

April 15, 2012 / Eastertide / David L. Edwards

### Breathing In, Breathing Out

*Acts 4:32-37 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.*

*John 20:19-23 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.*

The disciples are huddled in a locked room following the resurrection. There are rumors of Jesus somehow being alive again, but who can believe such things. Death is it. It's over. The whole experiment. All the bright hopes and enthusiastic dreams. Besides, now their lives are in danger because of their association with him. The religious and political powers that conspired to do away with Jesus are probably looking for them, too.

However, Jesus appears and stands in their presence. This is somehow a different Jesus. I mean, the doors were locked! And yet it is him. No doubt. He says what he was always saying to them: Peace be with you. In the midst of everything, be at peace. When things seem to be falling apart, be at peace. When the world around you has gone completely crazy, be at peace. Then he shows them his hands and side, the marks of his death. Yes, it's him all right.

Everything Jesus taught and lived, the way of life he not only preached but embodied, did not die. His death, as violent and final as it was in one way, was not the end. Everything he was and called us to be could not be silenced, killed, or done away with. In spite of everything that looked like failure and death, Jesus was still with those who gathered in his name, gathered because of him. To me, that is the meaning of the resurrection. Whenever we gather in his name, in worship as a community and to do the work of love in mission groups, Jesus comes and stands among us. His first words are always the same: Peace be with you. Which also means, Do not be afraid.

Then Jesus does something very unusual. To me it is one of the most vivid images in our scriptures. Jesus breathes on his disciples, as he says, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive sins, they are forgiven; if you retain sins, they are retained. This scene reminds us of the more ancient scene in Genesis(2:7), the second creation story. God forms the first human being out of the earth. We are of the earth. Then God breathes into the man the breath of life. We are of the spirit. Breath, spirit, and wind, all are the same word(*ruah*) in Hebrew. It is only then that the man becomes a *nephesh*, a living being. It is the breath, the spirit of God that makes us fully human.

So here in John's gospel is another spirit/breath story. Jesus breathes into us the spirit of God and we become a living community, a community awakened, energized, and led by God's spirit. This means we need to continue always to breathe in God's spirit. We do this through our worship, as a community and as mission groups. We do this as we practice silence and inward quietness and receptivity. We breathe in the spirit of God through study and sharing our lives with one another. In short, we breathe in God's spirit through what we call the inward journey, as persons, as a community, as mission groups.

What is that spirit? Jesus talks about forgiving and retaining sins. This stands for the authority we are given through God's spirit to carry out the ministry of God's love. It is a love that brings forgiveness and compassion and mercy. It is also a love that calls us and all people to account for living the way God created us to live, in justice, mercy, peace, compassion, and generosity. I have come to understand "retaining sins" in this passage as accountability. Jesus breathes into us, his community, the spirit of God that brings peace to us, and that leads and empowers us in the work that God gives us to do for the sake of the world. It is all about breathing in and breathing out.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist master and writer, enjoys making up *gathas*. A *gatha* is a little verse we repeat when we are doing a certain activity. Doing this helps us pay attention and really be present to what we are doing, whether it is washing dishes, praying, running the vacuum, reading a book, listening to someone who is speaking to us, or simply breathing. One morning this week as I was reading and thinking about this wonderful scene in John's gospel, a *gatha* came to me: *Breathing in, I receive God's spirit. Breathing out, I share God's love.*

We breathe in God's spirit, physically and spiritually, remembering that in scripture, spirit and breath are the same. Awareness of our physical breathing is an important part of prayer, for it helps us be really present to ourselves, the world

around us, and to God. The inward journey is the way we breathe in the spirit of God and the spirit of Jesus which is the spirit of our own true humanity. This breathing-in is the foundation and wellspring of our life of faith.

There is also breathing out. At the YMCA pool, on the wall there are signs that say: No Breath Holding. Why? Because it is dangerous. It can lead to death. Breathing in is half the process. There must also be breathing out. Breathing in through the inward journey, as individuals and as mission groups and as a community. Breathing out through the outward journey. To receive God's goodness, God's love, God's spirit is the first spiritual work that we have. Then there is the breathing out--giving, sharing, living our lives as expressions of God's spirit and love.

Look at the reading from the Acts of the Apostles. It is a little cameo of the early community in the days following Jesus' death and resurrection. The community is of "one heart and soul". It does not say "one mind". Community is not about thinking the same way, agreeing about ideas. So often we think we can only be with people who have the same ideas we have. That is not community, but conformity. There is a spiritual depth to community that this passage lifts up, an openness to and generosity of spirit with one another. It is the sense of being together with awareness that each and all belong to God. It is having one heart and soul when it comes to our love of God and our desire to be a community of that love.

The community also shares materially so that no one will be in need. Private property is trumped by the spirit of God in Jesus which brings a spirit of ours, not mine, of generosity, not holding back. The material well being of all displaces the individualist view of "mine" and "yours", or the view that some have a right to have more than they need, while others do not have enough. The whole of the material realm is placed under the rule of the spirit of God. Oneness of heart and soul, or spirit, expresses itself in oneness of material sharing.

This passage is usually tossed off as being an idealistic presentation of an early Christian "experiment" that did not succeed or did not truly exist in reality. Well, it did succeed in some manifestations of the church through the centuries, and exists still. In vowed communities where there are no individual bank accounts or held income, where everything is shared and the committed members of the community have what they need in order to respond freely to God's call in their lives. Wants diminish as basic needs are recognized and supplied. All of this for the sake of the life and work of Jesus' community.

Evi Kaiser came to us out of such a community, Church Communities International, or the old name Bruderhof. Material life is shared along with everything else that builds and sustains community--work and play, study and worship. Since Evi came here, I have learned a lot from her, and it has caused me to do some deeper thinking about our life together. We consider ourselves an intentional community, that is, the spiritual commitments we make to particular disciplines all have to do with a commitment to being in community. This is needed for us to be together in a way that makes us more aware of and responsive to the spirit of God in our lives.

One of our disciplines has to do with our material life. For Covenant Members, it is giving to the community and its work BEGINNING WITH a tithe, or ten percent of our financial resources. For Community Members, it is not that specific. I don't think we are called to become a community exactly like Evi's or other such communities. And yet, this passage will not go away, and, along with the teachings of Jesus, it can help us be more serious about our faith and our material lives.

Evi and Rachel sounded the call to a new mission this morning. Every time this happens, the little groups that form around the seed of a mission start worrying about where the money is going to come from. Two things. If we remain focused as mission groups on the mission we are given, keeping clear about it and doing the little things that will plant its seeds, we will find the answers to the money issues. The other thing is, if we as a community were really doing what we say with regard to tithing and serious financial commitment to our life and work, we would have the money we need to do the things we are being called to do. That means each of us needs to be working seriously with this picture of the early community sharing everything so that needs were met.

This week I received an email from Mary Elizabeth McCarthy, who attends Wednesday morning worship faithfully. She had a comment on the Acts passage. She said that this portrait of the early community with regard to its outward material life is preceded by a very important verse (v. 31). There we find the community praying for God's spirit, and receiving that spirit in a life-shaking way. It starts with the inward journey, said Mary Elizabeth. The breathing out of our outward, material life, starts with the breathing in of God's spirit. Our holding back, our reluctance to share or give in significant ways, are signs that we are holding our breath. If we are really breathing deeply of God's spirit, we will share more and more of what we have so that we can do the things to which God is calling us. Maybe we need a little sign here, too: No Breath

Holding.

If we are doing the breathing-in work of the inward journey, there is no problem with the outward journey, the breathing out. We won't be able to help it! If it is truly the breath or spirit of God we are breathing in, its nature is that it cannot be held. We will move out to do the things we need to do, to encounter the people we need, the resources we need. Maybe it will help us to remember this little *gatha*, and let it help us as individuals, as a community, and as mission groups:

*Breathing in, I receive God's spirit and love.*

*Breathing out, I share God's spirit and love.*