

Breathing In, Breathing Out

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..."*

The evening of Jesus' resurrection, 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 dares believe such good news? John says they are afraid of "the Jews," a term John uses throughout his gospel. This has been misused over the centuries to foster anti-Jewish hatred. This is wrong. John means the leadership of the religious establishment who felt threatened by Jesus and his popularity, and conspired against him. Besides, John is well aware that Jesus and the disciples were Jews. The disciples barricade themselves because they might be rounded up, too.

Suddenly Jesus is with them in some indescribable yet real way. Jesus was often frustrated with this frail little band of followers who never seemed to grasp what he was teaching. And yet, he comes to them again. He doesn't give up on them. 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, in the midst of everything, be at peace.

We are a community of the risen Christ who is always saying to us, "Peace be with you." We are to be a community of Christ's peace. I'm not talking, first of all, 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 gift and a command. He gives a peace that comes from God, a peace we can't receive from the illusions and distractions around us, or the absurdities of our society and world—the worship of war, wealth, power, success. The peace Jesus gives cuts through all the illusions, all the addictive attachments, and quiets our hearts and minds. We already are given 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, simply to be received.

Jesus' peace is also 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 living in denial. It is the response of our hearts to the deepest reality of life.

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. Being a community of Jesus' peace does not mean that we don't have conflicts, misunderstandings, and instances where we hurt or disappoint one another. The peace Jesus speaks and gives is not a peace that ignores things or pretends everything is all right. It simply enables us to quiet our hearts and let go of our fears. When people come here to this place—this chapel, the Lodge, the grounds with the woods, lake and trails—they often say that they feel at peace. The children and adults who come into the Festival Center downtown experience this. Also 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. That may surprise us because we know how weak and imperfect we are. We know how un-peaceful we sometimes act and feel. How in the world could anyone experience peace being with us! We're always struggling with too much to do, and what we are doing seems so little. The more honestly we look at ourselves, the more aware we are of our frailties and weaknesses. But that's the mystery of Christ's peace. It is his gift to us, not our achievement. However, we have to stop long enough to receive that gift. We touch that peace, individually and together, by what we call the "inward journey." We may feel that we are pretty shabby in 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 enables us to touch the peace Christ gives. 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 much we have to offer that does other people or the world any good, regardless of 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, the anger and fear in the world.

Now Jesus does a strange thing. "Just as God sent me, so I am sending you." Then he breathes on them and tells them to receive God's 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 know exactly what that means. The commentators I've read on the passage don't know either, or at least they don't completely agree. We may not know exactly what it means to forgive either. But when we work with remaining in touch with God's peace in Christ, then we become calm enough, open enough to receive God's spirit. And that spirit will teach us how to forgive and how to retain.

When we are able to be at peace, we can breathe in God's spirit. And when we are peaceful and open in this way, others experience grace and the lifting of burdens when they are in our presence. Because we become increasingly able to live 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, regret, or anger, and the letting go of fears and anxieties attached to the future. For me, the essential meaning of forgiveness is letting go. Letting go of our hurt, our grudges, our disappointment in others. It is also helping others to find forgiveness themselves, encouraging them to let go of the things they are hanging onto that continue to cause them suffering. Forgiveness is not easy. It takes hard spiritual work. And sometimes it takes a long time and a lot of patience with others and ourselves. As challenging as forgiveness may be, however, it is far better than continuing to live with our spirits tied in knots of resentment, anger, and the desire to seek revenge.

What might "retaining sins" mean? It seems to me that it may have to do with what we call in our community "accountability". Being a community of Christ's peace means that persons find here the grace, the gift of God's love. People can experience, perhaps for the first time, a love that tells them they are God's children, that they belong to life and are of great worth. We often call this unconditional love. However, lately I find myself a little uncomfortable with that term. God's love certainly is not conditioned by our strength or weakness, our success or failure, our goodness or badness. God's love is simply always there for us. We can't earn it and we don't have to earn it. And yet, I think that God's love comes WITH a condition—that we then live our lives according to that love. Jesus in John's gospel says it clearly to his disciples when he meets with them for the last time: I give you a new commandment—love one another as I have loved you.

Being part of a community of Christ's peace does not mean we can act any way we want. When we make a commitment to membership here, we commit ourselves to being part of this community and its struggles, as well as its blessings and joys. It means we agree to hold others accountable and to be held accountable for the commitments we have made. There will be times when I need to be confronted with my harmful actions or words, if I am in some way hurting others or the community itself. This is not separate from the love we are to have for each other; it is part of it. Dealing compassionately with our harmful behavior helps us grow into the fullness of love lived out in community. It is part of the struggle and the blessing of being a community of Christ's peace and God's love.

The forgiving and retaining of sins could also be a way of speaking of the whole mission dimension of our life. We breathe in God's spirit and we breathe out God's redemptive love for the world. We don't have to worry that focusing ourselves on Christ's peace will lead to introversion and abandoning the world. Jesus breathes into us the very spirit of God, and the nature of that spirit is to flow out and share itself. I've always struggled with two things: What I believe is the necessity of cultivating the inner life of silence, meditation and prayer, and the call of God to serve the world. However, 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! 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 inward journey deepens our compassion for ourselves, others, and the world. It deepens our understanding so that we can relate more lovingly to others. It reveals to us our own gifts with which we are to serve life.

This scene is very physical. 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. Psalm 104, for instance: "When you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit (breath), they are created(vv. 29-30)." Breath and spirit are the same in Christian scriptures. Nowhere is that clearer than in this story from John's gospel.

We need to take seriously the connection between breathing and God's spirit. Being aware of our breathing helps 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. It helps us calm our anxiousness. 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. 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. We are 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. That spirit displaces our fears, sending us forth more fearless and more loving.

So this story may help us to see where we may be locked behind doors of fear and anxiousness. And in our own ways we can listen for Jesus' words: Peace be with you. Our inward journey becomes a breathing in of God's spirit, and our outward journey becomes a breathing out of God's love for the world.