

“As Close as Our Breath”, a sermon shared with the St. Andrew’s church family by Catherine Somerville on Sunday May 24, 2015. (Luke 23:44-46//Acts 2: 1-6, 12-18, 21)

Not long ago, I read the most wonderful description of Pentecost. In the story, someone was remembering her time at an annual meeting of the World Council of Churches. The highlight for her, from the entire meeting, was hearing the Lord’s Prayer prayed in languages from all over the world. She could tell it was the Lord’s Prayer, because the cadence is the same, no matter which language you use, and it was a wonder to her, how the participants ended the prayer at the exact same time.

On that first Pentecost, when the disciples gathered together, a fresh new breeze woke everyone up, and it must have seemed as if ideas were literally dancing right out of the people’s heads. The air was electric with promise. Then they heard each other speak in just about every language known from all the corners of the earth. We heard in the story Natasha read to us that there were people gathered from as far away as Rome. The magic was that everyone heard and understood. But it was more than a case of language. The miracle that day was that community was formed, vision was offered, and nothing since has been able to stop that energy from infusing the world.

It is that same energy we feel whenever we gather to worship God. The Holy Spirit swoops in and among us, knitting us together through the songs we sing, the prayers we pray, and the breath we breathe. It can happen on the coldest day in February when the winds and bitter temperatures mean that only a few brave souls are able to walk down slippery streets, and come to worship. It can happen on Christmas Eve, when the church is full and the excitement is palpable. It can happen when two or three people gather around a hospital bed to pray. It can happen in a church meeting, when people catch the vision of something a whole lot bigger than any of us on our own, could imagine alone.

That spirit can scare us, comfort us, confuse us, clarify things, but as far as I can tell, it never bullies or coerces us. We are always free to choose whether, or even how, we will respond.

I invite you to take a breath, a good deep breath, as I tell you a story. This story has to do with how we envision God.

Many people image God as Father or Mother. Others are more comfortable using words like Creator or Strength or Sustainer. For me, I have come to understand God as breath. I believe that God exists right here (at my mouth and my nose), at the place where I gasped my very breath the moment I came howling and screaming into this world, and God will be there the moment I take my very last breath, and exhale one last time into the world.

This idea of God as breath was helped along by the writings of an Anglican bishop, Barbara Brown Taylor. Many people have favourite movies and favourite singers. Ministers have favourite preachers. Barbara Brown Taylor is the one I turn to when I need to make sense of difficult and curious texts.

She offered the most intriguing idea about the Pentecost story. Here is Barbara Brown Taylor's take on things.

Our earth, this gorgeous blue-green planet is wrapped in a protective veil we call the atmosphere. The atmosphere serves to separate the air we breathe, from the cold vacuum of outer space. And beneath the veil, is all the air that ever was. As she explains, "no cosmic planet cleaning company comes along every hundred years or so to suck out all the old air and pump in new air.

The same ancient air just keeps recirculating"(1), which means, when you think about it, that every time any of us breathes, we breathe in star dust from the creation of the earth. It means we breathe in brontosaurus breath and woolly mammoth breath. We breathe in air that has circulated through the rain forests of Costa Rica and air that has turned yellow with sulphur over Mexico City. We breathe in air that has swept across the deserts of Africa and over the Nile and Euphrates Rivers. We breathe in the same air that Plato breathed, and Mozart and Michaelangelo, Mother Theresa and Francis of Assisi, the Dali Lama and Martin Luther King Jr., not to mention that we breathe in the same air as Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin, Pol Pot, Paul Bernardo and Clifford Olsen.

Every time we breathe, we take in what was once a baby's very first breath, and a dying person's last. We take it in, we use it to live, and then we breathe it out, and it carries a tiny bit of us to someone else, or to a tree, or a dolphin who use it to live too.

Now think about what this means... think about that last breath Jesus breathed at the moment of his death. It hovered there in front of him for a second or two, and

then it was set loose on the earth. That breathe was so full of passion, so full of God, that it didn't just dissipate though. It grew in strength and volume, until it became a mighty wind, which God sent spinning through the cracks in the doors and between the window shutters, and into an upper room in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Jesus' closest friends became the inheritors of that breath. And it worked. They were taken from their fear and stagnation, and they were set on fire with the love of God.

Just a few moments earlier, they had all been moping around, wondering what in the world they were going to do without Jesus, when they felt the air stir, and the wind started to blow.

It blew God's very breath right into them. Then, they started coming out with words of praise they didn't even know they knew. The noise drew a crowd. Visitors to the city from distant lands poked their heads in the windows and pushed through the doors. They expected to see their neighbours from back home, and instead they saw a bunch of Galileans, uneducated fisherfolk and day labourers talking together like the wisest minds in the world.

By the end of the first day, the church had grown to three thousand believers. Shy people became bold. Scared people became gutsy. Lost people found a new sense of direction. In fact, they sounded an awful lot like Jesus. It all happened because they dared to take a deep breath on the day of Pentecost. They took God's breath into their lungs and they were transformed. Now they were ready to be the church.

I can't help but wonder how this story is working in us, and changing us here. We believe that God's energy blows through closed doors and sets our hearts on fire. We believe that God's love transforms us and enables us to reach out to our neighbours. We believe that God's spirit opens us to newness, be it new ideas or new ways of doing things.

There are so many words linked to the working of the Spirit in our midst. But commonly, we hear it described as newness, harmony and mission. The new life we find in Jesus invites us to work together, taking one another's ordinary gifts and making them into something incredible. We create a culture of encounter, where we step out beyond what is familiar and known, and dare to show the love and compassion of God to a hungry world.

It's like something that at this point feels rather small, that happened here this week. A few weeks ago, we told you about the Elevate program in the city, taking place this weekend.

Local congregations of every denomination were asked to do something in their neighbourhood to show the love of Christ. You may have heard and seen stories of playgrounds being cleaned up, trash being collected and flowers being planted. We decided to participate in the Elevate program, by making cookies and taking them to some folks in our city who are always there when we need them. About 14 of you made cookies this past week. The cookies were packaged up along with a letter explaining what we were doing, the names of all the cookie bakers were included in the letter, the letters were signed by Bill and I, and the packages were delivered to the Fire Hall, the Ambulance garage, and the Police Station. The best response came at the Police Station. I walked in on Thursday afternoon with a heavy package of homemade cookies. I told the officer at the front desk what was up, and his eyes and his smile grew huge.

"Are you serious?" he said. "No one ever thanks the police department for doing its job."

Well, St. Andrew's United Church did. I can't help but think that small gesture made a difference for some people who do what is often pretty thankless and heart-rending work.

Pentecost is all about the miracle of new beginnings. Breathe deeply and be thankful. Breathe deep and live with an open, curious spirit. It is about allowing spaces to breathe in God and allowing that Spirit to blow through this place, stir things up, and get us thinking in ways we never thought possible.

Breathing in and breathing out, taking God into you and then giving back to the world, but this time with a little bit of us attached.

Each holy breath we take is a gift from God. We can call it air, or we can call it Holy Spirit. And we, who breathe it in, cannot help but offer thanks and praise to the one who is as close as breath to us.

1. "The Gospel of the Holy Spirit" in *Home By Another Way*, Barbara Brown Taylor, Cowley Publications, Boston, 1999 pages 143-144