

Pentecost Sunday

May 23, 2021

Reflection by Sister Susan Quaintance

Acts 2:1-11; 1 Cor 12:3b-7, 12-13; Jn 20:19-23

Breath. I have thought way more about breath and the act of breathing since the beginning of the pandemic that I ever have before in my life.

We've been wearing masks inside, outside, pretty much everywhere since mid-March of 2020. The world came to understand relatively quickly that COVID-19 needed the respiratory droplets of our breath to spread, and that that spread happened extremely effectively during the most human of activities: standing next to one another; talking; laughing; singing; hugging – and, yes – breathing.

Given that so many of us had COVID, we probably paid new kinds of attention to our own breath. For the first time in my life, I had an experiential understanding of the phrase “shortness of breath.” Almost overnight we became well-versed in blood-oxygen levels and comfortable with the use of an oximeter.

Then came May 25. Tuesday will mark the one-year anniversary of George Floyd's murder, the cellphone video of which may have changed our country forever. Because of that video, the whole world knows that he said “I can't breathe” at least 28 times during the 9 minutes and 29 seconds that Derek Chauvin's knee was on his neck.

So I guess it's not a surprise that Jesus breathing on his disciples leapt out at me as I sat with John's gospel. To paraphrase an adolescent visitor to the backyard the other night: “Jesus! COVID!”

Of course, Jesus knew what he was doing. The symbolic weight of that action – mirroring God blowing the breath of life into Adam's nostrils, and Ezekiel prophesying to the wind to blow into the slain to bring their dry bones back to life – is mighty. For what is more intimate than being close enough to breathe on someone and them breathing on you in return? Call to mind that a time when that has happened in your life. Not only is physical proximity part and parcel of moments like that, but, likely, so is the feeling of being connected, safe, and at peace. Intimacy like that also means that we're vulnerable to being hurt or rejected. Like most peak human experiences, it is scary and wonderful, all at the same time.

But, like our least favorite virus ever, the Holy Spirit travels in that breath. It is that intimacy and vulnerability – with God and each other – that lays the groundwork for transformation, on personal, communal, and global levels. If Jesus is the sacrament of the Father, and the Holy Spirit is the sacrament of the Son, then perhaps the signs of those transformations are the sacrament of the Spirit. Our community, with trepidation and uncertainty, stepping into the future. Our country, where long-delayed conversations about race, equity, privilege, and power are starting to happen more broadly. Our friends and family members, at a distance for so long, being held in embraces that are beyond words but not joy.

That is the breath of Life. That is the Holy Spirit. Alleluia.