

Sermon for The Day of Pentecost
Trinity Episcopal Church in Lawrence, Kansas
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Aproximately 16 times every minute we human beings do something we all take for granted...we breathe. About 16 times every minute we inhale and exhale air, and we usually do it without a second thought. The process started at birth and will continue until we draw our last breath. Breathing was a deep mystery to the ancients, before we learned about the biological process. And, like all mysteries, breathing has been an integral part of the religions of the Tibetans, the Indians, the Chinese, and the Japanese. It was a feature of the cults of the Egyptians. We see it also in the Bible. The ancient Hebrews used the word wind, the *breath*, in context with *soul*. In the Biblical account of creation, we read that, "God breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life and he became a living soul." In the NT, the Greek word *pneuma* is used in speaking of the human soul. Our word, spirit, is from the Latin verb *spirare*, which means "to breathe."

Jesus gave a breath of fresh air to his disciples. On the first Easter Day, he came into the place where the disciples were, breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." It was this same breath of fresh air the disciples received on the Day of Pentecost, 50 days after the resurrection. This Holy Breath in turn came out of the apostles that day as they witnessed and preached so that those around them heard in their own languages. On this Day of Pentecost, I'm here to tell you we dare not take this spiritual breathing for granted because the quality of our breathing affects the quality of our lives – our health, moods, energy, creativity. Likewise, our spiritual lives are dependent upon the breath of God supplying the invisible virtues which are necessary for spiritual health, moods, energy, and creativity. How can we be more receptive to the breath of God?

First, we can seek inspiration. Most of my life, I have associated inspiration with enlightenment. In a sense, this association is correct. But, in another sense, inspiration refers to something else. When Rhabanus Marurus wrote the *Veni Creator Spiritus* in the 8th century, he had this "something else" in mind. In this hymn, which has become one of the beloved canticles of the Christian liturgy, we sing "Come, Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire, and lighten with celestial fire." Inspiration and illumination are segregated in his thought as 2 essential aspects of the work of the Spirit.

To inspire is to breathe in. If you want to be more receptive to the Breath of God, take a deep breath. The result will be new life. The psalmist celebrated inspiration: "When you take away their breath, they die...but when you give them breath, they are created, you give new life to the earth..." C. Ten Boom spoke of inspiration this way: "I have a glove here in my hand. The glove cannot do anything by itself, but when my hand is in it, it can do many things. True, it is not the glove, but my hand in the glove that acts. We are gloves. It is the Holy Spirit in us who is the hand, who does the job. We have to make room for the hand so that every finger is filled."

The question on Pentecost is not whether God is blessing our own plans and programs but whether we are open to the great opportunities to which God's Holy Spirit is calling us! Think of your openness to God's Spirit in this way. Breathe the life-giving Spirit in so that God can fill every pore and every fibre, making you able to be and do more than you ever imagined and more than could ever be possible under your own power. Keep your life open to the inspiration of the Spirit.

And, if you want the Holy Spirit in your life, try conspiracy. The late theologian John Courtney Murray effectively used the word conspiracy in its root sense. The word literally means to breathe together. That's what Pentecost was – a conspiracy, not in the sense of a sinister gathering for dark purposes, but as a consensus for good, a breaking down of barriers, a breathing together. Have you ever sat with someone else and tried to breathe together? I recall sitting with a group of about 15 people around the bed of my father during the final hour of his life. He was struggling for breath so hard that the bed shook. After the longest time of silence, one man put his hand to his chest and said, “we're all trying to breathe for him.” In a real sense, we were.

I recall another time when a group was together praying without speaking. The room was very still. Yet there was a movement of air. It made the candle flame flicker and you could hear us inhale and exhale. Gradually, we discovered we were all breathing in unison. It was as if we had become one body and our breathing had become one united prayer.

We frequently breathe in unison when we are singing or reciting a creed or prayer, together. Whenever we join together in the conspiracy of Christian fellowship, worship, and service, the Holy Spirit has a chance to move among us, uniting our hearts and minds in a consensus. And, the breathing that is usually so silent, begins to sound like the rush of a mighty wind. When we open ourselves to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we are also drawn to one another.

Finally, for the breathing process to be complete, it has to be respiration. Breathing in is only half of the process. Breathing out is also necessary. We need to pay attention to what we are breathing out because just a second earlier, it was what we were breathing in. If we breathe in hate, it will probably be hate when we breathe it out. If we breathe in peace (as Jesus disciples did) it will probably be peace when we breathe it out.

In order to gain support for the League of Nations, which the U.S. Senate opposed, President Woodrow Wilson set out on a speaking tour to convince the American people that the covenant was necessary. His standard theme was that the winds of war must give way to the gentle breezes of peace. The President drew upon the word “inspire” as he sought to do just that, inspire the people to peace. He told the American people that it was time to breathe in the fresh spirit of peace. But too few were willing or able to take that deep breath at that point in time. And the president, who suffered a stroke on the trip, bemoaned the fact of how easy it had been to inspire the nation to war only a few years earlier, yet how difficult to inspire them to peace. Peace is the fruit of the Spirit. Yet the world will not inhale the gentle air of peace, preferring the sulfurous lung-searing winds of war. Like the enemies of the psalmist they “breathe out violence.”

If we are constantly putting ourselves in a place where we can breathe in the Breath of God together, it will not be long before we will be breathing out the Breath of God in the world around us. Magnifying Christ and proclaiming the good News of what God has done, offering hope in the face of despair, peace in the face of hatred, comfort in the face of pain and suffering, and the eternal God in the face of the uncertainties of human existence. Elizabeth Barrett Browning once wrote, “He lives most life whoever breathes most air.” Jesus breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Let us make a new resolve to join with one another in the greatest deep breathing exercise ever known – to receive the Holy Spirit, let our lives bear the Spirit's fruit, dream dreams, see visions, and experience the mighty works of God first-hand by becoming one of them!