

ST OSWALDS BIBLE STUDY

Pentecost Sunday

Focus text: John 20:19-23

Additional texts: Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:26-36; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

Many of us have not experienced sustained peace since 2020. Collectively, as a society, the multiple pandemics of Covid-19, crime, gender based violence, corruption, poverty and unemployment, among others, have left our collective breath waiting for the next tragedy to occur. Many of us desire a double portion of peace so that we can breathe again. In today's passage, Jesus does that for the disciples. In the following reflection we see that a double portion of peace is necessary because it

1. frees the disciples from fear
2. stresses the importance of Jesus' breath in our lives, and
3. ushers in the Spirit to an empowered community.

John 20:19-23 begins with the disciples in a locked room because of "*fear of the Jews.*" The phrase "fear of the Jews" occurs in John 7:13; 9:22; and 19:38. Scholars note that these literal words in the Gospel of John seem to show this group as the betrayers of Jesus or, at the very least, accomplices to the Roman Empire as they condemned and executed Jesus by crucifixion. While other gospel narratives usually state that the "scribes and Pharisees" did the betrayal, the Gospel of John seemingly takes the consequences of the charge further, to a generalization of guilt upon an entire group of people (in other words, The Jews). While the Gospel of John does appear to provide a growing differentiation between Jesus' followers and Jewish people, this does not give us licence to interpret it as meaning that all Jews can be lumped together as Christ-killers.

Pondering what it means to hide away in fear, the beautiful part of this passage is that the greeting "*peace to you all*" frames the idea of Jesus showing his hands and side while the disciples see and rejoice. The text beautifully shows that in order to move away from fear, the community must constantly expect Jesus to show himself beyond any fears that lurk within the mind of the community. Thereafter, the community can come back to life after receiving the breath of Jesus.

In this particular pericope, after reiterating the second "*peace to you all,*" Jesus breathes on the disciples and tells them to "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*" This is where the "breath" of Jesus becomes important - it is the only time the word appears in the Greek New Testament. Greek readers of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) would recognize the word in Genesis 2:7 where "*the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the **breath** of life; and the man became a living being.*" As a community hiding in fear, the disciples could be classified as 'socially dead' and awaiting the breath of Jesus that mirrors the Genesis narrative. This breath brings them back to life.

The concept of 'social death' was ushered into academic conversations through the study of slavery, as slaves were disconnected from their homelands and people. They lost the basic conditions of relationality within human life. Because the Johannine community was losing connection to their Jewish friends and neighbours by following Jesus, they too were feeling the impact of the deprivation of their interpersonal contacts and experienced 'social death'. In addition, the disciples lived in fear because

of their identity as Jesus followers after Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus' breath transforms fear into bold living and leads out of social death, into community that can uphold and support our varying identities.

Finally, with breath that moves the community, from stifled breathing to receiving the Holy Spirit, the Spirit then empowers the forgiveness and release of sin.

John 20:23 is a complex sentence, stating what is not yet happening but what is probable to happen in the future. Accordingly, "*If you (all) forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you (all) retain the sins of any, they are retained.*" The word "all" has been added in order to highlight the idea of communal forgiveness and retention, meaning the remnant of "twelve" who were in the room, as well as the larger group of disciples that included the women who told them that Jesus was alive. Jesus releases the Holy Spirit onto a community of both women and men who throughout the Gospel have been suffering continued estrangement from their community of origin. The gospel writer is giving authority back to a community that has the felt sense of lost authority. This verse is a prompt for the Johannine community to come out of their locked room, accept into their community all of those who proclaim belief in Jesus, and release those who would continue to ostracize them.

Circling back to the multiple pandemics in the opening of this reflection, it appears that the greatest sin of contemporary Jesus followers, is the disbelief that we can leave our locked rooms and tackle pressing issues in our communities. We can tackle crime, gender based violence, corruption, poverty and unemployment with a collective voice and collective action. Jesus has given us a double portion of peace to breathe again. Let us be Jesus followers that transform society instead of being fearful inactive disciples who are holding our collective breath.

(from the Working Preacher website)

On this Pentecost Sunday, let us reflect on the many fears and stresses in our lives that prevent us from speaking out and acting against the ills in our society.

Let us ask Jesus for a double portion of peace so that we may breathe again. Let us ask the Spirit to give us strength and power so that we can work together to transform society.

Let us pray

*Holy God,
you spoke the world into being.
Pour your Spirit to the ends of the earth,
so that our divisions may be healed
by your word of love and righteousness.
Empower us by Your breath to transform society
Through our collective voice and action.
Amen.*