

Sermon – “A Breath of Fresh Air”
Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017
Scripture Reading: John 20:19-23, Acts 2:1-8, 12-18
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Our first scripture reading this Pentecost is John 20:19-23. John records Jesus' appearances following his resurrection that first Easter morning. Jesus' first encounter is with Mary Magdalene in the garden outside the tomb. The evening of that day Jesus presents himself to the disciples who are hiding “behind closed doors” following his death. Jesus makes himself known through his wounds of love and breaths on them with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Hear God's Holy Word.

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Our second scripture reading is Acts 2:1-18. This is Luke's account of what took place at the Pentecost festival fifty days following the Passover, which marked the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those gathered hear the words of the disciples in their own dialect and experience God's presence in a life changing way. Listen for the word of God.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*¹⁷ ‘In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.*

*¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.*

The title of the sermon: “A Breath of Fresh Air”

The text: *I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh,” Acts 2:17a*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, we thank you for breathing a breath of fresh air into our lives on this Pentecost. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

A breath of fresh air blew through a group of Galileans gathered in Jerusalem for a Jewish festival, fifty days after Easter morning. As the Galilean disciples shared the story of Jesus of Nazareth, their words were understood by each in their native tongue.

People actually heard one another. They knew as they watched the tongues of fire, even as Moses knew when he stood before the burning bush, that they were on Holy Ground, that God was in their midst creating something new, different and exciting.

“How could this be?” some asked with amazement. The miracle of God’s spirit coming on Pentecost is the miracle of people understanding one another, moving beyond their own particular dialect or point of view. The refreshing part of the breath that breathed life into Christ’s church was not the tongues of fire, per say, but the miracle of people listening to and respecting one another. This breath of fresh air would soon transform the community that was to become the “People of the Way.” This community would bring people together from different cultures and races to share leadership and resources for the good of all. Worn out biases and prejudices would be torn down in the spirit of Christ.

The uplifting spirit of Pentecost is the spirit that has been at work since the beginning of time—the Hebrew *ruah* which *swept over the face of the waters* creating the world. God’s spirit is the power that gives order to the universe and gives life and breath to us. This spirit is the same *breath* that Yahweh breathed into Adam and Eve, giving them life. *Breath* is essential for life. Our living and our breathing are one and the same.

When Breath Becomes Air is a #1 New York Times Bestseller which our son Paul gave to his dad last Father’s Day. It is the memoir of Dr. Paul Kalanithi, who at the age of 36 on the verge of completing a decade of training as a neurosurgeon is diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. Dr. Kalanithi spent his life exploring the science of how life, the mind, and the soul work. However in this refreshing and beautifully written memoir as he faces his own mortality, he becomes more curious about the meaning of life, the mind, and the soul.

He writes: *Although I had been raised in a devout Christian family, where prayer and Scripture readings were a nightly ritual... I spent a good chunk of my twenties trying to build a frame for a scientific worldview that would grant a complete metaphysics minus God... The problem, however, eventually became evident: to make science the arbiter of metaphysics is to banish not only God from the world but also love, hope, beauty, honor, and meaning... Science may provide the most useful way to organize empirical, reproducible data, but its power to do so is predicated on its inability to grasp these most central aspects of the human experience.*

Dr. Kalanithi, in looking for meaning within his very accomplished life as a neuroscientist, returned to the central values of Christianity—sacrifice, redemption, and forgiveness, because, as he shares, he found them so compelling.

The title he chose for his memoir *When Breath Becomes Air* is based on a poem by the 16th century English writer Baron Brooke Fulke Greville.

You that seek what life is in death,
Now find it air that once was breath.
New names unknown, old names gone:
Till time end bodies, but souls none.
 Reader! then make time, while you be,
 But steps to your eternity.

What a thoughtful and compelling call to each one of us wherever we are on life's journey and especially to our graduates. Let us not get so caught up in this material world that we lose sight of the spiritual and eternal. The breath of fresh air Jesus breathed into the disciples before he ascended and the refreshing wind that blew through the synagogue on that first Pentecost opening hearts and minds provides resilience and a reservoir of strength on the unexpected turns and challenges along the way of our life journeys.

This is the premise of Dr. Lisa Miller's book, *The Spiritual Child*. In as much as Dr. Kalanithi reminds us there is more to life than empirical data, Dr. Miller, clinical psychologist at Columbia University, uses empirical data to support her research on spirituality.

The breakthrough in her research came on a subway in New York City. It was a Sunday morning when she stepped into a crowded train and noticed a dirty, disheveled man at one end yelling and fuming, throwing pieces of chicken at each passenger who boarded, yelling, "Hey! Do you want to sit with me? You want some of this lunch? Everyone ignored him and hurried to the other side of the subway car. The awkward scene continued until the doors opened and an elegantly dressed older woman accompanied by a young girl about eight years old entered. They appeared to be a grandmother and her granddaughter. They looked put together in their Sunday finest and strikingly out of place.

The crazed man erupted right on cue accosting them. Without hesitation the grandmother and granddaughter looked at each other, nodded, then walked over to sit down next to him. "Thank you," they said in unison. He was shocked. The man resumed waving his chicken in the air and bellowed, "Do you want some?" The two looked at him and replied politely "No, thank you!" and then nodded again at each other. The man, as if he could not believe someone responded to him, asked again, this time loudly but somehow more contained. Again the two responded politely, "No, thank you." This continued several times until the man became calmed and relaxed quietly in his seat. When a few stops later the train reached their destination and the two departed, Dr. Miller realized they had shown her the missing piece in her research puzzle.

She writes: *There was more resilience, health, and strength in that nod between grandmother and grandchild than in any theory I'd studied in academic psychology. That grandmother was spiritual and she was making sure that spiritual sensibility reached her granddaughter. The nod is spirituality shared between child and beloved elder, values, taught and received in loving relationship. I felt I was watching the passing of a sacred torch, the intergenerational transmission of spiritual connection, a flame passing through generations of family and humanity.*

This is the very heart of spirituality; in the nod was recognition of a shared understanding of this ordinary moment, right there in our subway car, as sacred ground. I could almost hear the voice: What you do unto the least of these, you do unto me. The words taught from generation to generation over centuries were loud in my ears.

In the simple nod and the polite “no, thank you” the grandmother and granddaughter spoke the universal language of decency, respect and love which was a breath of fresh air blowing through that subway.

On this Pentecost we celebrate our graduates and we honor those among us who pass the sacred torch of spirituality in each generation. May God’s spirit continue to blow through our lives! Amen.