

Breath of Peace, Breath of Ministry

John 20:19-29

*Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."
...he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit..."*

It is the evening the day of Jesus' resurrection, a day shrouded in mystery and confusion...and fear. That's where John's gospel finds the disciples, huddled in fear behind locked doors. Their teacher has been killed. There are rumors of his somehow being alive again. But who can believe? Who would DARE believe such news, that it's not over after all? John says they are afraid of "the Jews," a term John uses throughout his gospel. Unfortunately, the Gospel of John has been misused over the centuries to foster anti-Jewish hatred and violence. However, John means the leadership of the religious establishment, who were so spiritually lost that they were threatened by Jesus and the flood of new life and spirit he brought to people. So the disciples barricade themselves in fear that they might be rounded up by those same authorities.

This frightened little band of Jesus' followers never fully grasped what he was about. They misunderstood him and projected into him their expectations of prestige or power. In the end, they all deserted him in the face of the principalities and powers. All of a sudden, Jesus is present with them again in some indescribable yet real way. But it's Jesus, all right. Frustrated as he may have been on many occasions with this frail little band of followers, who gave him ample reason to throw his hands up and quit, Jesus comes to them again. The first words out of his mouth are not "I told you so" or "Now do you finally get it?" Instead, he says: "Peace be with you." No lectures. No criticism. No judgment. Just "Be at peace." In spite of everything, be at peace.

We are a community of the risen Christ who brings us peace and calls us to be at peace. I'm not talking about being peacemakers in the world. That's important, too. But first we are to BE a community of persons who are within ourselves and together at peace. Each of us can touch that peace in ourselves, and together we can touch that peace. Jesus' words are both a blessing and a command. He gives us his peace, a peace that comes from God, a peace we can't get if we're all caught up in the illusions and distractions around us, if we've let ourselves get sucked into the absurdities of our society and world—the worship of war, wealth, power, success. The peace Jesus gives cuts through all the stuff, all the illusions, all the addictive attachments, and quiets our hearts and minds. We already have what we so anxiously strive for—peace, acceptance, the sense of being at home, of being at one with God and our true selves. It is the gift Jesus gives us.

Jesus' peace also has the sense of a command: Be at peace! In the midst of this mess, all these urgent issues and concerns, all the needs that cry out for our response, when being at peace makes no sense at all, Jesus commands us to be at peace as individuals and as his community. It is a paradox. We may be a mess. The world may be a mess. But all is well. We can be at peace in the midst of un-peace, and it is not escapism or wish-dreaming or denial of reality! It is the response of our hearts to the deepest reality of life.

I think this is very important. We can be at peace even when we "feel" anything but peaceful. We don't have to wait until other people, the world or we ourselves are fixed. We don't have to nail everything down or resolve all conflicts or questions. Jesus comes to us where we are huddled in our locked rooms, crouched in a dark corner out of our fears, and he says: "Peace be with you!" Be at peace.

When people come here to this place—this chapel, the Lodge, the grounds with the woods, lake and trails—they often tell me that they feel at peace. Those who come to the Lodge of the Fisherman on Thursday nights. The children and adults who come into the Festival Center downtown. And in the L'Arche community. It is the vision of the Chrysalis retreat center mission group. There is a sense of peace because we are a community that endeavors to touch and nurture the peace that Jesus gives and commands. It may seem surprising to us because we know how weak and imperfect we are. We know how unpeaceful we feel much of the time. How in the world could anyone experience peace being with us! We're always struggling with too much to do for such a few people. We often feel that what we are doing and trying to do seems so little. And the more honestly we look at ourselves, the more aware we are of our frailties and foibles. But that's the mystery of Christ's peace. It is his gift to us, not our achievement.

We touch that peace, individually and together, by what we call the "inward journey." We may feel that we are pretty shabby in terms of our commitments to daily prayer, meditation, cultivating silence, and self-understanding, and maybe we are! But the fact that we commit ourselves at some level to that inner life, to seeing the reality of who we are and of God's love for us, that very commitment enables us to touch the peace Christ gives to us. The most important thing we can offer to other people and the world is our own lives as we root them deeper and deeper in the peace Christ gives. Without that peace, that groundedness, there is not a whole lot we have to offer that does other people or the world much good, no matter how grand our missions might be. Without being people abiding in and practicing the peace Christ gives, we only add to the suffering and anxiousness and fear in the world.

Then Jesus does a strange thing. He says again, "Peace be with you." But he adds, "Just as God sent me, so I am sending you." Then he breathes on them and tells them to receive God's Holy Spirit. He tells

them that this spirit gives them authority to forgive sins, to cut people loose from guilt and shame so they can live out who they are really meant to be. It also gives them the authority to “retain” sins. I don’t claim to know what that means. The commentators I’ve read on the passage don’t know either, or at least they don’t completely agree. But when we are people who know and live God’s peace in Christ, then we receive God’s spirit. And that makes us people in whose presence others experience grace and the lifting of burdens. Because we become increasingly able to live completely in the present moment, in touch with God and God’s peace, others can experience the same thing--the letting go of the past, of guilt, of regret, and the letting go of fears and anxieties attached to the future. But also there will be some who feel confronted with the ways they are living that cause suffering to others and themselves. We may not understand or feel comfortable with Jesus’ words about having authority to forgive or retain sins. But it is something we cannot dismiss without some consideration.

Not only does Jesus give us peace, tell us to be at peace, but he also breathes into us a spirit of mission, of ministry. The peace he gives is to be the reservoir of our reaching out in compassionate and healing ways. God’s spirit fills and empowers us to be channels of God’s love in the world. We don’t have to worry that focusing ourselves on Christ’s peace will lead to introversion and an abandoning of the world. Jesus who gives us the gift of peace also breathes into us the very spirit of God, and the nature of that spirit is to flow out, spill over, and share itself. This is something I’m just realizing after all these years. I’ve always struggled with two things: what I have come to believe is the necessity of cultivating the inner life of silence, meditation and prayer, and the call of God to serve the world. How can we do both? If we devote ourselves to prayer and the inward journey, don’t we run the risk of getting stuck there, contemplating our navels, turning a deaf ear to the world’s needs? Absolutely not! For the very nature of the peace Christ gives is that with it he breathes into us this spirit that sends us forth to touch the life of the world.

The scene is very physical. John knows that breath and spirit come from the same Hebrew word. In Genesis 1, God’s spirit or breath hovers over the chaos, poised to bring about the creation. In Genesis 2, God breathes into the man the breath of life, the spirit, and the man becomes a “living being” (*nephesh*). The psalms speak in a number of places of God’s breath being the life of God’s creatures. Listen to this from Psalm 104: “When you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit (breath), they are created; and you renew the face of the ground (vv. 29-30).”

We need to take seriously the connection between breathing and God’s spirit. How we breathe, using awareness of our breathing to help us come back into the present moment, back from our attachments to the past or the future, so that we meet God in the present moment. This is an

important part of prayer. I think that we have a view of prayer that is far too mental, too intellectual—thinking about God, or about our lives in relation to God. But there is a physical dimension of praying, and the key to it is our breathing, which connects us to God’s spirit of life in us. That is the view of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. When we are able to breathe quietly and with awareness, we are calming ourselves, more able to be at peace, to receive the gift of peace. And we are at the same time preparing ourselves to receive God’s spirit that fills us with a sense of who we are and what God is leading us to give, to do in the world. And that spirit will replace our fears, sending us forth more fearless.

Finally, Thomas’ doubt. He missed the first encounter with the living Christ. We don’t know where Thomas was, but we could say here that it is very important for us to really be part of our community of faith, particularly in worship. If for no other reason, you might MISS something! That something is the presence of the living Christ with us and the way he gives us peace. I think this is at the heart of one of our disciplines or practices in membership here--worshiping faithfully and regularly with the community. It isn’t a matter of keeping an attendance chart. It’s a matter of being together as Christ’s community as he gives us his peace and breathes into us God’s spirit of ministry.

When Thomas is told about what happened, he can’t believe it. He has to touch something, see something for it to be real. So Jesus appears a week later when the disciples were again in the same house. For the third time in this story Jesus says: “Peace be with you!” By now we should be convinced that this peace of Christ is pretty important stuff! Jesus lets Thomas touch his wounds. Thomas cries out in faith: My Lord and my God!” Jesus isn’t all that thrilled. Did you believe because you touched me? Too bad for you. Faith has to do with not seeing, with living our lives trusting in and open to something deeper than what is seen. We can get fooled by what we see. We too easily grasp onto something we can touch or see and before you know it we’ve built an altar around it or turned it into a doctrine or a dogma. Or we keep thinking that faith has to do with figuring it all out before we give our lives to it. But the heart knows how to seek and follow the risen Christ, how to live on the basis of faith. Blessed are those, says Jesus, who have not seen but yet believe! He’s speaking to later generations, to us. The story simply leaves us with these words of Jesus’ as a blessing and an encouragement, that we are in a better position to know what it means to live by faith than were his first disciples who walked, ate, and lived with him everyday. We are blessed as we open our hearts to and seek to follow this risen, living Christ, as we live our lives as a journey of faith.