

Today is the Feast of Pentecost - the birthday of the Church - and the scriptures are full of material for prayer and reflection. The Book of Acts brings us a powerful wind, tongues of fire, and multiple languages. Psalm 104 sings about God's creative powers. And in the Gospel of John Jesus blesses his disciples with a peace that passes all understanding. There is enough here to reflect on for a very long time – maybe that's why the Season of Pentecost stretches so long, all the way from now to December! Yes, Pentecost is OUR time, our lives ... as we live out what it means to be disciples of Jesus in our everyday lives.

Pentecost picks up the biblical story as a kind of NEW beginning, a Second Genesis. Psalm 104 reminds us that God's Spirit gives the breath of life, and the Book of Acts speaks of a new, powerful WIND that filled the house and lives of the disciples. It was the house where the Risen Lord appeared and gave them God's Shalom, Peace; only now this house becomes the cocoon from which a whole NEW LIFE is about to take form: the life of a whole new community.

And so, the long Season of Pentecost begins by reminding us that following Jesus has something to do with the power of life itself, the very breath of God that flows in and out of us every moment of the day though we seldom notice it. A few chapters later in John, Jesus will BREATHE on the disciples and say to them: "Receive the Holy Spirit." The word means take, grasp, hold close. And so today I would ask you to TAKE something. Take a deep breath. Feel the power of God breathing life into your lungs. Grasp that power of creation which gives you life: LOAD UP ON GOD!

Now, raise your hand to your mouth and blow on it. Feel it: THAT is as close as GOD is to you every moment of every day. THERE is God. We might even call this, the Sacrament of Breathing. What a privilege and joy! Every time we breath in, we breathe the life of God. Every time we breath out, we share that power with the world around us. Every animal and every plant is doing it with us too! IF we could only remember THIS, our world would be a better place.

It would be a better place because we would treasure the breath we take, the creative power we share with God. The evil we do is less because of specific intent, than it is because of neglect. We FORGET the breath that ebbs and flows in us every moment. And this is NOT the forgetfulness of sleep or unconsciousness – when we are the MOST ANGELIC and do the least damage. No, this is the forgetfulness of our WAKING hours, when we are so mindful of all the details of the day, but actually neglect the fundamental reality of life: GOD IS IN US – in our BODIES. We live and move and have our being in GOD ALONE. When that breath finally leaves us, our lives take on a reality beyond this body. Somehow, we need to learn, again and again, not to forget, not to neglect this breath of life: it is our PRIMARY CONDITION and the basis of all the good, or evil, we do. So yes, blow on your hand: *God is right there.*

A few years ago, I was dramatically reminded about the gift of the breath. After several months a cold that would not go away finally transformed into pneumonia. The reason it did was because I was neglectful of God's creative, life-giving gift. Between each cold, I thought I could simply manage it. I thought I could take over-the-counter remedies and keep up my regular schedule. But I was ignoring the real rhythm of my body. And so eventually that rhythm asserted itself and I was forced, by pneumonia, to STOP and rest. Of course, I was encouraged by my doctor's gracious invitation of a hospital stay if I did not follow his orders!

I have to say, as the days wore on, I was not bored. My body began to heal. I napped, read some books, rejuvenated. Later my spiritual director asked me about the experience. What happened was that I became acutely aware of the act and grace of breathing – just breathing. God did not seem distant at all. God was right there, coursing in and out of my lungs. A beautiful consolation was taking place as much in my SPIRIT as in my BODY. The breath of life became increasingly creative and I became aware that the Spirit of Jesus can breathe new life into us whenever we turn to him.

THAT is John's Pentecost story. The Risen Lord stands before a group of preoccupied, exhausted, and frightened people and speaks PEACE to their troubled souls. This peace is not just the absence of violence. It is Sabbath peace. It is the wholeness and joy of the 7th day of creation, when all is complete, and ALL IS GOOD! This peace is the very WELL-BEING of God. It is a kind of peace that is fertile ground

for new life and new wonders. But Jesus does not only share peace with his scared friends, he BREATHES it on them. The word actually means he breathed INTO them. John is saying that Jesus CREATED new people. Jesus was creating a new reality on the ground. Nowhere else in the New Testament is this word “breathed into” used. The only other place in the Bible where you will find it is in the Hebrew Scriptures whenever God CREATES life. In Genesis God breathes life into Adam and Eve, and in Ezekiel God breathes life over the valley of dry bones. But the new creation Jesus calls forth takes place at the END of John’s Gospel. It is after Jesus has been killed. It is after the forces of forgetfulness, negligence and destruction have been at work in terrible, irrevocable ways. Pain, hurt, injustice, sorrow – every horrible eventuality is summed up in the pierced, dead body of their friend Jesus. Yet here he stands in front of them, and just as his blood soaked into the earth on Good Friday, NOW his breath enters their own bodies and they become God’s new creation. John’s prophetic prologue has become a reality; Jesus, the Word, HAS become flesh and dwelt among us: dwelt INSIDE of us, full of Grace and Truth.

The creative, forgiving, redeeming breath of God is the ONLY thing that can create new conditions in this world of ours. It is a tragedy whenever we neglect that breath. So today on Pentecost, BREATH DEEPLY the power of God. Take God’s breath into YOUR body, and SHARE the creative PEACE of God with those around you. *Receive the Holy Spirit.*

References

B. Barnhart: *The Good Wine*. Paulist Press, 1993. Pp. 249-274.

Greek Language New Testament