

May 31, 2020
“Deep Breaths”
1 Corinthians 12:4-13 / Acts 2:1-21
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

I'm thinking about breath this morning. About wind and about spirit, too, but mostly about breath.

I'm thinking again about the Hebrew word, *ruach*, which can mean all three (breath, wind, spirit), and its Greek cousin, *pneuma*. *Pneuma*, or *pneumatos*, is what we find translated as Spirit, as in Holy Spirit—manifest so powerfully, so miraculously, in the story of Pentecost.

Fifty days after Easter, after witnessing the promise of new life manifested in the risen Christ, we celebrate the power of new life, interdependent, interconnected, intertwined life, made possible by the Spirit.

What we, at Pentecost, in Christian tradition celebrate as the birth of the church, Jews have long celebrated as Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, or “week of weeks” in reference to the fact that the festival takes place seven weeks after Passover—remembering the day that God gave the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai. The beginning of covenant, of community.

But on this day of Pentecost, marked by rushing wind and indwelling Spirit, we mourn the death, the murder, the lynching, of George Floyd, whose breath, whose breath, whose breath, whose breath, whose breath . . . was violently taken from him this week by a white Minneapolis police officer named Derek Chauvin. You all know the story.

George Floyd's dying words, his desperate, repeated words, like Eric Garner six years before him: “I can't breathe.” “Please, please, I can't breathe.”

With the Psalmist, we cry out, “Why, O Lord, why?” Why, O Lord, why—again, still? And so on this day of Pentecost, during which we typically revel in the stirring power of holy Spirit to bring people together, we deplore and lament again—and so painfully still—the crippling power of an unholy spirit that tears people, that tears peoples, apart.

White supremacy racism—and make no mistake, there is no other kind—is an unholy spirit that has had its institutionally embedded knee on the necks of black and brown people for more than 400 years. So it's hard to notice the winds of change blowing this morning. It's hard to feel the Spirit stirring this morning. I don't feel like celebrating. I feel like crying. I feel like screaming!

I'm angry, and I know you are, even as I recognize that as a white person, I do not and cannot experience the killing of George Floyd or Breona Taylor or Ahmaud Arbery or Atatiana Jefferson or Mike Brown or Eric Garner or Renisha McBride or Tamir Rice or Sandra Bland or Trayvon Martin or Amadou Diallo as people of color do—and particularly African Americans with such an outsized experience of racism in this country.

I do not know what it's like to experience racial trauma. I do not know what it's like to have racial trauma handed down generation after generation after generation, nor to have racial trauma compounded, experience after experience after experience, directly and indirectly. My heart breaks for and with you, friends, who carry the weight of such relentless trauma in one way or another.

The text from 1 Corinthians gives us Paul's oft-referenced image of the “body of Christ,” one body made up of many members. We know that this body—understood universally as the body of all humanity, and indeed all creation, bound by one God, one Spirit, as Richard Rohr and others have suggested—is broken.

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.” The body is broken at least in part because we are—across our common humanity, across our common created-ness—unable or unwilling to see and therefore treat each other as members of the same body. As fundamentally interconnected.

When the neck is bent and the throat is crushed, the body can't breathe!

“Remember those who are in prison,” writes the author of Hebrews, “as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.” And with similar sentiment, Paul goes on in his letter to the Corinthians, still chapter 12, verse 26: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”

That is what authentic, Spirit-filled community looks like. And it is what racism—among so many other unholy, evil spirits—undermines and destroys.

Such a truth can feel downright polyannish in the face of such glaring hatred and violence, but it is true just the same. We are all members of one body, like it or not.

Now there are varieties of gifts, of services, of activities, Paul goes on in verses 6-7, “but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” The common good. Were that it were so, but we know that the body is broken. Deeply, deeply wounded.

And the body cannot function, cannot be made whole, without the breath. The breath of life, the very breath of God present from the beginning of creation: *ruach*, breath, wind, spirit. Genesis 1:2, sweeping over the face of the waters as God introduces the light, and separates the light from the darkness.

The story of Pentecost is at its heart, of course, a story about the power of breath, of wind, of Spirit. God's Spirit. Holy Spirit. Evidenced in its power to bring diverse peoples from all over, speaking many different languages, together in one place—and enable each one, somehow, to hear each other speaking in the native language of each. To enable them to understand each other!

Pentecost is about the power of the Spirit to make possible what seems impossible. To make dreams come true. Quoting the prophet Joel, with some alterations, we hear Peter addressing the gathering: ““In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.’”

Visions and dreams of another world. Of a body made whole.

I don't know what it will take to rid the world of racism and the scourge of white supremacy. It's overwhelming, and I know that with the privilege whiteness affords me, I can so easily, even if not intentionally or maliciously, fall back into routines and patterns where I don't even have to think about it. And so by default affirm a racist status quo, the world as it is.

We all do this when we consider oppression and suffering in the world. It is overwhelming. We don't always know where to start or what to do, or we feel so overwhelmed by the demands of our own lives—and so by default, we don't do anything. And we effectively give up whatever power we do have to foster change for the common good. We effectively resign ourselves to the world as it is.

Many of you are likely familiar with Jane Elliott, the former third-grade teacher from Iowa, most famously known for her “Blue eyes-Brown eyes” discrimination experiment—conducted with her all-White school children for the first time in 1968, the day after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. You may have seen a more recent video of an exercise she's used in her long-time role as an anti-racist activist and educator.

Addressing an auditorium full of White folks, she says, “I want every White person in this room who would be happy to be treated as this society, in general, treats our Black citizens . . . if you, as a White person, would be happy to receive the same treatment that our Black citizens do in this society, please stand.” No one does, so she repeats the invitation, and when no one stands the second time she concludes, “That says very

plainly that you know what's happening, you know you don't want it for you. I wanna know why you're so willing to accept it or to allow it to happen for others."

We know that one definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. I don't want, as a White person, to accept—as just one example—the reality that Black men are more likely to be murdered by the police, or allow what happened to George Floyd to happen to others. I don't know exactly what that means for me, but I do know it means doing something differently than I'm doing now.

In the face of such deep-seated racism, I am overwhelmed. But I'm also angry. And I'm tired of dreaming and getting lost in the dream without figuring out how to actually make it real. However I can.

So I am challenging myself this Pentecost Sunday, and I want to challenge you—especially in this case, those of you who are White—to consider, with me and with each other, what you are doing and what you will do differently or more extensively to confront racism. I believe the mantra that there is no such thing as a passive anti-racist.

I challenge you to consider, with me and with each other, what we as a community at Calvary will do differently or more extensively. To demonstrate solidarity with people of color. To educate ourselves. To get involved, more involved. To hold White leaders accountable. To speak out. And most importantly, to show up.

To show up, and keep showing up, because Whiteness is the problem. White supremacy is the problem, and we have work to do.

The body is broken. When one of us can't breathe, none of us can. Members of the body are suffering. Members of the body are dying.

So may we, all of us, continue to hold onto the promise and power of new life made real in community, in the common good. Open to the Spirit's leading, may we not—by choice or by default—resign ourselves to the world as it is, in its fundamentally racist and so often violent brokenness, but instead dare to dream big, Spirit-filled dreams—dreams that have the power to lead us through and beyond the world we know to the world God dreams.

A world where the body is made whole. Where the body can breathe deeply and without fear. Deep breaths.

May it be so.