

April 7, 2013 / Second Sunday of Easter / David L. Edwards

Being at Peace, Breathing in the Spirit

Psalm 150 *Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!*

John 20:19-23 *When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit...."*

The disciples are aware of the presence of the risen Christ in a house where they have locked themselves in. They are afraid of "the Jews," says John. John is not talking about Judaism as a religion, or the Jewish people. He is talking about the religious power structure that conspired to do away with Jesus because he was felt to be a threat. John's gospel has been misused through the centuries to fuel anti-Jewish prejudice and violence. John knows full well that Jesus and his disciples were Jews and never saw themselves as anything but Jews. The point is that the disciples are afraid of a world that is hostile to the way of life they have learned in Jesus. Their leader has been killed. As his followers, they are in danger. They have withdrawn in fear.

In spite of everything, Jesus is still with them, just as he is present with us when we gather and strive for what it means to live as his followers. His first words are: Peace be with you! In the midst of the things that scare us, whether outside or inside us, in a human society lost in violence, greed, and hatred, in the thick of the challenges we experience on the spiritual path of Jesus...in the midst of all our fears, Jesus says: Peace be with you!

Earlier in John's gospel (14:27), Jesus is talking to the disciples just before his arrest. He says: Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give you peace the way the world does. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid. The peace Jesus gives, even commands, is rooted in our belonging to God. It does not remove the challenges or pains of life. It does not pretend that everything is okay. It is a deep and solid awareness of God, our connection with God, and God's steadfast love for the world and for us.

Being at peace, then, is the first "work," if you will, of the spiritual life. Isn't it interesting that the first thing the risen Christ tells his follower is NOT, Okay, let's get out there and change the world! No. It is peace be with you. Be at peace. But, Jesus, you don't understand! Look at what I am going through, how badly I've been treated, all my hurts, disappointments, and losses. Don't you see what a mess the world is in, how many people are

suffering and how much violence and injustice there is? How can you say, Be at peace? Let me get through this struggle. Let me figure out who I am, feel better about myself. Let the world become less violent and unjust. Then I will be at peace. When this or that happens, then my life will be peaceful. How can Jesus expect us to be at peace? Doesn't he know what a mess we are, and the world is? It is right there that Jesus shows us his hands and his side, the torture and death wounds dealt by the world we think he doesn't understand. Jesus, who experienced all the suffering there can be in life, still commands us as his followers and his community: Peace be with you. Be at peace within and among yourselves. You don't have to wait for anything. Be at peace now.

A most important spiritual issue for us as persons and a community is how we respond to and work with our fears and all the unpeacefulness within us. If we allow ourselves to be governed by our fear or anxiousness or anger, then we have little to offer that is life giving. We only add to the mess. Jesus said as much in the Sermon on the Mount: Why do you worry? Why are you anxious? Your worry you can't add one single hour to your lifetime!(Matt. 6:27) We know today that worry and anxiousness, in the form of excessive stress, actually removes hours, if not years, from our lives. If we are living out of our fears, worries, anger, even righteous anger, what is accomplished? Nothing. We only add to the troubles and stress and confusion of life.

Being at peace is the work of our inward journey as we grow in compassionate awareness of all that is going on inside us. As we sit for our inward journey time, we practice becoming aware of these feelings and thoughts, not judging them, not DOING anything about them. We simply hold them, looking into them. Then we begin to understand where they come from, what they are rooted in. As we grow in understanding what is going on in us, our fear or anger or anxiousness already begins to diminish. We are no longer afraid of our fears! We are no longer anxious about our anxieties! Sounds simple, doesn't it? Actually, it is simple. We forget that we can just sit, be aware of what is going on in us, and let it be there. Not trying to drive it out. Not giving ourselves little moral lectures—Oh, if I were a stronger person, I wouldn't be afraid or worried or depressed! We just receive this wonderful word, this gentle command, from Jesus: Peace be with you! It is simple, but not easy. It takes time, patience, and practice. It is practicing the peace of Christ.

This is why the inward journey, the life of prayer in its fullest sense, is so critical. Committing ourselves to daily practices of prayer, silence, meditation, self-understanding, and study gives our lives a framework that helps us to touch the peace Jesus is talking about, the peace that comes from God. To make this a regular, daily practice is difficult at first. We

are still running from our fears. We are still blaming others or the world for our anger. We are still trying to fix the world and other people when we ourselves are such a mess and don't know who we are. When we take time each day for quietness, becoming aware of our inner life, understanding the things that are making us afraid or angry or depressed, we are practicing the peace Jesus is talking about. It is all about working with Jesus' call to be at peace. And this is what makes us ready to hear clearly and authentically what we are called to do and to be for the sake of the world.

The world desperately needs communities of faith that are that are taking Jesus seriously when he says, Peace be with you. About thirty-five years ago I took my first silent retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, Thomas Merton's monastery. I admired Merton, and since I was only a year out of seminary and already burning out, I thought I might as well give it a shot! This was the beginning of my taking spiritual practice seriously. I was about to begin learning how to stop running from my fears, anxiousness, and anger, and how to listen inwardly. As I drove away from Gethsemani after three days of silence, I felt a profound gratitude for that community. It was not a community without tensions and conflicts. Merton's writings about life there tell us that. Yet it was a community devoted to living in the peace Jesus commands us to have, a peace within a world that is tumultuous, lost in confused values and directions. It was like an anchor for the world, or a wellspring of spiritual sanity and clarity. Over the years, Gethsemani, and later the Sisters of Loretto Motherhouse ten miles from Gethsemani, continued to be places where I could return to touch again my truest self, and reset my life and work out of a clearer sense of my calling and gifts.

We don't need to be a monastic community, however, to live in and out of the peace of Christ. The Church of the Covenant has felt called to be such a community from the beginning, a community that calls people into an inward journey of deepening their lives in God. People come here for worship or to walk the grounds or to spend time in retreat, and say such things as, "This is such a peaceful place." I think it is true. We try to create places--mission groups, the missions with which we work, our worship, these grounds--where people can touch the peace of Christ, the peace of God, and the sacred dimension of their lives and of life itself.

It can be this way only as we continue to touch and deepen in ourselves the peace Christ gives. We make a commitment to work in our individual lives with spiritual practices that help us touch peace. Our mission groups need to continue to work with spiritual practices that ground the group in peace, as well as in the vision to which it feels called. We may not

do it perfectly, but that's not the point. The point is the desire, the commitment, and the effort to keep touching the peace of Christ in the midst of our fears, conflicts, and the tremendous needs of the world. This is all the work of the inward journey, individually and together.

Then Jesus does a strange thing. He breathes on the disciples. As God sent me, I am sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit. The sins you forgive are forgiven; the sins you retain are retained. I don't think we need to get too hung on what Jesus means by "retaining" sins. In essence, Jesus is giving his community authority and power to continue his ministry—the work of God's love in and for the world. The breath he breathes on the disciples is the breath of peace and the breath of ministry, of mission, of reaching out. This is the outward journey, the impulse and energy of God's spirit filling and leading us. It grows out of the inward journey. Being grounded in the peace we have because of our relationship with God, we live out of that relationship and the spirit we receive in it. And we can be assured that as we practice being at peace, it will not lead us away from the world and its needs. Practicing the peace Christ gives, we begin to breathe in the spirit of Jesus, of God, that fills us with God's power and love, that leads us outward to touch the life of the world in healing, nurturing, loving ways. As we continue in the practice of the peace of Christ, we begin to see the particular need to which we are being called. We grow in awareness of those places where our own gifts meet the needs of the world, and that becomes for us a vocation, a calling.

I love this image of Jesus breathing on the disciples. Biblically the word for spirit is the same as breath or wind. This scene is meant to remind us of Genesis 2, the second story of creation. There God fashions the man out of the soil. The man is not a "living being" (*nephes*), however, until God breathes into him the breath of life. Breathing is fundamental to our lives. It is physical and it is spiritual. It was many years before I realized the importance of the physical part of prayer. How we sit. How we breathe and let our breathing lead us into awareness in the present moment. I first encountered these things in my studies of Zen Buddhism. How we sit and how we breathe has everything to do with our spiritual alertness and openness. I learned, however, that all spiritual practice, including Christian practice, has always known the importance of breathing in prayer. When we breathe and are aware of our breathing, we become more present, more aware of life within us and around us. When we become anxious and fearful, we sit firmly so that we feel solid, and we go back to our breathing, letting it lead us into the present moment where the spirit of God can calm us, fill us, and once again lead us.

So I finish on a very practical note. I suggest that we take our breathing very seriously

as a spiritual practice and a part of praying. It leads us back into peace and it connects us with God's spirit. It calms us so that we can simply hold, look into, and understand our fears or whatever else keeps us from being peaceful. Breathing in the spirit of God, the breath of Jesus, we can then breathe out our fears. Becoming more peaceful and inwardly quiet and listening, we are then open to the spirit that Jesus breathes into us. It is the spirit of ministry, that makes our lives channels of God's love for the world. It is the spirit that helps us see what we are to do and what are the gifts we have been given to share. Breathing in, breathing out. This is a simple, good image for the life of faith as Jesus' community.