

Day of Pentecost (Year A) –June 8, 2014
Numbers 11:24-30; Psalm 104:25-35, 37; Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Pentecost: Take a Deep Breath, Together

Today we celebrate Pentecost, the event in which the early church was empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit—*Ruach* (in Hebrew), *Pneuma* (in Greek), *Spiritus* (in Latin)—all mean literally Breath (and Wind). This Divine Breath/Wind sweeps over the primal waters of creation;ⁱ and “blows where it chooses,”ⁱⁱ dispersing seeds of new life and renewal, growth and transformation. The Holy Spirit is closer to us than our very breath, and is the power behind and the Source of every breath we take. When I talk about breath or breathing, I can’t help but be reminded of my father. My father smoked non-stop, and he also drank—a lethal combination. Every day he smoked at least three packs of Lucky Strikes (the ones without the filters)—some lucky strike alright—he died at the age of fifty-nine after a thirty-year fight with emphysema. Watching someone fight for their breath is a terrible sight. And I smoked many of his cigarettes, passively, as a child and to this day my lungs are not my strongest organs. Like most of us, breathing is something I take for granted; and, yet, it is something I don’t take for granted.

As one observer put it, “Breath animates the clay of our being. It is the lusty cry of a newborn, and the essence of wind, spirit, muse, sound. Our feeling states manifest in changes of breath, from the panicky shortness of breath to the sighs ‘too deep for words’ of intense sorrow. Breath carries other things like disease, harsh words and rank odors. Everything ‘breathes.’ Think of a woods on a spring day, the whispering of leaves, the rippling grasses, the trembling of dappled light.”ⁱⁱⁱ

All great religious traditions recognize an eternal power behind and within the power of our breathing. In Sufi,^{iv} Buddhist,^v Taoist^{vi} and Hindu^{vii} practices, gentle attention is paid to the ebb and flow connected to breathing. Judaism has as its name for God the essential sound of breathing (*Yahweh* – according to the rabbis, more correctly pronounced “yaaah [inhale]-whaaay [exhale]”).^{viii} And in our own Christian tradition, for example, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), who lived some 900 years ago, spoke of prayer as breathing in and out the breath of God, and of our human breathing as being integrally connected with the divine “breath of air” that gives and sustains all life on earth. In fact, we can even ask, “do we breathe, or are we *breathed* ?”^{ix}

Now contrast that with our modern emphysemic breathless state of living in which many of us can hardly catch our breath as people living in an age undergoing change at a breath-taking pace. The poet Mary Oliver called this for what it is. She writes, “Listen, are you breathing just a little and calling it a life?”^x That describes my personal style which someone once described as coming from the Tornado school of organizing—run, run, run...I’ve often been left breathless, especially in my 33 years of full-time ministry. I thank God that my move to Brooklyn and this parish community has enabled me to catch my breath, breath deeper and begin to learn to sip life more than gulp it on the run.^{xi} I wish the same for each of you.

How can we be alive if we cannot breathe? The great mystic, Rumi (1207-73) who lived 800 years ago, stated succinctly both the problem of our individual and cultural hurriedness and harriedness—our gasping and grasping—as well as what could be described as the meaning of Pentecost. Rumi wrote, “There is a way of breathing that’s a shame and a suffocation. And there’s another way of expiring, a breath of love, that lets you open infinitely.” I certainly have more to learn from those who have slowed their pace of life, who can breathe in the life-giving Spirit and who aren’t left breathless by their rushing always to the next thing. As Thomas Merton put it, “being attentive to the times of the day...the reason that we don’t take time is a feeling that we have to keep moving. This is a real sickness. We live in the fullness of time. Each moment is God’s own good time. The whole thing boils down to giving ourselves in prayer, a chance to realize that we have what we seek. We don’t have to rush after it. It was there all the time, and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us.”^{xii}

An illustration that we both breathe and are breathed, in an exchange, as it were, is found in the actual chemical reality of breath. As one writer put it,

“Breathing is the taking-in of oxygen and the release of carbon dioxide from the body by a complicated internal pumping mechanism that changes the air pressure inside the body, and so causes oxygen-filled air to enter. Breath links animals and plant life: Animals require oxygen and release carbon dioxide, while plants need carbon dioxide and yield up oxygen. The body stores almost no oxygen, so that breathing is an urgent matter; death is literally, as in the Inuit language, ‘losing your breath.’ Because breath is what quickens the body, it is equated with soul, which is thought to take wing on the last breath of life.”^{xiii}

As I’ve said, the Latin *inspirare*, “to breathe”—or *spiritus*—means “breath” as in respiratory, inspire, conspire, and expire. The Holy Spirit is the breath of God, the giver and sustainer, the power and the aliveness of life. In John’s gospel account of the Risen Jesus’ appearance on Easter evening, which we read today, we see a similar exchange of Jesus’ forgiving and empowering breath. Fifty days later, on the Festival of Pentecost, the God-given life force of the disciples’ breath was reinfused [in-spired] and co-mingled [con-spired] with the life force that sustains the Risen Jesus. In the Pentecost event, recorded in the second chapter of Acts, we see a community that had come together and together learned to breathe, and thus live, in a new way. This new way of breathing in the Holy Spirit led to living with less gasping and grasping and more caring and sharing.

We also see in our reading from Acts that this new way of breathing together—conspiring, if you will—also honors the diversity of *individuals’* languages and cultural identities, their gifts and practices, while uniting them in a *community* of shared faith. Such communities of faith as the ones described in our readings today - and here in this parish - find inspiration from God as they con-spire with God and one another in ways that both permeate the whole of their life together and breathe/live it out as a “breath of love” to others beyond their walls.

Like the disciples, we must somehow find space in our frantic lives to be open to the Holy Spirit—the animating love breath of God. Things get better, somehow, when we slow down enough to pay attention to the breath—our own, God’s, and others’. We become more present and aware. However we give time and attention to this, it’s important to relish and repeat these practices, so that we may find or catch our breath and feel and live life’s meaning and purpose with all the beauty, truth and goodness for which it was meant. As a church community, we learn to breathe in sync with one another, supporting one another, countering the breathless pace that sucks life from us all—enabling us to take a deep breath and expire “a breath of love, that lets us open infinitely.”

ⁱ Genesis 1:2

ⁱⁱ John 3:8

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in “Breath” in *The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism*, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 16

^{iv} See, for example, writings of Rumi. See Jalal-al-Din Rumi (Coleman Barks et al, trans.) *The Essential Rumi* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995).

^v E.g., “Breath is the bridge which connects life to consciousness, which unites your body to your thoughts.” – Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976). See also his other writings.

^{vi} E.g., “The Tao is the breath that never dies. It is the Mother to All Creation.” – Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* (37). Also, e.g.:

"A lifetime is not what is between
the moments of birth and death.
A lifetime is one moment
Between my two little breaths.
The present, the here, the now,
That's all the life I get.
I live each moment in full,
In kindness, in peace, without regret."
- Chade Meng, Taoist poet

^{vii} Various sources quoted in *The Book of Symbols*, *Ibid.*, p. 16.

^{viii} Rabbi Lawrence Kushner explains this name:

“The letters of the Name of God in Hebrew are YOD, HAY, VAV, and HAY. They are frequently mispronounced as “Yahveh.” But in truth they are unutterable. Not because of the holiness they evoke, but because they are all vowels and you cannot pronounce all the vowels at once without risking respiratory injury.

This word is the sound of *breathing*. The holiest Name in the world, the Name of the Creator, is the sound of your own breathing.

That these letters are unpronounceable is no accident. Just as it is no accident that they are also the root letters of the Hebrew verb “to be.” Scholars have suggested that a reasonable translation of the four-letter Name of God might be The One Who Brings Into Being All That Is. So God’s Name is the Name of Existence itself. And, since God is holy, then so is all creation. At the burning bush, Moses asks for God’s Name, but God only replies with Ehyeh-hasher-ehyeh, which is often

incorrectly rendered by the static English, 'I am who I am.' But in truth the Hebrew may denote the future tense: 'I will be who I will be.' Here is a Name (and a God) who is neither completed nor finished. This God is literally not yet." [Lawrence Kushner, "Breathing the Name of God" in Eyes Remade for Wonder (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), p. 144. See also Lawrence Kushner, The Book of Words, (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993), p. 27].

^{ix} The Book of Symbols, Ibid., p. 16.

^x From Mary Oliver's poem, "Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches?" in Mary Oliver, West Wind: Poems and Prose Poems (New York: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1997), p. 61.

^{xi} It's even enabling me to appreciate the popular phrase, "Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away." I can even begin to appreciate Sylvia Plath's (albeit ironic) quote, "I took a deep breath and listened to the old bray of my heart: I am, I am, I am." – from Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar (HarperPerennial, reissued 2013), Ch. 20.

^{xii} Thomas Merton, A Hidden Wholeness, p. 49; see also Quoted in David Stendl-Rast's "Man of Prayer," in Thomas Merton: Monk edited by Patrick Hart, copyright the Abbey of Gethsemani (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974).

^{xiii} The Book of Symbols, Ibid., p. 16.