

Pentecost A May 31 2020
John 20:19-23
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

"Breathe"

Grace to you and peace from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 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." Let's pray:

"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Forgiveness is probably the most overlooked fruit of the Spirit when we think about Pentecost. Any mention of Pentecost undoubtedly evokes a recollection of the incredible events in the story from the book of Acts. We see the disciples gathered in the upper room. We hear a sound like the rush of violent wind filling the house. We picture divided tongues, as of fire, appearing and resting on each disciple. We try to imagine the drunken chaos of people speaking, hearing, and understanding strange new languages.

If you're anything like me at all, you wish for such an extravagant experience of God yourselves. I sometimes feel a need for something tangible, a sign, a sound, a vision, that reveals God's presence, that guides my life, and reassures me. But, for St John, Pentecost is more

about what's happening within us than what is happening around us. The sign of Pentecost for St John is forgiveness that opens locked doors, recreates life, and sends us out to be like Jesus. While forgiveness is not the whole story of Pentecost it is an important and often ignored piece of the Pentecost puzzle.

One of the most difficult things to do is to forgive someone. We know we should forgive. It's the right thing to do. It's the Christian thing to do. It's what Jesus continues to do. But it's sometimes very hard for us to do. It's always easier to judge someone else's behaviour and how it affects us, than it is to see them as God sees them. Yet, even more difficult than forgiving someone else, is to forgive ourselves. To forgive ourselves is to set ourselves free to return to the most blessed likeness of God.

About 10 years ago, I learnt of the incarceration of a Christian man whom I know quite well and consider a friend. He was in charge of 90 stockbrokers at a large financial services firm in Western Australia. Sadly, temptation got the better of him and he was apprehended for attempting to embezzle A\$1 million from a wealthy client. He admitted his intentions, repaid the money, and went to prison for 5 years. Still, mud sticks, and I can't help but wonder whether my friend has been forgiven by his wife, friends, staff, colleagues, and the man whose trust he had betrayed. I know that he regrets doing what he did and is remorseful and deeply affected. I can't help but wonder whether he will ever forgive himself.

Forgiveness doesn't excuse or justify the wrong my friend committed. I'm not suggesting there aren't or shouldn't have been consequences for his actions. There were and still are, but that's a different issue. The question of forgiveness is about whether others will give my friend the chance to reclaim the original beauty of his creation. The question of forgiveness is also about whether he will give himself that opportunity. To put it in Jesus' words, will his sins be forgiven or retained? Will he be allowed to move forward with life or will he be forever haunted by shame and guilt? They're not just questions for my friend. They're questions for each one of us.

If we look deeper into the story, beyond the court's determination, the newspaper articles, the texts, the tweets, and the Facebook shaming, we come face to face with the reality of darkness. His, as well as our own. We may not have committed an act of grand larceny, but if we're really honest, we wouldn't need a microscope to find the secrets, the lies, the deceptions, the betrayals that hide in our darkness.

It's a darkness that splinters our lives, separating us from God, other people, and the truth of our wonderfully created selves. Part of the deception of our darkness is that we only look skin deep at our behaviour, the things we have done or left undone, said or left unsaid, thought or should have thought of. But they're just the symptoms that point to the darkness. The darkness is our mistrust of divine love, the denial of our original beauty, the refusal to see our life and the world as God sees them. That is the real sin.

The same darkness has left the disciples hiding in their house. The doors are locked for fear of being found out. They're probably hiding as much from themselves as they are from the religious authorities.

I wonder how often you've tried to hide from yourself? Don't we tend to deny what's really going on? Invent cover-up stories? Pretend everything is alright? Sometimes we even believe the lie that we're so clever that we get away with it. The inescapable reality is, however, that leaves no room for the Spirit of Truth to blow through our lives, to inspire and recreate us. Ultimately, we choose to retain our sins and live in the darkness, to live in a state of "unforgiveness." God forgives us, but we choose to lock the door, close the shutters, draw the blinds, and suffocate. The fear of being found out keeps us locked in the darkness of our house, and drains the life out of us.

The only thing that can overcome that darkness and open the doors to new life is the Spirit of Truth: an Advocate who will stand on our side (John 14:16) and not leave us orphaned (John 14:18); one who will teach us everything and remind us of all Jesus said (John 14:26); one who will guide us into all truth (16:13), truth about God and truth about ourselves. We need to be “pentecosted”, which is exactly what Jesus does. Jesus comes and stands in the midst of our locked houses. He gets in our face and breathes. His holy breath sends forth the fire, the wind, and the tongues of Pentecost.

The fire of Pentecost glows in our hearts and pushes back the darkness. The wind of Pentecost unlocks and blows open the doors to new life. The tongues of Pentecost proclaim the great deeds of God and call us to live in a state of forgiveness; to remember and reclaim our original beauty, to turn our gaze back to God, to be transformed in his likeness.

Christ’s “Pentecostal” breath resuscitates our lives. Again and again, he inspires and fills us with the Holy Spirit. Pentecost replays the day of creation when God gathered dust from the ground and breathed his own life into us (Gen. 2:7). Pentecost is an act of re-creation, freeing us to leave the darkness, to step out of our house into a new world and a new life. Nothing is retained against us so let’s not hold back anything from ourselves or others. We have been “pentecosted”, God and humanity sharing one breath, one life.

So, what are we to do with this holy breath of God, Dear Saints? Breathe. Breathe life, breathe love, and breathe forgiveness. Just breathe. Amen.

And the breath of God, which surpasses all understanding, will sustain you in body and soul to life everlasting, in Christ Jesus. Amen.