

Sermon – John 20:19-23; Acts 2:1-21
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Grace Lutheran Church
Pentecost – Year A
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“Deep Breaths”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. One job. I had one job. And I almost blew it. A hot, South Carolina July had given way to an even hotter August, and Erika was five days past the due date with our first child. And then, labor seemed to be upon her. We counted the minutes between contractions throughout a long day, finally going to the hospital. She was admitted, but the contractions subsided. False labor, they said, so home we went, with this advice for Erika: eat a good meal, take a bath, and then take a Tylenol PM and go to bed. She did so. And I took two-thirds of the advice, eating with her and taking a Tylenol PM, too. After all, I needed my sleep! The medicine, however, served in some way to re-induce Erika’s labor. Sadly, the drugs worked on me in the predicted way. The contractions were coming every six minutes, five, four; and I was falling asleep between each of them. She finally prodded me out of bed so that we could get to the hospital, at which point I fell asleep in a chair. The nurses began to tend to both of us, medical care for her and gallons of coffee for me. I had one job, to be fully present with her, and I almost blew it. And for what was I needed? To help her breathe, to breathe in and out through her contractions, just as we had practiced. Unfortunately for Erika, labor went on long enough that I was able to recover my wits and perform my small part in the miracle of birth. Erika, of course, was a rock star, and dear Greta came with new life into the world.

2. Breathing. It's second nature, and yet so often we need someone outside of ourselves to remind us to do it, and to do it well. We spend so much time breathing the wrong way. We breathe in hurt and breathe out hatred. We inhale shame and exhale insult. We breathe in sin and breathe out death. Most of the time, we do perfectly well at taking in oxygen and letting out carbon dioxide. But while our lungs keep us physically alive for a time, we are in so many other ways gasping for air. We need to breathe differently; we need a new wind to blow life into our deadness.

3. Today is Pentecost, and a new wind is blowing. Luke writes of that day, the fiftieth since Jesus was raised, when there was a sound like the rush of a violent wind, filling the disciples with God's Holy Spirit. John writes of an earlier day, Easter itself, when Jesus enters the locked room in which the disciples were hiding in fear, says, "Peace be with you," and then does something rather odd. He breathes on them. He breathes on them and gifts them with the Holy Spirit, filling them with the new life brought about by Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus teaches them a new way of breathing the breath of life: they breathe in peace. And what do they breathe out? Forgiveness. The Holy Spirit gives the disciples the very power of Christ, new life that is rooted in peace for the sake of forgiveness. New life bringing peace and forgiveness; what could the world need more than these?

4. This passage is, in part, the basis for what we call the Office of the Keys, by which the church understands that it has the power to forgive or to retain sin. This office, empowered by the Spirit, is rooted in nothing other than the work of Christ. Jesus forgave sins throughout his ministry and on his cross accomplished forgiveness for all. While there may be good reason for the church to withhold forgiveness for a time, it won't do for long. Jesus isn't in the sin retention business and he doesn't desire that his church would be in that business, either. Jesus is not so much telling us that we have the power to retain sin as he is warning us what happens when we do. If we retain sin

we are left with, well, *sin*. Sin and all the ways it divides us from one another and from God. It's the old way of breathing, and it does not lead to life.

5. Jesus was killed and raised for more than this, more than to give a divine stamp of approval to our old way of breathing. God desires more for us, from us, than to simply identify sin. We're already good at that! It is the easiest thing in the world to see and name sin in others, or even ourselves. Just watch the current political jousting, as each side points out what's wrong with the other. Same as it ever was. Even in the church we fall into this trap. We correctly identify injustice or oppression or simple mean-spiritedness, as we should. But forgiving such things while resting in the peace of Christ? That is something at which we're not always so good. Today we rejoice that the Spirit has been breathed out upon us. Breathe deeply of the peace of Christ, and breathe out his forgiveness. It's the only way to deal with sin, and it is the way in which God has dealt with sin once and for all.

6. Too often we focus on the divisions that have emerged between us, but it's not our differences that are the problem. When the Spirit sends Peter to preach on Pentecost, the peoples' distinctions are not erased; one new language does not emerge. Instead, the Spirit gives ears to hear, that all people would hear in their own language and breathe of that same Spirit. Eric Barreto of Princeton Theological Seminary writes: "Our adoption as children of God does not erase our differences. Instead, that adoption erases the need to claim superiority or inferiority based on these markers of identity. We are not the same, but we are reminded that our differences are not ways to measure our value in the eyes of God or in the eyes of one another." To which I add, thank God that we need not all be the same! We can embrace our differences, find healing for our divisions, and forgive one another with the forgiving love of Jesus and his cross.

7. We sometimes refer to this day as the birthday of the church, and there's nothing wrong with that, I suppose. But truer yet is the reminder that the church is born anew each and every day solely by the power of the Spirit, connecting us to the forgiveness and peace of Christ and guiding us into newness of life. This, as the church, is our purpose, for we are nothing but a creature of the gospel. Whatever other good things we do, if we are not about the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name, we are not about the work of God in Christ. Pastor Rafael Malpica Padilla reminds us that we are mistaken if we think that the church of Jesus Christ has a mission, as nice as that sounds. No: *the mission of Jesus Christ has a church*. Jesus' mission is the forgiveness of sins so that peace and life might rush in. Really, it is the one job entrusted to the church, the people of God at work in the world. So the next time you begin to feel anger or hurt or shame or the powers of evil and death at work in you, just stop. Take a deep breath. Breathe in the peace of God. Breathe out the forgiveness of Jesus. Repeat as necessary, remembering that the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, is fully present with you, filling you with life. New birth is coming. You have peace with God. God has forgiven you for Jesus' sake. Breathe these gifts into the world. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.