, God's peace, God's healing, as close as your breath. It's a wonderful practice; try it on your own when you're feeling lost or upset. But I encourage you to breathe like a rain forest, too: to take in the negative and transform it as the forests do, as Jesus took our death on himself and transformed it into life. Is there anger around you? Breathe in the anger; breathe out peace. Are you surrounded by fearful people? Breathe in the fear; breathe out trust. Does someone close to you seem consumed by hate? Breathe in their hate; breathe love back on them. Remember that it's not you, but Christ who lives in you, transforming you even as you breathe. Breathe for the life of the world. Amen.

Prayers

God, merciful and mighty, close to us as our own breath, powerful as the wind stirring the seas, breathe in us so that we may breathe with others, making space for their voices, their stories.

We pray for those involved in the trial now taking place in Minneapolis: we pray for the judge and the jurors, for the attorneys, for those seeking justice, for the world awaiting a verdict. May love live in all of them, and may peace and right prevail.

We pray for violated areas in the world; we breathe in your peace and let go of violence; we pray for those forced from their homes by threats, or drought, or poverty, find welcome and safety;

We pray for those whose lives and health are precious to us and to you: Restore to all of them your joy and peace.

We pray for an end to this pandemic, and a calm return to health, even as society begins to heal the terrible inequities that have been exposed through this past year;

We pray that we, as your people, may rise to the challenge of entering a changed world with courage, dedicated to rebuilding on a nobler, more humane foundation that honors the earth and all who inhabit it;

May we live that beautiful balance
Between active service and quiet contemplation.
Teach us to be of use in this troubled world
At the same time that we cultivate joyful intimacy
With the Beloved who lives and breathes within us
And who taught us to pray: Our Father who art in heaven...