

Easter 6 (A)
May 17, 2020
Text: John 14:15-21

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I'd like to invite you to share in a very simple spiritual practice, to pay attention to your breath—breathe in slowly and deeply... and breathe out... In... and out... You may wish to close your eyes in order to be able to focus as completely as possible on your breathing. When we feel especially frazzled or distracted, when we're caught up in rehearsing over and over again something from the past, or worrying about something that could be in the future, paying attention to our breath can be a way of returning to the present, a way of being God's beloved child in the here and now.

Attending to our breath can become a way of prayer for us. Using your imagination, breathe in God's sure love, God's eternal compassion and commitment toward us. Breathe out the fruits of love to be shared with everyone who is part of our lives. Breathe in... and breathe out... Breathe in God's forgiveness, God's grace and mercy, given freely to us. Breathe out the resolve to seek to be forgiving in all our relationships. Breathe in... and breathe out... Breathe in God's generous providing for us—from the abundance and beauty of creation. Breathe out the intention to live generously toward those who share our lives, to be generous with our time and attention, generous with our abilities, our possessions and our money. Breathe in... and breathe out... Breathe in God's strength and peace, so that we can be bold and courageous. Breathe out the resolve to share encouragement and support with family, with friends, with neighbors. Breathe in... and breathe out.

I invite you to open your eyes again. This very simple spiritual practice mirrors the essential movement of Christian faith—of being blessed by God so we can be a blessing to others. We are forgiven and set free by God so that we can become a force for forgiveness and freedom in the world. We are touched by God's healing and reconciling power, with the result that we can take part in God's ongoing healing work for the whole human family. God has broken down the barriers of sin and separation in order to empower us to create connections and create open, inclusive community. This is the work of God's Spirit in our lives. This is the breath of God blowing into us and filling us with new life, and then blowing through us to share that life in all of our relationships.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus speaks to his followers about the Spirit to prepare them for a time that would be scary and uncertain. We're living through our own scary and uncertain time—and although our experience is different from that of those first followers of Jesus, I wonder whether what we're going through now can help us hear and appreciate what Jesus is saying.

Our passage comes from the evening of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples. It was later that same night that Jesus was betrayed and arrested, condemned by the religious authorities and sentenced to death by the Roman governor. Beyond death on the cross was resurrection and ascension—and it all meant that profound and disorienting change was coming. Jesus'

followers would no longer experience his physical presence as the center of their lives—the center that gives focus and purpose and joy and meaning. Jesus would no longer be physically present to show them God’s love and mercy. And with Jesus gone, they would feel vulnerable and alone, like solitary travelers. Perhaps they would feel they were adrift, losing touch with what is true and what makes life meaningful.

So Jesus promised that they would not be abandoned or alone. He would send them another Advocate, the Spirit of truth, to be with them forever. The word Jesus uses, which our translation renders as “Advocate,” the Greek word is *paraclete*, which can mean a helper or comforter, or a legal advocate in court. When Jesus is no longer physically present, God gives the Spirit of truth to help and comfort them, to remind them that they are beloved children of God, that their lives are precious in God’s sight—no matter what the world around them seems to say.

There’s one important thing that our English translation hides from us about God giving the Spirit of truth, the Advocate, to us. When Jesus says, “the Father will give you another Advocate,” it’s easy for us to hear something like—the Father will give each of you (singular) an Advocate—for you an Advocate; and you, and you too. But in Greek, Jesus says God will give you (plural), all of us together, as a community, an Advocate. We experience the gift of God’s Spirit to be with us, to give us comfort and strength and encouragement and guidance, by being a community together, specifically by being Jesus’ community together. We know that Jesus has not abandoned us or left us to find our own way when we live together in the way that Jesus has shown us—with forgiveness and compassion and mutual care. Jesus’ followers continue to experience him as the center of their lives that gives focus and purpose and joy and meaning, not by his physical presence, but by being the community that lives by his way of love, which is exactly where the Spirit of truth gives help and comfort, reminding us that we are beloved children of God.

This is part of what makes this time we’re living through now so difficult. God gives us this gift of life, and we experience its deepest beauty when we share it as a community. We experience life as good and meaningful through relationships and connectedness, and we recognize the gift of God’s Spirit in life together. But in order to make it through this pandemic, and to care for our neighbors, we are not gathering. We are not being together in person.

And yet! The Spirit still holds us together, making us one community in Jesus—this morning, a community mediated electronically by Zoom. And I wonder whether our experience of being “together” like this on Zoom can help us see more clearly how we are always together in all our various places in life. We are the community of Jesus that cares and comforts and supports in a hundred different places all at the same time. Even when we are physically separated, the Spirit holds us in each other’s hearts. Even in this life-together-at-a-distance we experience God’s Spirit with us, helping us to endure times that are scary and uncertain, to encourage and strengthen us through experiences of worry and loss and grief. God’s Spirit is breathing life into us, breathing strength and courage into us, even at a distance.

And there's more. There's not just breathing in, but also breathing out. We breathe in this gift of connection and mutual care in our life together as the community of Jesus. And then we breathe out. In our daily lives apart from this gathering, the Spirit kindles our love to be an instrument of God's love—for our families, our neighbors and coworkers, for those in need, for the world. Breathing out this way, we learn in our heart of hearts that Jesus' way of being—loving each other as he has loved us—is what makes life meaningful, what makes life human!

We breathe in... and we breathe out... We breathe in God's love and mercy and forgiveness... and we breathe out to share that love in whatever ways are available to us. And the Spirit makes us know that we are not just passing through this life as solitary travelers. We have been caught up into God's great work of love to heal and renew all of creation, and nothing can ever separate us from that deep, deep love. Thanks be to God. Amen