

Take a Breath, Forgive

The night of Jesus' resurrection is depicted in the Gospel of John (20:19-31) in remarkable ways. It had been an extraordinary day. It had been an extraordinary weekend. On Friday Jesus had died by crucifixion. But now rumors filled the city. All that day there had been stories of the tomb found empty and of sightings of Jesus. And there had been people rushing back and forth through the narrow alleyways of Jerusalem reporting this and that. Now it's nightfall, and the disciples (except for Thomas and perhaps a few others) are together. The doors are locked for fear of the authorities. Despite this, Jesus comes and stands among them and says, "Peace be with you." He shows them his hands and his side where the nails had been driven in and the sword had been thrust. The disciples are overjoyed.

And then Jesus does the most remarkable thing. He breathes on them, maybe to help them visualize – these guys are a tad slow sometimes and certainly confused by all that's happened – and he says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." He breathes on them and they receive the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God! But it's not really so strange at all when we remember that the Greek word for "Spirit" – *pneuma* (πνευμα) – means "wind, breath, spirit or soul." It means all these things. And this is not the only time we see these connections. On Pentecost the coming of the Spirit begins with "suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind" (Act 2:1). And now in our text Jesus breathes on them the breath of God, and they receive the Holy Spirit. It's not so very different, when you think of it, from how man was created in the first place, as recorded in Genesis 2:7, when "the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." It was creation then, and now it's a new creation.

So one thing we might observe is that Spirit-consciousness, this encountering the presence of God, can begin with focusing on breath, on breathing. We don't do that often enough. Except when sometimes we turn a little asthmatic. Some of you know the feeling. You find yourself reaching for breath, and it's not quite there. And then you don't take it for granted. But Spirit-consciousness, encountering the presence of God, can well begin with just focusing on breath, on breathing, conscious breathing, in and out, God as near as the air we breathe, deep diaphragmatic breathing, from deep in your soul. So what Jesus does here is not so surprising. He breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit," the Spirit of God.

But then Jesus goes on to say, in effect, "I know that there are a lot of things you don't understand. I know you're confused and stunned by what's happening. But I still have a purpose, a meaning, a mission for you. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." In the history of the church these words have created a lot of debate about whether Catholic priests can absolve sins, and if so, in what sense. But as usual what Jesus is saying is not nearly as complicated as it seems, or as we make it out to be. What he's saying is this: To you and to those who come after you is entrusted the ministry of forgiveness. I want you to go out among the people and start forgiving them in my name. This is what a Spirit-filled person does, one

who has grasped how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. I want you to tell them that there's nothing they've ever done or thought that cannot be forgiven. There is no fantasy so perverted, no secret so shameful, no deed so outrageous, no private hell so hidden that they can't be forgiven. But it'll help them to believe it if they see that forgiveness in you. Tell them they can come clean. Tell them that God can be trusted, that he will forgive them, and that they can start over. But whether they do or not is up to you!

The truth is: Spirit-filled people have been given the ministry of forgiveness. We see the wounded child in others. So much of the offense we take of other people comes from expecting so much from them. We expect our husbands or our wives to nurture us, comfort us, affirm us, make us feel great about ourselves, make us all better. Why? We expect our parents to have always done justice by us. Why? We expect church leaders to be perfect, to never make mistakes, to do our thinking for us although it better be what we think. Why? We expect those we elect to govern us to live flawless lives, to solve all our problems, to make us all better. Why? Why do we expect all this? Because we are still children inside. And why should we not expect it? Because they are all children too! That's the view from heaven! Behind the facades, and the cool demeanors, and the trappings of culture and affluence, and the authoritative tones just children. If we could just see it! And admit it! And the anger dissolves. And now we can begin to live life realistically and with grace. And we can learn to forgive and get on with the ministry of forgiveness.

So breathe. Breathe deeply, slowly, consciously, from the diaphragm, from deep in the soul. Feel the tension let go. Feel the energy return. Feel the forgiveness. In fact, in forgiveness we encounter the very presence of God. Forgiveness is a transcendent moment. No, it doesn't happen naturally. Naturally we hold on to our grievances, we nurse them, we recite them over and over. But when we forgive, we draw on the Spirit of God, we engage the realm of grace, the dimension of grace, and in that act we transcend ourselves and encounter the presence of God.

– Dale Pauls