



**Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA**

**Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick**

**The Day of Pentecost, May 31, 2020**

**Sermon Title: "Give Yourselves to This"**

**Gospel Text: John 20:19-23**

**Pre-recorded Worship sermon**

A hiker from British Columbia; a spiritual director from New York; a consultant from Cape May; a seeker from Arizona; a person who moved from California to Queens right before it all went nuts; a priest who retired to Maine only to have everyone he envisioned as friends leave and he's on an island; and yours truly, filling the hole of what should have been: a vacation to Canada; hiking the Camino in Spain, the Appalachian Trail, a new job. We were "Together in Spirit" a/k/a virtually. Everyone expected to be somewhere else, but winds of a pandemic blew, so we were introducing ourselves on Zoom, sharing feelings and what we needed from God, alongside stories, scripture, and poetry. We promised to journey twice a day wherever we were and join monastery worship by Facebook Live. We were invited into Zoom Happy hours and to pray the prayers that the Spirit gave us as we thought about the crazy journeys we are on, with far more in common than you'd guess. Words like "feeling adrift," "looking for community," "wanting to be more authentic" "finding prayer hard" "who am I now?" "I should be more trusting." Wondering what God had to show us in the new seasons we had envisioned and the one we all were thrown into lately. Jesus stood among us and proclaimed, "Peace."

I confess, I was pretty skeptical that God really could gather us, in a way that would be meaningful, much less rich. It's hard to figure out other people normally, much less from an array of thumbnail pictures with the occasional "I can't hear you." But in Spirit, we shared pictures of places we were, in a whirlwind of laughter, tears, profound awe, joy and peace. I virtually traveled among saguaro cacti in the desert, Acadia National Park, a canal path, the beach, waterfalls, and the Hudson River. Each of us had been blown off track, and yet, the Spirit was doing exactly what we needed. We accompanied each other as a priest lamented yet laughed that when he recorded a worship video he thought he looked like he was held against his will. We nodded as the spiritual director whose whole ministry was traveling was now grounded, discovered he was the healthiest ever. People seeking clarity caught glimpses.

One person feeling stuck in NYC, made his way in a now silent city neighborhood to seek beauty. God revealed the beauty of color in graffiti, that none of us might have seen that way.

For me, one day I had hopped off my trail to check something out, got sidetracked by a bog and had to climb out through the brambles. Heading toward a clearing, frustrated, I suddenly ended up in a small orchard that was literally humming.

I was enveloped by a swirling symphony of bees in apples trees, the sweetness of the blossoms and a song of exuberance, reverence and community. The usual question of "where am I headed?" seemed less important than what the Spirit was doing right there, saying, "Give yourself to this." It was a breath of peace and rejoicing.

When Jesus gathers his followers, he breathes into their midst peace and the Holy Spirit before traveling instructions: "what you forgive is forgiven, what you retain is retained" in the new journey. "Forgive" can also be "let go." "What you hold onto, what you let go" is spoken to people whose worlds have been upended, expectations unmet, and even when they think things have settled down, they will be disappointed as their closeness to Jesus in the way they have known will feel gone. It would be easy to hold onto their hurts, fears, doubts, and emptiness and not "get" what the Spirit gives.

Every hiker will tell you that what you carry will affect everything about how you walk in the world. Your balance, or lack of it, your endurance or weariness, whether you feel filled or empty. It's hard to hold perspective **and** a spirit of possibility.

That day with the bees was so transforming especially here in Pennsylvania, "where boots go to die." "Rocksylvania" has lots of rocks, including anklebenders- smaller pointed rocks jutting up out of the land, at all kinds of angles and spacing- the bane of existence. Endless fields of rocks look like God woke up one day and hurled fistfuls of them at the earth. When I see a field of them stretched out like a choppy sea you have to traverse, as it is sinks in, it may seem less like adventure, and more like "who hurled this here?" As if knowing the answers to that would change the path. As my foot slips and gets banged against an unforgiving surface, or a sole is wearied by the trek, this happy hiker starts feels dragged along this journey, broken down in the process. It's hard not to fall victim at some point to loss of perspective. When I lose that perspective, I stop seeing

beauty, hearing the hawk overhead, or feeling anything except irritated, slipping and sliding, as the ground feels like it falls out from under me. On more than one occasion, nature has given me an instant “have a seat, now!” moment. Humbled and bruised can happen on the trail. Place me in a stretch of limitations and frustrations long enough, anklebenders can become all I notice. Nothing else seems possible.

I imagine those disciples waiting for what Jesus would send, surrounded by their own anklebenders. I’ve been thinking about that possible collective feeling of being “so done with this” and wanting to know who is to blame for what we are experiencing, or what we are not. These months, my journey, like yours has included fears and struggles and missed opportunities.

But... I have also been given so much beauty, so many ways that God is providing what I truly need, like that symphony of bees, my virtual fellow hikers and much, much more. Be we hikers, befuddled and astounded apostles, or folks just trying to get by these days, life can remind us that despite what we want to think, we are not really in control. But in perspective, there is so much we really don’t need to control. We can let the Spirit help us take a break from focusing upon the limits or obstacles—that will not truly fill us, and to be ushered into possibility. There are those moments the Spirit breaks forth, like the rush of voices, the buzz of bees, or however your heart has been awed. God wants to breath into us possibility we hadn’t envisioned, to renew us and bring peace. Of all the things to carry forward from this season that is what I will keep carrying.

Parker Palmer suggests that Jesus’ statement seems simple- decide what to let go of and what to hang onto. But, he says, “I found that question did not work for me.” After a while in discernment, he says, he emerged with a better question- “I’m no longer asking what do I want to let go of and what do I want to hold onto. Instead I am asking, what do I want to let go of and what do I want to give myself to? I now see that “hanging on” is a fearful way of clinging, but looking for what I want to give myself TO transforms everything. It’s a place of unexpected energy, abundance, trust and new life.’

That life, loved and missed friends, is what I pray God will birth. And I talk God at God’s word to do just that for us all. Together may we join in that collective prayer:

“Come Holy Spirit, come.” Amen.



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**Sermon Title: "Help Us Breathe"**

**Gospel Text: John 20:19-23**

**Radio Broadcast sermon**

Usually I'm wrapped up in the drama from Acts- wind, fire, loud voices, foreign voices, people who seem drunk. This week, I already recorded my sermon for Pentecost focusing upon the gospel but the world kept spinning and frankly, now it sounds like nothing is going on in the world outside of the pandemic and our experience of it. In the gospel, after his betrayal, and arrest and execution, Jesus, now risen, shows up to the grieving and terrified, who worry they will be the next victims and who in other ways know their own complicity. Jesus speaks peace...right away because he knows they can barely breathe. Then he bestows the Holy Spirit for all that is to come.

Both of those things take breath.

Jesus breathes.

He breathes into a world where in far too many ways, for far too long, people are afraid they can't breathe. In our time, we fear this never-ending virus that attacks our lungs, and we fear never-ending hatred and senseless violence in our world, the kind Jesus knew.

What about that breath Jesus breathes and how much we all have in common?

Our default is "we" and "they, "us" and "them." Separation.

That separation is the very embodiment of sin. Separation from one another in all the ways we experience it and the ways we perpetrate or are complicit in its existence. Even in the pandemic, the results are diverse. People of color have borne the weight of the disease, the dangerous work and the lack of ways to just "shelter in place."

The disciples start out in that binary way of looking at the world "they were locked in a room," for fear of "them."

But when Jesus speaks and sends, he says "you all."

The disciples separated themselves out of fear.

Jesus breathes peace and Spirit.

In Revelation, that Spirit Jesus has bestowed will be invoked to churches getting it right in many ways, but where something is eating away at their existence and mission. The writer of Revelation says, "Listen to what the Spirit is saying" to move them from patterns of separation and fear. It is not only time, it is so far beyond time, for us to listen to the Spirit in what Jesus so simply lays before us that causes us such struggle.

"What you forgive will be forgiven, what you retain will be retained."

Jesus is not saying that if we don't forgive, it will not happen. Forgiveness is the province of God.

Instead, the reason we receive the Holy Spirit is so that we can embody, as Christ embodied, the living and breathing announcement of a new reality in the cross.

That embodiment and announcing has the power to transform the world. How well that happens depends upon how we breathe.

Will we let go of "our" breath and breathe in this new one?

Our old life is typified in what we retain, or hold onto.

What we allow, or defend or ignore because it seems too uncomfortable or challenging. As if we do not have that Spirit, the breath and power God assures us is ours.

Jesus has to breathe for us to live. And Jesus does. But we are all struggling to live and to breathe because in many ways we're holding on to "our" breath.

We struggle to see the world around us as "we."

We still have a list of what constitutes "they." And patterns that retain "our" view.

It is unacceptable, and unfaithful for us to seek to justify that which we do not wish to face, while vilifying that which we do not wish to embrace.

We do this when we use our breath to describe some other group as a uniform block and attack who "they" are, or what "they" do, or how "they" look. At its worst, in the face of the senseless and unnecessary deaths, the word "abomination" comes to mind.

"We" feel free to characterize ourselves with a laundry list of exceptions. A group of people who look like me can storm public spaces with guns, or engage in systematic domination, exclusion and elimination of others. But when questioned, will say "we" have to "know more first" to respond.

While we then turn around and say that if "they" are sitting in a car, in their

house, their yard, on the sidewalk, in a store, watching birds, frankly "anywhere,"...

"they should just get out of the car, or open the door, or leave the area, ..."  
But "we" never have to.

I weep. I weep over people's fears of breathing in places where "they" labor to serve in demanding jobs that "we" deem essential, while denying "them" what they need to breathe. Saying, "if some die, well then "they" will."

Can we see that we are a "we?"

James Franklin said it well in this morning's CDT- "I feel gutted." We are being called to ask, in the words of that Penn State phrase, who "WE ARE"? Even when we can connect all of the dots of patterns of horror, some hold onto inaction.

Jesus want to breathe for us to live wherever we say, "I Can't Breathe."

We share a collective fear that we cannot breathe. We have to own and collectively repent as a "we" and engage in the serious ongoing labor it takes to eradicate these deadly divides.

Because some of us are holding our breath that one misstep will choke us. Others are holding our breath by retaining that old, depleted, dying breath of the spectre of racism and prejudice and hatred.

Like we don't need that life giving breath Jesus breathes.

We're dying here.

Aren't we tired of holding our breath? We need Jesus to breathe.

To receive the life giving breath Jesus wants us all to have, to know the peace that only God can bestow we have to let "our" breath go. Because the sin of holding it will starve us all in the grips of fears. Don't you want to be able to breathe? I sure do.

We need God to live and move and breathe in us.

And so, I call upon everyone to listen to what the Spirit is saying in our siblings. Not to assess, just to receive the stories of others. Not just to hear them, listen. Then call upon the Spirit to speak a word and pray for Jesus to breathe a new breath.

Then use your breath. One of the most powerful uses of breath we have is the power of speech- use yours to accompany those who are victims, call out the words that get tossed around but kill, and walk away from feeding on the media of negativity that denies the beauty of our siblings, even when it comes from the halls of power.

Receive the Holy Spirit, live in the power of the cross and the world of grace

and mercy where sin and separation no longer hold sway.

With every measure of my breath, I pray we do more than engage in meaningless optics, let's do the laborious breathing of transformation.

As one writer said, "I'm no longer asking what I want to let go of and what I want to hold onto. Instead I am asking, 'what do I want to give myself to? I see now that 'hanging on' is a fearful way of clinging, but looking for what I want to give myself TO transforms everything. That's the place of unexpected energy, abundance, trust and new life."

That life, beloved community, is what I pray God will birth in us all. May that Spirit come.

Amen.