

Breath of God Pentecost Sunday 2009

Have you ever taken the time to intentionally breathe?

I am not talking about that once a year doctor's office visit when the nurse places that stethoscope on your back and asks you to breathe deep and you hope that there's not rattling going on in there.

Nor am I referring to your yoga class or breathing exercises for stress reduction

Nor am I referring to controlling your breathing after hyper ventilating over that Red Wings game.

What I am referring to is to slow down long enough to appreciate each breath as a gift from God.

If we begin to do this we begin to grow in our appreciation of that fact that the very act of breathing is filled with hope and potential for life. Yet is so common, even automatic that we might take it for granted and not realize that each breath represents precious time that God is allowing us to live, to move and to have our being.

If I might overstate the obvious breathing is the easiest recognition that someone is alive and at the moment of death when it ceases the clearest sign that the spirit has left the body.

As we recognize our own breathing some of us experience it as labored with such things as the onset of emphysema pneumonia or other less severe ailments like the latest allergies. While others breathe quite freely.

One might make the same comparison to one's spiritual life or the breath of God in one's life.

Ezekiel, the prophet, speaks to a dying and dejected people who have been exiled and who feel lost and cut off from their very identity and style of life they have grown accustomed to and have lost sight of the covenant that God has established with them. In reminding them of the faithful presence of God Ezekiel uses the image of the breath of God transforming old dying bones into life giving flesh. The same Spirit that brought order to the chaos in creation. The very same Spirit that Ezekiel was promising to renew, rejuvenate, rebirth the people of Israel. The same Spirit that was experienced in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The same Spirit of God that transformed and empowered the disciples on that day of Pentecost.

The other night at bible study we were talking about how we allow the Spirit of God to enter us and transform us. Judy made the connection to receiving communion. The image of the clenched hand being opened and releasing anything standing in the way of receiving the presence of Jesus Christ. It brought to mind a moving event in my own ministry.

Some years ago I was working in the retreat ministry at the Center of Christian Living in Massachusetts. As with many a retreat house we would often have a group of religious sisters or nuns come to our center for an eight day guided retreat. The retreat involved a great deal of meditation and contemplation but also left room for individual counseling and some group sharing. In the group I was leading there was an elderly sister named Theresa of the Child Jesus who sat pretty much throughout the

retreat without as much as a smile. Her habit was perfectly pressed and her rosary beads were placed appropriately dangled from her sash. Her jubilee pin marking 50 years of religious life was adorned proudly on her blouse. She had quite the reputation among the other sisters as being the grouch. I recall one of the sisters remarking O don't mind her Father she hasn't smiled in forty years.

Her hands throughout most of the sessions remained closed , clenched and tight fisted. Beneath the perfect nun image lie a woman hurting from some type of pain. Over the course of this week as the retreat dealt with freeing oneself of one's burdens and allowing the Spirit of God to breathe upon one's heart this sister began to relax and respond to her prayer. By the end of the week her hands were open and her very presence emitted the peace and warmth of God.

At times we are all probably a little like sister Theresa of the Child Jesus thinking that we have to be about holding onto our pain.

As Christians we proclaim that the Holy Spirit is our life energy breathing in us, transforming that which is mortal and reduced to brittle bones and dust into flesh and blood, viable expressions of the Creator God empowering our very lives to be about the work of transformation to make a difference in the world. We the church, the people of God, the baptized, the believers have as our job, as our response to the loving grace of God to be animated.

If I could be so bold as to paraphrase the great philosopher Soren Kierkegaard who described in reaction to some pretty dark and gloomy doomsayers of his time his meaning of the breath of life. Life's work is

about living passionately animating others living life to the fullest and giving it our all.

The gospel today invites us to consider that Christ is our advocate. We need not worry about our worthiness or our rightful place in the book of life but rather be about the work of loving, nurturing and empowering. We need to abandon getting hung up on all the small stuff that closes us off, isolates us, reduces us to ash but rather to be open and to provide access to the breath of God in us.

Consider the progression of what was once a pagan agricultural feast day was celebrated by Jews as a day of remembrance of the Torah, the Mosaic Law being handed down to them through Moses and now as being a day recognized by Christians as a day of transformation by the gift of the Holy Spirit sending the disciples into the world to proclaim the Good News.

We need not see Pentecost as merely a day event, a feast day of what if's or when I get around to it I will, or isn't that nice of the Spirit to empower all those people back then but they didn't have the troubles that I face.

The Holy Spirit that was present in the act of Creation, in the covenant with Israel and the renewing of that covenant over and over and over again, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is now breathing in you and me. Through our baptism we are the temples of this same Spirit and have been commissioned to go and breathe this Spirit of God to all those we meet along our journey.

Breathe on me, Breath of God,
fill me with life anew,
that I may love what thou dost love,
and do what thou wouldst do.

Amen