

Learning to Breathe Again

Fifth Sunday of Easter

April 29, 2018

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Texts: Acts 8.26-40,
Psalm 22.25-31,
1 John 4.7-21,
John 15.1-8

I've noticed over the last period of time I have been using a metaphor in everyday conversation that was far more revealing than I knew at first. I noticed it first when shooting a quick email to friends say I would love to catch up after I 'come up for air'. Then I noticed emails that included the apology "I'm sorry it's taken me so long to get back to you. It's been hard to 'catch my breath' these days." Just about the time I was noticing how frequently I was using this metaphor I began to notice that it was also quite literally true.

Some of you may have read the 'And Finally' article I wrote for the April newsletter¹ in which I shared the way I have felt the Holy Spirit pulling my spirit and body into the work of racial justice more intentionally than I have ever done before. As I was sitting in workshop after workshop at the White Privilege Conference in early April and then listened to Paul Kivel in the training he provided here just two week ago at Hope Church on *Being Equitable Allies in a Racialized Context* -- I found myself literally holding my breath in particular moments. Sometimes it was because I recognized myself in the descriptions of what needs to change or in feeling how deep the suffering goes for friends and colleagues who are people of color. I thought I understood but I don't fully understand.

I noticed it in other places too: listening to the news, reading blogs on what's coming for our denomination, sitting with some of you hearing the press on your lives as a caregivers or walking through some serious

¹ The *And Finally* article is on pg. 11 of this newsletter: <http://hopechurchca.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/HCN0418-COLOR.pdf>

loneliness or struggling with mental health or trying to sort through a relationship crisis. The weight of all that complexity - because not one of these situations was a clear cut with an obvious way forward - the weight would sit on my chest. In many of these conversations, I found my body forgetting to breath.

It's a place I suspect many of us can relate to and it was the space the disciples were in after Jesus' death and resurrection. So in this season of Eastertide we are given stories from these early days in the life of the church and we are given teachings from Jesus that bring us back to heart of his gospel.

The teaching we have from Jesus today is John chapter 15 where Jesus describes himself as the vine, describes us as the branches, and describes God as the gardener and vineyard owner. There are some pieces within this teaching that soothe an anxious heart feeling the weight of the world. Like this invitation to abide in Jesus as he abides in us. This thought that our life is intertwined with God's life is a profound one. Clearly there is distinction between the vine and the branches. One is the root and source of life for the other. Once they begin to grow and intertwine you can hardly tell where one begins and the other ends.

Part of the weight I mentioned a moment ago comes from a false narrative that tells us that we, as individuals, have to figure this all out on our own. Where the image Jesus gives us here is that we are in this together: my life, your life, our life, God's life - all intertwined. Especially in the gospel of John, the "you" Jesus speaks of us in this text is almost always "ya'all"; plural. Keeping that clear is critical as we listen to the closing piece of this text which has always been a stumbling block for me: that part where Jesus says "ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

Can I be frank and just say "Balderdash!" That is just not true. And that statement understood the way we often understand it is not only **not true**, it has been the source of some serious damage in the hearts of God's people! How many people have asked, and it has not been done for them? Maybe that is because as I mentioned with the children before God is not a genie.

So what did Jesus mean by this? Well, I was talking this week with a friend who is both pastor and theologian. She was ranting about this verse and the harm it has done to so many people. She pointed me back to the Greek and when you look at the roots of these words a very different image emerges. It has to do with our life together and what it takes for us to bear fruit in this complicated and fractured world.

The word we read as *wish*, in Greek (thelēte) can carry with it a sense of resolve, a clear commitment of purpose.² The word we hear as *ask*, in Greek (aitēsasthe) can also have the connotation of demand and in particular to demand an accounting for something. Finally the word in Greek that is translated here by the phrase it will be done for you (genēsetai) comes from the same root that words like origins or beginning or creation come from. It has this sense of unfolding or becoming over time. So hear the verse this way: “If you abide in me, and my words (my teaching and stories) abide in you, demand from God whatever you all resolve to do or be and it will unfold in you over time. My father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

It’s a very different kind of promise isn’t? Not to fix it all with the wave of a wand but to provide within our life together the resources that we need to support each other to live into all the things Jesus has called on us to be and to do. My friend called the Spirit a co-conspirator helping us to see how these stories and these teachings are leading us in this day and this time and then working in us and with to make us ready to go there! Helping us to find our way forward even if we stumble.

Here is one more place where the English translation does not capture the meaning in Greek. Where we read “he removes every branch in me that bears no fruit”; that word rendered here as *removes* actually means *lifted up*. And the same word translated here as *pruned* doesn’t mean cut off but *cleansed*.

When I think about some of those moments in the past month when tensions were rising in the room or I recognized myself as part of the

² (Willam F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press), 1979), 355.

problem, I stopped breathing because I was so afraid of making a mistake and hurting someone or being found out. For all the ways I have known and preached God's grace these many years, I still live at times with this visceral fear in the center of my gut that can take my very breath away that I will be rejected if I do not measure up. It's such an old story. It dies hard.

If you have ever sat in that place, hear this word to us today: the source of our life is the vine. If we fall away and find ourselves face first in the dirt, the promise of this text is that God as the gardener will come alongside of us and lift us up and clean us off and tie us back into the vine. We are in this together. And when we find ourselves adrift, all we can do is to go back to these stories and to this teaching. To let these words of our Lord resound within us not just what they meant back then but what they mean for us right now in this fractured, tenuous time that we live.

Folks, I know that when we face difficult decisions or wade into complicated dynamics there is a lot of fear that comes up. Because the stakes are often high and it isn't always clear. But I hear this text inviting us to be bold. And if we fail to receive the lifting up and the cleaning off as gift not attack.

I read a piece in the NY Times recently about why it's so hard for us to get critical feedback.³ Why it feels like attack rather than gift. It's often because we do not trust that the feedback being offered is for our good. It doesn't feel like lifting up and cleaning off. We have a totally different script that we run that tells us that the intention is to cut us off and throw us away. The really fascinating part of this research is that the reason our anxiety kicks up and our breath gets shallow and our brain shuts down is because of how often we have ourselves offered criticism in that spirit of cutting off and throwing away. Makes it hard to be bold when those are the reactions we might face because they are the reactions that we give.

When the Ethiopian eunuch dares to ask in the book of Acts today "what is to prevent me from being baptized?" I love to think of his voice in this

³ Article entitled "Why It's So Hard to Hear Negative Feedback"

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/26/smarter-living/why-its-so-hard-to-hear-negative-feedback.html>

question as strong and bold...daring Philip to say no. I suspect his voice broke as he braced himself for the whole litany that could have been thrown his way and probably had been many times before. After all, as once commentator wrote, "He belonged to the wrong nation, held the wrong job, and possessed the wrong sexuality. But Philip heard the voice of the Holy Spirit speak a different answer to the man's question. 'What is to prevent me from being baptized?' asked the eunuch. 'Absolutely nothing,' whispered the Spirit. 'Absolutely nothing.'"⁴

I can imagine the breath he was holding being released in a long exhale as he found himself able at last to be breathe freely and to be fully alive.

Every single one of us needs to feel like we belong as Beth so powerfully preached last Sunday⁵. It is clear to me that no matter what else we do together as the body of Christ we keep seeking out the ones who have been so consistently told there is no place for you and we make a place.

Friends, I don't know what makes it hard for you to breath. What pieces of this text speak most strongly to you.

But what I do know is this. God does not trade in fear. God is love.

You are loved. Whether you are so tied into the vine that the fruit is just falling from your branch.

You are just as loved if are face first in the dirt and need to be lifted up and cleaned off before you can be tied back in.

Friends, we are in this together.

As the choir shares the first stanza of our prayer for blessing⁶, just breathe and receive as gift what the Spirit has to share. Amen.

⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 458.

⁵ Link to Beth's sermon manuscript from April 22: http://hopechurchrca.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/042218_Beth-Carroll.pdf. Link to the audio of that sermon: http://hopechurchrca.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/042218_Beth-Carroll_audio.mp3

⁶ Hymn "Holy Spirit, Living Breath of God" words and music by Keith Getty and Stuart Townsend. You can read the text here: <https://www.gettymusic.com/holy-spirit/>