

Breathe on Us, Breath of God

Genesis 2:7; John 20:19-23

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When I was in seminary at Boston University, my classes were filled with people from many Christian traditions. Most were Methodists, because the BU School of Theology is affiliated with the United Methodist Church. But there were some, like me, from the United Church of Christ, some Baptists, a few Presbyterians, a Christian Scientist, and others.

Despite our differences, we had much in common. We all had to struggle to stay awake as we read our church history textbook. We all suffered through the same Old Testament exams. We all griped together about how hard some of our professors were. We worshipped together every Tuesday morning, and we ate lunch together on Wednesdays. Some of us were pretty conservative theologically, and some were more progressive.

We were of different beliefs, but we could mostly discuss these differences with civility. Mostly. Though we were each overwhelmed by our studies and by the ordination requirements of our own denominations, it seemed that we were becoming something of a community. Despite our differences, we all wanted to serve Jesus Christ and to graduate on time.

Then a terrible thing happened. The president of the LGBTQ student organization at the School of Theology opened his campus mailbox one day and found a vile, hate-filled death threat there.

From the way the envelope was addressed, it was clear that the message had come from a student in our own seminary community. We were absolutely broken apart by this awful act. The gay students, of course, felt the most threatened, as they should. But all of us – or maybe all but one – felt viscerally threatened, too. We thought we could trust one another. We thought we were safe here. Who among us could possibly have done this?

Two things happened then that changed our community profoundly, and I think they were both gifts of God. The first was that the students decided we needed to reclaim the hallway in front of the campus mailboxes as a safe space. So, we held a 24-hour prayer vigil. Students signed up for shifts around the clock, each praying in our own way for God to cleanse this space and make it physically and spiritually safe again.

When my turn came, I sat on the floor across from the mailboxes, back against the wall, legs crossed, wrapped in a prayer shawl, and I quietly sang, “Breathe on **us**, Breath of God. Fill us with life anew, that we may love as you would love and do as you would do.” Over and over again I sang for an hour, chanting that beautiful hymn until it sank into my very soul and became the deepest prayer I have ever uttered. I was praying, begging for the Spirit of God to rush through our community and bring new life out of this dark and threatening time.

I said a moment ago that some of us were conservative theologically and some more progressive, and that we mostly handled our theological differences with civility. There was one important exception to that. We hadn’t let ourselves talk openly about our differences on homosexuality and gender expression. That seemed to be an unbridgeable divide for us, and we chose to keep the peace by keeping silent.

But that silence was no peace at all. That silence had led one among us to feel they were so righteous, so privileged in their beliefs that they could threaten the life of one of our classmates, and that no one would object.

So, the second thing that happened, the second gift of God after the prayer vigil, was that we began to talk with one another. Gay students finally had a voice in our community on matters that pertained to their own lives and safety. My friend Katherine – the one who preached here for my ordination – Katherine and I made and passed out buttons that said, “God has no outcasts.” Those spurred conversations, too. We all learned to listen even when it was uncomfortable for us, I think, and we were introduced to scriptural interpretation that we had not learned before.

In that weeks-long, painful conversation, the Spirit of God did blow through our little community, just as I had prayed for, and it offered us new life. No longer were our differences papered over with silence at the expense of some among us. We could not go back to the false peace of the past. Instead, God brought healing to our community through a truer, deeper peace that could only arise when everyone in our community had a voice. New life can be a scary thing. God sometimes answers our prayers for peace in unsettling ways, ways that require courage from us.

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In our scripture today, it is the evening of that first Easter. The Resurrection has happened, and Mary Magdalene has told the disciples that she has seen the risen Lord. Perhaps they didn't believe her; perhaps they didn't understand. Because they are now in a locked room out of fear for their lives. The religious authorities or the Romans could be coming for them next. They dare not go out into the world because there is danger there. So, they purchase a pretended peace by locking themselves in, away from the world. But true peace eludes them. They are locked in with their fears.

Then Christ appears inside even that room. Twice he bids them to be at peace. Then, one by one, he breathes the Breath of God into them, like the Creator breathing sacred life into the first of humankind. Christ offers them new life.

And then he commissions them to do what they do not want to do. He tells them to go out and face the world in his name. Worse, he gives them the power and the authority to forgive the world. Think about that. It would be so easy for them to hold a grudge against the world just now, and Christ says they can do that as well. But to forgive the world – this world that is so dangerous, so life-threatening – to forgive it in the name of the Love of God, that is a challenge.

The disciples don't want to go out; they want to go back, back to the way things were before. They are afraid. But the world doesn't need their fears. And it doesn't need their grudges. It needs the forgiving love of God, and so Christ charges them to go out into the world and be that love.

This is not the peace the disciples thought they had purchased by locking their doors. In fact, it doesn't feel peaceful at all. It feels painful and dangerous. And yet it is in setting aside their fears and their grudges and focusing on sharing God's forgiving love in Christ's name that they find the peace that passes understanding.

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New life can be a scary thing, and God sometimes answers our prayers for peace in unsettling ways, ways that require courage from us. The world doesn't need our worries. And it surely doesn't need our blame. Instead, the world is crying out for the overflowing, forgiving, life-giving, grace-filled love of God, the love we are called to share. And we will feel true peace when we focus not on what makes us anxious, but on sharing God's love with the world.

The Breath of God is blowing through us now, working in us, calling us to share God's love in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Breathe on us, Breath of God. Fill us with life anew. That we may love as you would love and do as you would do.

Amen