

Breathing Forgiveness

[John 20:19-23](#)

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle
Sunday, March 30, 2008
Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let us pray together. Indeed, Lord, your Word is a lantern to our path and a light to our feet. May your Word now speak to us and breathe life into us. In the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A young man looked into an old brownstone townhome in front of him. He hesitated because he did not like going into the basements of old buildings. But he gathered his courage and went down the narrow stairs into the lowest floor of that 200-year-old home, which had now become a store front. He had to stoop down in order to open the weathered door below, and duck as he walked into the dimly-lit room. As soon as he stepped inside, he began to feel claustrophobic. The ceilings were low, the room was small, and the stacks of books were chaotic and tight. He could barely move around without knocking something onto the floor. The toughest encumbrance was the air. It was stuffy, musty and damp; but mostly, it was just hard to breathe. No fans; no air conditioning; no airflow at all. He really wanted to leave; but he had been told that this little bookseller was the best in the city.

As his breathing became more labored, he felt mounting anxiety in these closed quarters; panic was catching hold of him and he wanted out. But just as he was turning to leave, a little old man, with a crinkled, but gentle face and sharp eyes, said to him, "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for some advice," he said. "I have an old book here and I'd love to know its value." As they examined the old book together, the young man soon forgot his claustrophobia and his belabored breath. There was something special about the presence of this little old man. He looked worn by the trouble of life, but yet, he had a peaceful way about him. The more they talked, the less the young man was conscious of the tiny room. He realized, then, it was the spirit of the old man that seemed to breathe fresh air into this confined space.

Today are you a person who breathes positive energy into a difficult situation? Does your very presence open up the closed group, or brighten the dark room? Or, on the other hand, when have you been with a person who countermands positive patterns? They seem to suck the very good air out of a normally encouraging moment? They are so bitter and harsh, that when you walk away, you are only able to catch your breath.

John's Gospel records that, on that first day of the week, Jesus was resurrected from the dead. The disciples had gone into hiding for fear of their lives and they were in a locked house. As the disciples were huddled there together, protecting themselves, breathing their palpable anxiety, Jesus appeared—the Resurrected Christ. No longer bound by death, nor threatened by fear, he appeared in the midst of that confined space. He came to them to give them peace and forgiveness; to release them from fear. He came to breathe new purpose and new life into their dashed hopes and their abandoned dreams. He came to give them his Spirit—the Holy Spirit of God. So Jesus breathed on those disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

From the beginning, at creation, in the words of Holy Scripture, in the book of Genesis, it says, "The earth was formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept across the face of the waters." The sweeping wind here is the same Hebrew word for "breath." God breathed on the dark void of matter called Earth and brought forth light and life. This is what Jesus did in that tightly-sealed safe house. He swept into the void and despair of the disciples to breathe light and life into their confused and chaotic lives.

And this is the ministry of God's Spirit. Given by God, breathed through the very life of Jesus himself, the Spirit is a gift that sweeps through messy lives... sweeps out sin and evil... and blows away the dust of our deadliness... clears out guilt and fear... and gives us a sudden blast of immortality, right there in the midst of our darkest space.

This is God's intended sequel, planned from the foundation of the world; his completion of his original creation of human beings. Because God breathed into the very nostrils of the man and the woman in the Garden, to give them life—life that they might become aware and attentive to God—life that not only breathes Earth's oxygenated air, but also breathes God's presence. As both physical and spiritual beings we are born to breathe Earth's air and to breathe God's Spirit. In our lives, as both finite flesh and spiritual being, we must learn to breathe both temporal air and eternal Spirit.

There is a Greek word that summarizes our practice of breathing-in God's wonderful presence: it is the word "doxa," – the word for our two short hymns that we sing every Sunday morning, our "doxologies:"

"Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end."

"Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise him all creatures here below. Praise Him above, ye heavenly hosts. Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost." Our doxologies.

Another way to say this is: "Glory be to God the Father, who breathes life into God the Son, and who breathes life into us, as God's Holy Spirit." As we exercise our bodies, we breathe-in creation's oxygen. As we exercise our faith in Jesus Christ, we learn to breathe-in God's (and I'm going to coin a word here) "doxy-gen". The breath of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, gives us a new birth, a new genesis of God's glory in us. Breathing God's air is a spiritual discipline – it's the pulmonary care of our life with the Resurrected

Jesus. Develop the spiritual practices that help you breathe God's eternal presence here and now.

When Jesus appeared to the disciples in that tomb of a room, they were suffocating from the lack of Jesus' presence. They were breathing toxic air – air filled with fear and guilt. They were afraid for their lives. How toxic do you become when you project your anger and fear on those around you? Because of your toxic breath are others dying in your presence? Are they inhaling your second-hand smoke? Are you a source of emotional and spiritual disease? When people see you coming, do they look or walk the other way? Do you breathe threat more than you breathe life?

In the New Testament book of Acts, chapters 7, 8 and 9, we read a dramatic comparison between Stephen, the deacon of the young church, full of the Holy Spirit, and Saul, Pharisee, who was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." It was young Saul who stood nearby in support of the execution of Stephen. As the rocks were pounding the life out of him, Stephen knelt down and cried out, in a waning physical breath, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." While Saul breathed threat and murder, Stephen breathed forgiveness and life. There is great paradox in these contrasting life and death moments. The dying Stephen breathes life; the living Saul breathes death. The dying Stephen breathes forgiveness; the living Saul breathes condemnation.

Who do you want to be today? Are you breathing forgiveness or fear? Are you breathing blessing or curse? Are you breathing Holy Spirit or the spirit of harm? Some of us here breathe more toxicity than we do doxology.

Jesus said to the disciples, in that locked house, as he breathed his life upon 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." We know that someone is breathing Holy Spirit when they are living in forgiveness and they are forgiving others. We know that someone is breathing toxic air when they live in fear and breathe blame. Parents, what kind of air are you breathing in your household? What kind of air are you giving to your children to inhale? Is it open and fresh... or closed and suffocating? Are you breathing criticism or encouragement?

As spiritual discipline, we worship regularly so that we can learn to breathe the right kind of air. Every Sunday morning, in our Reformed order of worship, we say The Lord's Prayer together, which supplicates these words: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive others." As we breathe this very prayer that Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, we breathe the very essence of the ministry of the Holy Spirit: forgive us as we forgive others. As we inhale the forgiveness of Jesus for our own sins, we exhale our forgiveness for those who have, in fact, trespassed against us.

Praying is breathing the Spirit of God, who forgives us, and then moves us to forgive others. The ministry of the Holy Spirit, as the ministry of Jesus, is all about forgiveness. As Jesus hung there on the cross dying, during his last breathing moments, he breathed what Stephen breathed in his last moments: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

Are you able to forgive others—whether they know what they're doing, or not? Are you breathing threats against them? Have you refused to inhale the forgiveness of Jesus? If so, it's time to take a deep breath; it's time to receive the Holy Spirit of God. Do you feel like you're still locked up in a stale room... caged up in the darkness and void of your own soul? Are you still exhaling threats because you've never stopped to inhale forgiveness?

What is it about people who can suddenly bring joy into troubled spaces? We can look at Jesus in this scene to give us a sense of what makes such a person tick. Once Jesus had suddenly appeared in the room with the disciples and greeted them with "Be at peace!" he showed them his hands and his side. Jesus showed them the marks on his body of his crucifixion—the nail wounds and the spear gash. He showed them the signs of suffering and pain. People who can be trusted in stressful situations, who show calm in the face of threat, are people who have lived through difficult times and have still learned to forgive. They have been through the darkness, and they have emerged on the full side of grace. They bring joy into the midst of the terror because they are continually breathing God's forgiving presence. And that's the power of the resurrection—their peace and joy is not superficial or trivial. They have the marks of the cross to prove their peace has come at a high price.

The Holy Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus, is a wounded Spirit, a Spirit who lived in the body of Jesus as he was enduring the pain of the cross. And that same suffering Spirit now Jesus breathes on us today—a Spirit who's faced the worst and emerged with the best. You trust because you can see the scars on Jesus' body. You trust, because you feel the calm that he brings when life is such a mess. This Spirit has cried out to forgive people who are beating him, mocking him, and killing him.

What a marvelous reality—that you can breathe this very same Spirit today! But learning to breathe such a Spirit takes work. While the Holy Spirit is given as a gift that we can receive, we must practice breathing for ourselves, and breathing it out to others. The spiritual discipline of breathing Jesus' Spirit is similar to the discipline of singing, which we've heard so well today. All of these wonderful guest singers know that singing is all about good breathing—controlled breath disciplines the singer, moderates the vibrato, and sustains the sound. And let me tell you, we've heard some great pipes today! [Mastersingers USA]

It is like learning to breathe the Spirit. It takes time to learn the discipline; it takes discipline and persistence to practice good breathing technique. We learn how to breathe the Spirit in spiritual disciplines of worship; of prayer; Christian community; the study of Scriptures; reflection and meditation. Jesus wants us to learn the discipline of breathing peace and forgiveness; but we have to practice it.

The deacon, Stephen, learned to breathe the Spirit. He breathed under fire, but he breathed forgiveness and he breathed peace. That terrible Pharisee, Saul, even learned to breathe Jesus' Spirit. His breathing of threat toward the church was changed by meeting the Resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. Paul—he breathed—as with the new name, a new Spirit of peace and forgiveness toward the church that he had attacked and threatened. If Jesus can bring life into an old Pharisee, he can do it for anyone.

Just as the discipline of the careful practice of breathing creates freedom to sing well, so the prayerful spiritual discipline of breathing the Holy Spirit trains the saint to breathe the Risen Christ. So let the Risen Christ breathe in you today, the Holy Spirit.

This coming Friday, April 4th, the 40th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination will be celebrated here in Washington, DC. During the last months of Dr. King's life, he was beset by fear that someone would kill him. He suffered in deep grief, fighting sleeplessness and depression. For weeks on end, he could only relax in a room with no windows.

Do you find yourself so afraid that you can only be safe in confined space? As Dr. King lived day-by-day in the midst of the fear, he expected Jesus to show up for him, to give him the courage to go outside for one more speech... for one more appearance. And he lived breathing the forgiveness of Christ, in the face of fire.

Today, I encourage you, as you go, to inhale the forgiveness of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit. You can breathe peace and forgiveness to those around you. As God sent Jesus into this troubled world, so Jesus sends you and me— not on your own, but breathing Holy Spirit... overflowing with forgiveness and peace. As you leave here today, who are you breathing?

Let us pray. O Lord Jesus Christ, now breathe on us the power of your Spirit, that we might leave and breathe on others forgiveness and peace; in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.