

Sermon: “Breathe”

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When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

Acts 2:1-13

The word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

The title of today’s sermon is “Breathe.”

Before we speak, [inhale]
we breathe
Before we sing, [inhale]
we breathe
Before we give a presentation at work, [inhale]
we breathe.

Breathing is essential to everything we do.

It’s so constant that we often take it for granted. Unless we suffer from a breathing abnormality that focuses our attention on our breath, most of us leave it on autopilot. We breathe in shallow patterns, unaware, until someone reminds us to breathe. Breathing is essential not only in our physical existence, but also, in how the church began.

Today is the birthday of the Christian church. We call it Pentecost. On this day, we remember how Jesus promised his disciples that he would send the Holy Spirit, an advocate, to them. He told them to wait in Jerusalem after he died and was resurrected. They weren't to return to their homes. They were to remain in Jerusalem together, grieving, waiting for what comes next. We can imagine this was an anxious time for them. The disciples debated among themselves if and when the Holy Spirit would come to them. I wonder if they feared they might miss it. Lucky for them, the Holy Spirit came in such a way that no one could deny it. Everyone experienced it. On Pentecost, the birthday of the church, diverse nations of people gathered together in one place and the Holy Spirit came upon them.

The Hebrew word for Holy Spirit is "ruah." Kind of a fun word to say, "Ru-ah-hh." Ruah means "wind," or "breath," God's breath. On the day of Pentecost, God sent God's breath to God's people. It came as a wind with a loud sound. When it landed on the people, they began speaking in different languages. We are told that the people were Jews traveling on pilgrimage from diverse nations. They spoke different languages, but when God's breath comes upon them and they breathe it in, something mysterious happens. They begin to speak in other languages! These languages are not native to them. They didn't learn these languages in school. They don't even understand the words coming out of their mouths.

Can you imagine that?

It's as if in this space, we all took in one breath together [inhale] and then when we exhaled, we began to speak languages foreign to us:

Arabic

Hebrew

German

Mayan

Creole

Languages that are not common among us, but are understood by a particular people in a particular place. Why did God do this on the birthday of the church? We have to take a trip back in history to understand why.

You may remember the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. At that time, toward the beginning of human history, the whole world spoke one language, which meant everyone understood one another. And those early humans came up with a plan. They decided to bake bricks and build for themselves a sturdy city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens. Their goal was to make a name for themselves and to have the highest tower in all the land.

God saw the greed that motivated their new construction and decided to confuse their languages. God made it so there were a multitude of languages and God scattered the people all over the earth. The Tower became known as the "Tower of Babel," because it is said that the people babbled and they could no longer understand one another.

Now, God isn't some malicious God who doesn't want us to understand one another. That's not the point. The point is that there is a danger when we think we understand it all. The danger is that we forget to leave room for mystery, or in this case, for God. As my grandmother would say, "We become a little too big for our britches." So, at the beginning of time, God confuses our languages. And then, at the beginning of the church, God makes it so we can understand each other again.

The thing is—God doesn't pick one language as superior and make everyone speak that one language. God makes it possible for all of the languages to be understood. God upholds the diversity of voice, acknowledges it, and then with God's breath, makes it so we can understand one another.

Y'all, this is one of my favorite parts of our faith!

The Holy Spirit—the breath of God—comes to us as a gift and connects us to God and to each other. We breathe God's breath in today, and it allows us to understand one another in spite of the fact that many of us grew up in different parts of town, or vote differently at the polls, or value different things with our money.

The breath of God connects us despite our differences.

The breath of God does not make us uniform in our Christian beliefs, but able to understand one another with our differences.

I get to see this at play here at Downtown Church in Columbia, South Carolina. In our Bible studies, when we read something Jesus said, there are at least eighteen different interpretations of what Jesus means. Even when there are only twelve people in that room!

God celebrates the diversity of thought and meaning so long as each individual is heard and honored and valued. This means no bullies are allowed to grandstand their belief. This is always the temptation. It's the reason God destroyed the Tower of Babel. It's hard for us to hold space for a variety of opinions and voices, especially when we are passionate about our own opinion. God's breath is what makes it possible for us to exist in the same room. God's breath is what makes it possible for us to be in relationship with anyone who is different from us. God's breath is what makes it possible for us to BE church, a community of followers of Jesus.

Think about the early church. After Jesus's resurrection, there were several different accounts of his story. We have FOUR gospels in our Holy Scriptures. Four perspectives: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And there were more that didn't get included. The inclusion of four voices alone points to God's ability to unite us, while honoring differences. So, too, there were passionate leaders in the early church. The Apostle Paul and Timothy and Lydia of Philippi. With different people come different leadership styles, different kinds of worshipping communities, and God honors all of this because God provides the source upon which we draw—our breath.

God's breath.

When we listen beneath the words, we hear what is common to our existence—our breath. So, too, in the church, when we listen beneath the litmus tests of belief

systems, we hear what is common to our existence—God’s breath. God’s Holy Spirit sent to live with us, to guide us, to sustain us, to advocate for us as we follow Christ. God’s breath and the message of who Christ is for us transcends every language, every boundary, every barrier of time.

When I was nine years old my mother took me with her and a mission team from our church to Guatemala. I didn’t speak Spanish at the time. I’d never been on a plane. I’d never eaten black beans or rice before, which is what we ate at every meal. I was learning new things every moment and one of the main things I learned was that our friends in Guatemala followed the same Jesus I did. Here’s how.

Our host family invited us into their home. Picture with me clay-dirt floors, a pitched roof with a patchwork blue tarp, two beds for the ten family members to share. The family pulled out their only two plastic chairs for me and my mother to sit. They knelt. As we sat together, we listened to the melody of each other’s voices, we used our hands to motion what we were trying to communicate because neither of us spoke each other’s language. We laughed a lot. At one point in our conversation, I saw the mother of the house hand a small coin to a child about my age. That child lit up with excitement and took off running out of the house. I watched her go, curious about what she was up to. She came back a few minutes later with an ice cold Coca-cola. In a glass bottle, you know the kind made with real cane sugar. The top had just been popped and condensation was coming down the sides. I understood now why the kid was excited! She handed the drink to her mother and her mother handed it to us. Two straws for the two of us visitors. My mom and I immediately felt uncomfortable with their generosity. It was clear that small coin was all they had.

They couldn’t possibly spend it on us, but they did. And as the woman nodded to my mother, expecting her to take a drink, so, too, my mother nodded to me.

I’ve never tasted anything so sweet.
So Christ-like.
So generous.

I didn’t need to speak the same language as them to recognize the Spirit of God among us. God’s breath, the Holy Spirit, connects us in this way.

I’m going to close us by telling you a story our musician, Perry Harris, shared with me.

It’s the story of a mother and her child. It’s the story behind the song you are about to hear. The child lives with autism, which makes it hard for him to make sense of some of his surroundings. He can get overstimulated and overwhelmed by people and their expectations of him. Oftentimes, speaking is difficult for him.

His mother has taken great care to learn his language. She knows what makes him uncomfortable. She is able to anticipate his needs. She also knows he is capable

of greatness. So when she notices him get overwhelmed, she gently takes his face into her hands and she sings to him,

“Breathe.”

“Come ya, child, and breathe.”

She returns him to the basic rhythm of his breath, the rhythm that connects her to him and him to her. As he finds his breath, He finds his voice and something mysteriously miraculous happens. He mimics her.

This child sings to his mother in the language she speaks. He sees her, a single mother. He sees the bills stacked high on the coffee table. He likes to point at all of the numbers. He sees her hold her breath when he does. So, taking her face into his hands as she has done for him, he sings to her,

“Breathe,”

“Come ya, mama, and breathe.”

This is Pentecost.

This is God’s breath connecting us across languages.

This is God’s invitation for you, now, to breathe.

Amen.