

2019-05- 16 Meditation TUMC – Pentecost (celebrated on June 16, 2019)

Acts 2: 1 – 21; John 14: 12 – 27

Michele Rizoli

A Meditation on Breathing

I invite you, as you are comfortable, to place your feet on the ground in front of you, relax and at your own pace take three deep breaths. Be mindful of taking in air, and letting it out.

...

“There is a traditional story about a Zen student who complained to his master that following the breath was boring. The Zen master grabbed his student and held his head under water for quite a long time while the student struggled to come up. When he finally let the student up, the Zen master asked him whether he had found breath boring in those moments under water.”¹

As you know, God’s Spirit in the Hebrew Scriptures is the same word as breath or wind. And so I’ve structured this short “meditation” in the shape of three breaths: one to reflect on our Scriptures, one to invite you to a specific spiritual practice, and one to celebrate the Church.

Breathing in: The Spirit dwells with us.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is having an intimate moment with his disciples, just before his death, where he promises them the Holy Spirit. It’s kind of like the introvert version of the coming of the Holy Spirit and we learn a few things about this Spirit.

- It is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive – don’t we just know that in our times! Truth is sometimes hard to take in, hard to live by, but truth is always the first step in any path of healing. Truth is the Spirit of God.
- The Spirit comes to us and surrounds us with love and belonging: “I will not leave you orphaned.” Sometimes we hear this as an emphasis on “commandments” as if a relationship with the Spirit is filled with duty and obligation. Yet Jesus’ main commandment was compassion. The Spirit promises to abide with us, to live, dwell with us and to move us toward compassion.
- The Spirit also comes to comfort and teach and empower. “But the Advocate (the Comforter), the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you *everything*, and remind you of *all* that I have said to you.”

The Spirit dwells with us.

¹ Jack Kornfield, “Training the Puppy: Mindfulness of Breathing” in *Talking to God, Portrait of a World at Prayer*, edited by John Gattuso

Breathing out: The Spirit causes us to reach beyond the in-group

In Acts, we have a different scenario, much more public, the extrovert version of the coming of the Holy Spirit. A mighty wind, as fire, as commotion! It's an explosion of diversity! People start speaking in languages they didn't know before, and others start hearing about God's deeds of power in their heart language.

Imagine you have been living away from your country of origin for many years (some of you don't need to imagine this), always speaking in a second language, and suddenly you hear someone talking about God's love in the language of from own home town or your childhood: Low German, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian, French, Tigrynia, Hindu, Cree, Southern English, in any accent. What would it be for you? There's nothing like it to hear your heart language, it hits you right in the gut, it's wonderful, and it makes you feel less alone, less different, more recognized.

Let us not miss what the Spirit was up to here. It was not about a closed group of people with new language skills, it was about reaching the people beyond that group. What a special gift God gave to those people who were listening, by speaking to them in their mother tongues! Empires and powers want to make things to be all the same. But God has given the church the gift of diversity!

So, breathing out: The Spirit causes us to reach beyond the in-group

Breathing in: Placing oneself in the way of the Spirit

Just as breathing is a reflex and you don't even think about it, in our day-to-day lives we may not always be conscious of the presence of God's Spirit with us. But there are practices that can help us to open up ourselves to God's presence. To put ourselves in the way of God's Spirit, as it were. That's why it's called practices, you just keep doing it, you don't always connect, but that is where you keep going to meet God.

One of them is Christian meditation practice. Father Thomas Keating², one of the contemporary pioneers of this in our day calls it Centering Prayer. "[It] is a method of silent prayer that prepares us to receive the gift of contemplative prayer, prayer in which we experience God's presence within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself. This method of prayer is both a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship."³

One explanation I heard about Centering Prayer is that it is a prayer where you become quiet and listen for God, instead of talking to God. Try it, sometime. (If you'd like to learn more about it you can talk to me, or I will give you a link here. Of course, there's also an app!)⁴

² One of his colleagues says: "Prayer is not a request for God's favours...Genuine prayer is based on recognising the Origin of all that exists, and opening ourselves to it."~Cynthia Bourgeault

³ Thomas Keating, <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/>

⁴ Centering Prayer basics: <https://www.contemplative.org/contemplative-practice/centering-prayer/>

So breathing in we place ourselves in the path of the Spirit

Breathing out: Ground ourselves in ethical living

There's a caution about meditation. A recent article I read online was rightly critical of some of the "self-helpy" applications of mindfulness meditation. It noted that these practices, which started in Buddhism had been "stripped of the teachings on ethics" and of the goals of "dissolving attachment to a false sense of self while enacting compassion for all other beings."⁵

The same would be true of Christian Contemplative practices. It is not a coincidence that many people who practice contemplation (Jesus himself) also end up becoming very active in advocating for social justice. Or maybe it is the other way around people who advocate for social justice find that contemplation nourishes them in discerning God's heart of compassion. But the two are always linked.

Breathing in: Pentecost

I think we've mentioned already that technically, liturgically, we are a week late to Pentecost compared to everyone else. We could have just skipped over it, but it happens to be what I think is one of the most significant markers for us. It has been called the birth of the church, the manifestation of the Holy Spirit and it is our link with Jesus.

Pentecost in the Jewish calendar was the Festival of Weeks, a time of covenant renewal and celebration – and this is also why we are having communion together today. To remember our common link to the example and power of Christ, to join ourselves together and, in a sense, to renew our vows as a congregation.

As you saw so far in our service, the life of our church, Caring Team, praying for each other, singing, getting involved in activities outside ourselves, nurturing each other, faith formation, these seem almost mundane to us because we are so used to doing it, but these are the breath of our church. This is how we stay alive and open ourselves up to the working of God's Spirit.

We also practice listening to God's Spirit any time we engage in some of our church processes where we take time to listen to each other in our diversity. It's not the easy way, the easy way is to aim for uniformity where everyone thinks and acts the same. I sometimes quote Shel Silverstein : "I found the way to be friends forever/There's really nothing to it/I just tell you what to do/And you do it." It would be easy to put all the power into one person and let them figure it out, but we do it the hard way here. We don't aim for uniformity where everyone thinks and acts the same.

⁵ The Mindfulness Conspiracy, referring to Buddhist meditation https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/jun/14/the-mindfulness-conspiracy-capitalist-spirituality?CMP=fb_gu&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR0djqt4T3rAX8ToTryh4PLGTejfhXQPDd1sCDWaiEWogB9hs3fYr1qp00I#Echobox=1560509014

For example: At TUMC we don't fill positions through volunteering but rather through affirming gifts in each other and through discernment (a process that includes prayer and reasoning and everything else that comes with volunteering). We just build in that we are going to check in with God in that process. And so we keep up the work of affirming one another, and of looking for the movement of the Spirit.

We don't make most decisions by voting, but we've made a choice to use consensus, where we listen carefully to hear what we perceive the Spirit is saying to us as a group. We place ourselves in service of each other as we read scripture, as we work together, as we gather our resources to further God's calling to move beyond ourselves.

This is the breath of our church that I would like you to be aware of.

Breathing out: Serving the world

So, as we enter a time of Communion, as you set out after the service, I invite you to be mindful of what the Spirit is breathing in you, what the Spirit is inviting to be born in you in all its fullness of love and diversity, and inclusion. And I invite you to listen for what the Spirit wants to do with your life on behalf of others.