

2023.03.05 Lent Week 2:

Finding Your Breath: Listening to Our Bodies

Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living soul.

(Gen. 2:7)

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

(Romans 8:26-27)

I. Of Breath and Spirit

When was the last time you noticed that you were breathing? It seems strange that something we do approximately 26 thousand times per day takes place largely outside our conscious awareness. Stranger still is the fact that if we missed just a few handfuls of those breaths in a row, we could no longer count ourselves as citizens of the earth. Yet unless we suffer from asthma or COPD we'll probably not spend any time today worrying about missing any of these breaths, and little to no time giving thanks for them. It is said that from breathing alone, we should be able to acquire 99 percent of

our energy, yet most of us only access 10 to 20 percent of that energy.

Perhaps we would do well to become more grateful for our breathing.

In the Old Testament, the words for spirit, soul, and breath are related. One

Hebrew word for "breath," *ruach*, is the same as the word for "spirit."

The Hebrew word for "soul" or "being," *nephesh*, can also be translated as

"breath." Thus, in Genesis 2, God is said to have breathed the breath

(*nephesh*) of life into Adam's nostrils, and Adam became a living soul/being

(*nephesh*).

This relationship continues into the New Testament as well, with the Greek

word *pneuma*. You can only tell by the context whether *pneuma* means spirit

or breath. Even then, it may be unclear. In the Gospel of John the

resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples and then breathes on them,

saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit [*pneuma*]." (John 20:21-22) But did Jesus

say, "Receive the Holy *Spirit*" or "Receive the holy *breath*"? If we take the

biblical relationship between breath and spirit seriously, the answer to both

questions just might be "Yes."

The great contemplative mystic Thomas Merton was asked—one too many

times—about his life and practices at his hermitage at The Abbey of

Gethsemani in Kentucky. Tersely Merton responded, "What I wear is pants.

What I do is live.

How I pray is breathe."

Merton's observation may betray a note of exasperation, but it also reveals wisdom. For Merton, experiencing the Holy Spirit, of God is not confined to the mountaintop. It is a daily experience, even a moment-by-moment experience, in which the Holy Spirit is as present—and constant—as breathing.

If we became more aware of our breath, would we become more aware of God's actual presence—or Holy Spirit—in our lives? Just as we grossly underutilize the physical energy available to us in the air we breathe, making use of only 10 to 20 percent of its potential, could there also be a vast, spiritual resource literally right in front of our noses waiting to be tapped?

II. Too Deep for Words

Do you have a hard time praying to God for longer than a few moments?

Do you wonder what to say, or how to listen?

You may be comforted to know that even great spiritual leaders like the apostle Paul—and Thomas Merton—found prayer difficult. Unlike most people, however, Paul (and Merton) understood that, given time and constant practice, what we put into prayer is vastly exceeded by what we receive from it. They also knew that we don't have to consciously be aware of what we're saying, or hearing back, to receive benefits from prayer. What was that Woody Allen line? *Eighty percent of success in life is just showing up.*

Let's imagine taking this principle seriously with prayer: that eighty percent of our "success" in prayer (that is, connecting with God in a way that transforms our life) is just showing up. This would imply that transformative prayer isn't about words you use, or the scriptures you've memorized, or even the degree of saintliness you have attained. It's mostly about showing up each day, willing to take the time to connect.

In fact, it's a very good thing to just show up and breathe. Just try inviting God's Holy Spirit into you as you inhale. When you exhale, simply allow your breath to carry your joys and concerns, your hopes and fears back to God. Allow your breath to convey whatever you cannot put into words. Praying with our breath isn't the only way to pray to God, but it's a significant one. For many who pray for an extended time each day, paying close attention to breath is a helpful, even vital, part of what they do.

III. Taking and Giving

So, prayer, kind of works like . . . breathing! If you only breathe in, and never breathe out, you will be allowed to have just one breath in a day.

That's it. And then you will die. But if you are willing to let out what you took in, you can take 26,000 breaths each day—or more if you like! So, it works with the rest of life. If you want God to make "the good, the bad, and the ugly" work together in such a way that it ultimately works for good—if you want to "breathe in" this incredible, loving gift—you've also got to "breathe

out" by loving God in return and surrendering the fruits of your labors to God's purposes.

Last week I asked you to find your devotional space (a cave), a place where you intentionally wait for God and now you can try this idea of meeting God out on a very concrete, practical level. Try "showing up" each morning, spending five or ten minutes simply breathing as part of your prayer routine.¹ You see, following God is not some woo-woo, mountain-top-only kind of thing. While there is certainly a place in life for those special spiritual experiences (I've had a few myself), the most common experience of God looks much more like what I've been describing. It's like breathing in. And breathing out. Welcoming God into your very body. Letting go of whatever you've been clinging to too. Welcoming God into your body again. And offering God your hopes, dreams, and service to God's world.

Take a deep breath in. Now exhale. Now breathe in . . . and out. Pray like you breathe. AMEN

¹ Incidentally, studies show that people who pray less than fifteen minutes per day report a low level of satisfaction with prayer. Between fifteen and thirty minutes, reported satisfaction rises dramatically. Satisfaction goes through the roof above thirty minutes.