

“Breathe on Me, Breath of God”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Easter Season, Sunday, April 15, 2012

The Rev. Dr. James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: John 20: 19-31

19 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.” 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” 27 Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” 28 Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 29 Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Breathe on me, breath of God!

Jesus breathed on them and said to them,

“Receive the Holy Spirit.

23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them;

if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Hidden in plain sight.

Are you like me, as many times as you and I have heard this story,

I had never noticed that

Jesus juxtaposes forgiving and retaining, letting go and holding on.

Have you?

What do you think of the urgency of Christ's message to the disciples?

Why should Jesus Christ care how you behave, whether you forgive or not?

Of all the messages and inspirational words

to bring to the living from the beyond,

Jesus Christ chose to emphasize our need to be forgiving

and the power we have through the Holy Spirit

to forgive one another...

and the consequences if and when we don't,

that when we retain the sins of any, they are retained...

Breathe on me, breath of God!

Let's review the situation and put Jesus' teaching in context:

Just a few days and hours earlier

the disciples had heard His last words from the cross,

including His memorable quotation of Psalm 22,

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

They must have been amazed to hear Jesus look heavenward

and speak to God of forgiveness, to be so understanding,

when there was so much to make him

feel upset and angry and disappointed.

It must have been difficult for the disciples to imagine Jesus of Nazareth

being in a forgiving state of mind

when he had just been betrayed then flayed,

hailed then nailed,

hung out to dry then hung up to die,

and all of it by those He trusted.

And now they were alone, abandoned, afraid, angry.

They had just witnessed their beloved Rabbi Jesus

arrested by the occupying army

and then the sham of a trial by their own religious leaders.

Now Jesus was dead and gone;

all they had to go on were stories of an empty tomb

and rumors of his resurrection from the dead into new life.

They had cause to be afraid, angry, disappointed,

unsure of where to go and to whom to turn.

Suddenly, Jesus appeared to the disciples in their hiding place.

Jesus came and stood among them

and said, "Peace be with you."

²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.

Look, see what I went through for you?

See my hands?

See my side?

See my scars?

See my power over death and sin and evil?

See my love for you, and you, and you, and you?

Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

²¹Jesus said to them again,

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Now, just as His last words spoke of the need for God to practice forgiveness,

his first words back speak of the need for us his followers to do the same.

Jesus breathed on them and said to them,

“Receive the Holy Spirit.

²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them;

if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Breathe on me, breath of God!

Observe that the Holy Spirit breathed onto the disciples

is the same Spirit Jesus received from the Lord at His baptism.

After he was baptized, Jesus walked into his home temple and quoted Isaiah 61.

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint
spirit.*

*They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.*

Breathe on me, breath of God!

We know this Spirit, this mighty Spirit, this empowering Spirit, this loving Spirit.

When you connect with the holy and welcome in this Spirit,

you and God's people can together conquer mountains of hate
and slay the giants of oppression and neglect.

You can even overcome sin and wrongdoing, intentional or not.

With this Spirit, you can forgive.

Surely the disciples had much to forgive.

They needed to forgive themselves,

for sleeping when Jesus needed them
and for abandoning him,

denying him and letting him down.

They needed to forgive their religious leaders,

and they needed to find a way to forgive the Roman army and officers.

They needed to discern how to forgive so that they could live,

so they could be ambassadors for Christ,
representatives of God's grace,

bearers of the Holy Spirit.

Breathe on me, breath of God!

When you do not forgive,

when you retain the sins and omissions
and harmful actions of others and your own self,
what is life like?

Do you feel like you are carrying an unbearable weight?

Not only do you feel like you are carrying that weight with you,
the same weight holds others back,
slowing and impeding their spiritual growth and life.

Is your spirit impeded?

Are your own actions impeding the spirits of others, of your
neighbors?

The motto of New Hampshire is “Live Free or Die.”

So true, when it comes to our faith walk.

Live free, free of sin,
free from carrying grudges and anger and disappointment,
lest it feels as cold as death in your soul
and your stomach is in knots
and your nights are sleepless.

What are you going to do about it?

Are you going to forgive, or retain, the sins of others?

Breathe on me, breath of God!

In his work called An African Prayer Book, Desmond Tutu tells of...

“A [gentleman who] had a particular besetting sin,

and he used to confess it and God would forgive him.

But no sooner had he been absolved then he would trip up and sin again.

One day this happened,

and he rushed back to God and said, ‘I’m sorry, I’ve done it again.’

And God said, ‘What have you done again?’”

“God,” writes Desmond Tutu, “suffers from amnesia when it comes to our sins.

God does not look at the caterpillar we are now,

but at the dazzling butterfly we have in us to become.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus bids us to ask God to forgive us

as we forgive those who have wronged us.

Not to forgive others is to shut the door to our own being forgiven.”

(Desmond Tutu, An African Prayer Book, 1995, P.38)

Desmond Tutu, the Lord's Prayer, the Holy Scriptures,

and your own beautiful faith point you toward

the incredible, amazing truth

that God forgives and forgets our repented
sins.

When it comes to our confessed sins,

the amnesia of God is a spiritual attribute

we are encouraged to claim and emulate.

God covenants with us to not hold our confessed sins against us.

Accepting this as a starting point is the easy part.

Here is the hard part, my friends.

Here is the part that makes us uncomfortable and afflicts our consciences:

As God has forgiven us, so we are to grant forgiveness to one another.

My mother, Buffy Calvert, tells a true story

about a dispute between the children of two neighboring families.

One thing led to another and before they knew it

best friends were worst enemies.

The mother of one of the families prayed with her children,

made some brownies,

and then told her children to take them next door.

The kids didn't want to go.

They finally gave in and reluctantly walked across the yards.

In that simple gesture of reconciliation,

the incident was over and all hearts and minds were healed.

Simple gestures of grace can move mountains of misunderstanding and loss.

Breathe on Me, Breath of God!

We have this power to forgive, thanks to the grace of God.

Our hearts and minds are prepared by God for grace.

In the midst of our workaday lives,

there are ample opportunities for healing and reconciliation.

Pray for such opportunities; pray for deliverance, pray to live free.

Buffy Calvert concluded her story about the two neighboring families by saying,

“Forgiveness, like every other muscle, becomes stronger with each use.

The more you practice being forgiving,

the easier it becomes until it becomes a habit,

a spiritual habit so common to you that you naturally forgive quickly

without harboring grudges.”

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

Children Sermon

One evening a father went into his two preschool daughters' bedroom three times in order to tell them to be quiet, that it was time to sleep. Finally, for lack of anything better to say, he asked a question he had never raised before. "How many times must I tell you to be quiet?" Knowing an answer was expected, his eldest daughter responded in a soft voice, "Seven?"

Have you ever forgiven someone seven times? When Jesus told Peter, "70 times 7," he might as well have said, "7,000 times 7." Forgiveness is always the answer. When we forgive we are freed. We are freed from harboring grudges, freed from the need to get revenge or to get even, freed from a self-righteousness and self-centeredness, freed to be free in Christ, to be united with God and one another. Practice saying, "I forgive you." Say it until it feels so natural, so easily does it roll off your tongue, that being forgiving becomes a part of who you are.

Communion Meditation (#1)

You know, forgiveness is not saying the offense never happened. It did. Forgiveness is not saying that everything is okay. It isn't. Forgiveness is not saying that we never feel the pain of being wronged. We do. Forgiveness is an attitude; it is a way to approach life; it is our greatest challenge and our mightiest joy in the practice of

our faith.

A friend shared his favorite Anne Lamott quote with me, saying, “I am not one of those Christians who are heavy into forgiveness. I am the other kind.” Consider this quote of Anne Lamott from a recent interview. “I think joy and sweetness and affection are a spiritual path. We're here to know God, to love and serve God, and to be blown away by the beauty and miracle of nature. You just have to get rid of so much baggage to be light enough to dance, to sing, to play. You don't have time to carry grudges; you don't have time to cling to the need to be right.” (Anne Lamott interview in [The Washington Times](#))

Maybe the first question we have to ask ourselves when it comes to forgiveness is this: Do I want to be right or do I want to be reconciled?

Communion Meditation (#2)

Jesus never said following him would be a rose garden. He did, however, promise to be with us.

After the resurrection event Jesus appeared to the disciples. He still bore physical scars, evidence of the violence of crucifixion. He still bore emotional scars, the painful memories of friends who slept while he prayed, those who stood far off while he hung on the cross, and Peter's three denials of his connection with Christ.

After the resurrection Jesus sent angels with messages of mercy.

After the resurrection Jesus personally appeared, and He reached out His pierced hands to forgive and extend the grace of a fresh start to Peter, the disciples, and the whole people of God.

We are reminded to forgive...and to forget. We may need to learn from our histories, gleaning wisdom and experience, without feeding the grudges and desire for revenge that pulls us back into a painful past and a lost future.

After the resurrection Jesus appeared to Peter and three times called him to feed and love God's flock. Christ always saw in Peter what he could become; He refused to let Peter's sins negate the potential of this repentant child of God. Peter was forgiven and gifted with an opportunity of a new life in Christ.

As Desmond Tutu said, "God does not look at the caterpillar we are now, but at the dazzling butterfly we have in us to become."

After the resurrection, Jesus returned to breathe new life into your soul. Come as you to the Lord's Table. Here you are welcome and loved.