

From the Pulpit

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“God is Still Breathing...”

John 14:15-21

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dan Clark, Designated Associate Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 25, 2014.

“God is Still Breathing”
John 14:15-21

Good morning to you. This is my seventh Sunday with you as Designated Associate Minister. My three children, Jude, Lucy, Sadie, and I have really enjoyed getting to know you and the merciful and hospitable people at First Church. So today Rev. Tim is celebrating his daughter Sarah’s graduation from high school, and I am happy to share with you in worship.

It is my first message to you, friends and family of First Church, and our text from John 14 is Jesus’s last message to his friends and family. It’s an address that he shared with them between their last meal together and his arrest. And as he’s speaking with them, the disciples are starting to realize that things are getting out of hand. These words are spoken to them between the Passover meal... a meal that they had in a borrowed second-story dining room... the same Passover meal that Jesus actually hijacked, and in hijacking it, he actually transformed it, giving himself as the way of freedom. It’s that meal that historically the people of Israel celebrated when they ceased to be slaves and began their own journey to a free and promising life. It was that holiday, it was that meal, it was that remembrance that Jesus invaded, inserting himself into the story, giving himself as the way to freedom. Their heads must be spinning. Things are getting out of hand.

These words in John 14 come between that meal and an ambush in one of their favorite metropolitan parks, the Gethsemane Gardens. And there a traitor had ratted Jesus out. One of their own had given his location away and he was arrested right before their eyes, right in the middle of these after-dinner conversations. Their heads must be spinning.

I have found myself in several situations that got my head spinning. If I’m alone in that, I’ll skip a large portion of my sermon. But I think that maybe this is something that we all share: moments in our lives that get our heads spinning. Even this week, several situations where you have to stop and think. In times like this, I’ve found that there’s some very helpful advice out there. And often, the most helpful advice isn’t the long-winded advice. Often the most helpful advice is the simplest ideas, the simplest words, the simplest actions. I’ve found that some really helpful is to do something that we all do all the time. You’re doing it right now, involuntarily,

automatically. This advice is to breath. Inhale. And exhale. Whatever you do, don't forget to breathe.

This advice is on a poster on the ceiling in the room where I used to go to receive trigger point therapy for carpal tunnel. Now, has anyone received trigger point therapy? It's not real pleasant. It hurts. And do you know what you can forget to do when you're in pain? You can forget to breathe. So, conveniently placed on the ceiling above the table where I would lay while the massage therapist would agitate my trigger points was the word, breathe. It's good advice. Breathe.

This advice is also given to groomsmen in stuffy sanctuaries when they're not used to wearing suits and when they lock their knees and when – I don't know why – they show up dehydrated. Breathe. Breathe, gentlemen, breathe. It's good advice.

This advice is something I share with the doctors and nurses and volunteers I've taken to Ethiopia with me. We fly 15 hours from Dulles to Addis Ababa, which is the highest capital in the world at 7,500 feet above sea level. Then we drive 12 hours south through the Lower Rift Valley to where a road ends in a village called Chench. And after the road ends, we get out because our journey is not done. And we hike 6 miles up to 10,000 feet above sea level. (Gasping.) Breathe. It's good advice.

I give this advice to my children, Jude, Lucy, and Sadie. Jude is 8 today actually. And Lucy is 6 and 1/2. And Sadie is almost 5. And sometimes I just need to tell them to breathe. You know, sometimes they're trying to get a story out, or often they're trying to lodge a complaint against a sibling, or they're trying to explain to me why they're hurt, and they start to just (gasp) they, they (gasp) start to hack and hiccup and they can't get the story out. So I tell them, "Breathe, baby. I'll listen to you. Just breathe." This is good advice.

It's also good advice to us 21st century Americans who seem to have perfected holding our breath through life. It's good advice to us who sometimes feel like we're living in a wild goose chase. Breathe.

With this in mind, let me share with you a helpful prayer for we who need to catch our breath.

*Holy Spirit, Wild Goose
Great Spirit,
Wild Goose of the Almighty
Be my eye in the dark places;
Be my flight in the trapped places;
Be my host in the wild places;
Be my brood in the barren places;
Be my formation in the lost places. Amen.*

This prayer was written by Ray Simpson, Guardian of the Community of Aidan and Hilda on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne in the UK.

And so recognizing that in the dark places, and the trapped places, in the wild places, and the barren places, and the lost places, we just need sometimes to breathe. Recognizing this, Jesus, in his mercy, in his farewell address to his disciples, offers us help with breathing by promising to not leave us alone. To not leave us alone in the dark places, and the trapped places, and the wild places, and the barren places, and the lost places. But by giving us the Spirit of God, the breath of God.

Now there are several helpful images throughout Scripture for encountering and engaging with the Holy Spirit. Common ones that I am sure are familiar to all of us are the dove. The Spirit is often depicted as a dove. Or as fire and flame. We'll celebrate in 2 weeks the Feast of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit is represented as fire at the Feast of Pentecost. Or even, and especially in Celtic spirituality, the Holy Spirit is represented as a wild goose, as we've heard in the prayer from the Community of Aiden and Hilda. But none of these are derived directly from the biblical word for the Spirit of God. The biblical words for the Spirit of God are not related to the words for dove or fire or goose. They are in Hebrew, ruach. And in Greek, pneuma. They are both nouns. They are both feminine. And they both mean 'breath'.

And this Breath of God, well, she has been animating the story from the beginning to the end.

In Genesis 1 it says "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God – the Spirit of God the Breath of God, the ruach of God – swept over the face of the waters." The worlds began with a breath.

Mark 15. "Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last." The worlds began with a breath. And here, the greatest sacrifice of love was punctuated with breath.

John 20. "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

The worlds began with breath. The greatest sacrifice of love was punctuated with breath. And here, resurrection faith was formed with breath.

Acts 2. “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind – breath, pneuma – ... All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit...” The worlds began with breath. The greatest sacrifice of love was punctuated with breath. Resurrection faith was formed with breath. And here, the church was born with a breath. Inhale. And exhale.

And still today, the Church’s prayer is ‘Come, Holy Spirit.’ Come and know that God is close to you, that Jesus keeps his promises to never leave us but to send the Spirit of God so that we are never alone. Come to know that God is close to you, as close as your breath, filling your lungs, and moving your body, and enlightening your mind. So that in the dark places, the trapped places, the wild places, the barren places, the lost places, we can just... breathe. And our living God, our loving and light-giving and lung-filling God invites you to just... breathe. Whoever you are, and wherever you are on your journey, breathe.

In the United Church of Christ, we believe that God is still speaking. "God is still speaking" is a campaign by the UCC to remind us that God still has a lot more to say. For the last 10 years, Stillspeaking has worked with thousands of churches and individuals across the country to make religion relevant again and to extend an extravagant welcome to all – because no matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here at First Congregational Church. In 2004, it was concluded by the denomination that it was a necessary, real, and present need to spread the message of extravagant welcome, which continues to historically reshape our understanding of Christian faith and proclamation. The UCC responded to this call with a new identity, to let others know that anyone can find a spiritual home in the United Church of Christ, anyone can be strengthened and nourished and nurtured in their faith, anyone can be blessed to reach out to others with their God-given gifts and talents. Today we can enthusiastically say that the United Church of Christ is a welcoming, justice-minded Christian community at a time when religion is too often portrayed as narrow-minded and exclusive. There are many who are raising their voices for this alternative vision: that where God is, is all-loving and all-inclusive, where the Church of Jesus Christ welcomes and accepts everyone as they are – where your mind is nourished as much as your soul – where Jesus the healer meets Jesus the revolutionary – and where together we grow a just and peaceful world. Here at First Church, we believe that God is still speaking.

We also believe that God is still breathing. So just breathe. And know that no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, God is as close to you as your breath. Amen.

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