

Finding Your Breath: Listening To Our Bodies

Genesis 2:5-7; Romans 8:26-28

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When was the last time you noticed that you were breathing? Experts say that the average adult breathes approximately 22,000 times per day - 12-20 times per minute. Through our lungs we breathe in the oxygen that powers the rest of our bodies. When we breathe out, we release carbon dioxide so it doesn't build up in our systems. Our lungs are remarkable organs which, if opened flat, would cover the surface of a tennis court. They contain approximately 1,400 miles worth of airways.

Yet, all the work they do takes place largely outside our conscious awareness. Unless we suffer from asthma, we'll probably spend no time today worrying about missing any of our 22,000 breaths, and little to no time giving thanks for them. Yet, if you have ever not been able to breathe, then you know the feeling of panic that rises up very quickly. With our lungs, we literally breathe in the breath of life. It is no wonder, then, that breathing is such an integral part of so many spiritual practices.

This is the third weekend in Lent and the third in our sermon series on listening to the still, small voice of God through prayer. I'm hoping that through this sermon series, you will have a tool kit for praying - different approaches you can try to help bring you closer to God. From the very earliest days of the Church, breathing and body prayer have been one of those tools.

In the Old Testament, the words for spirit, soul, and breath are related. One Hebrew word for "breath," *ruach*, is the same as the word for "spirit." The Hebrew word for "soul" or "being," *nephesh*, can also be translated as "breath." Thus, in Genesis 2, God is said to have breathed the breath (*nephesh*) of life into Adam's nostrils, and Adam became a living soul/being (*nephesh*).

This relationship carries forward into the New Testament as well, with the Greek word *pneuma*. You can only tell by the context whether *pneuma* means spirit or breath. Even then, it may be unclear. In the Gospel of John the resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples and then breathes on them, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit [*pneuma*]." (John 20:21-22) But did Jesus say, "Receive the Holy *Spirit*" or "Receive the holy *breath*"? If we take the biblical relationship between breath and spirit seriously, the answer to both questions just might be "Yes."

According to Paul's letter to the Roman, that same Spirit intercedes for us with God. The Spirit helps us to pray and so breathing is, in essence, prayer.

Once, Southern Methodist University professor Jack Levison was having a conversation with his students about who the Holy Spirit is, why the Holy Spirit matters, and how to go about experiencing the Holy Spirit. The responses of his students were typical of many of us. One talked about experiencing the Holy Spirit at a campfire at the end of a week. Another described a special worship service. One by one without exception, says Levison, the students associated the Spirit with exceptional things in their lives—things that don't normally happen. Our basic problem with the Holy Spirit, he argues, is that we need to take it "from the mountaintop into our daily lives."

The great contemplative mystic Thomas Merton was asked—one too many times—about his life and practices at his hermitage at The Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Tersely, Merton responded, "What I wear is pants. What I do is live. How I pray is breathe." Merton's observation may betray a note of exasperation, but it also reveals wisdom. For Merton, experiencing the Holy Spirit is not confined to the mountaintop. It is a daily experience, even a moment-by-moment experience, in which the Holy Spirit is as present—and constant—as breathing.

One of the oldest prayers in Christianity is a breath prayer. In essence, a breath prayer has two parts - something you say in your mind as you breathe in and something you say as you breathe out. Dating back to the Third Century, the breath prayer was originally the words, "Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me". That said, you can choose whatever words work for you. You might choose a line of scripture or something that helps you to settle your mind or calm your anxiety. I frequently use the words, "Breathe in the peace of Christ, breathe out all that is stressful". The idea is to repeat the prayer and the breathing until you feel yourself focused and open to God.

Of course, there are other similar types of prayers that involve connection to your body. Christianity has a long and complex relationship with bodies. In the earliest days of the church, Gnosticism was a growing movement throughout the Roman Empire. The Gnostics were dualistic thinkers. They considered anything from the material world, including the human body, as evil while everything from the spiritual realm, including the human soul, was good. While Gnosticism was ultimately deemed heretical, we can see its influence on the writings of the apostle Paul, who frequently writes about the human battle between the flesh and the spirit.

That said, a Christian theology of the body really is built on two important beliefs. The first is that God created humanity, including our bodies, and called them good. As Jared Eckart writes, "At creation, God made humanity from the dust — that is, with physical bodies. The body is not an accident. Nor is the body external to the true self. Instead, the body is a gift from God that is originally and intrinsically good, and an essential part of the self."

The second belief which informs Christian theology about the body is the incarnation. God came to earth and took on a human body in the form of Jesus. Jesus's body enabled God to live among us but also to experience what we experience - hunger, fatigue, illness, and ultimately death.

We can't deny that we have inherited some of the Gnostics' distaste for and distrust of our human bodies, largely thanks to Paul. However, a much firmer foundation for how we think about our bodies, how we treat them, and how we live in them is rooted in God's love for and acceptance of humans as God created them.

Unfortunately, many of us have become disconnected from our bodies. The demands of our lives in a society that keeps us working harder than we should, the stress of living in a time of tremendous uncertainty and upheaval, and the brokenness left by those who have used or misused our bodies - all of these lead to a life lived in our heads, divorced from our physical selves. As a result, we don't treat our bodies well.

Thus, breathing is not only a form of prayer but also a way to return to our bodies. Mindfulness practices that focus our attention on how the breath feels as it enters and leaves our

bodies or on relaxing particular muscle groups can gently return us to our physical selves while also breathing in the breath of life.

There are other forms of body prayer, as well. Yoga, which has become immensely popular in recent years, helps us to stretch and challenge our bodies at the same time as we support that physical effort with breath. All of this reminds us of how miraculous our bodies are - as it says in Psalm 139, we are “fearfully and wonderfully made”.

Another form of body prayer is prayer walking. Not only do we bring body and spirit into alignment when we are walking, our surroundings remind us that we are a part of all of God’s Creation and we are interdependent with all living things. One particularly meaningful form of prayer walking is to walk through a place and pray for those who live or work there. For example, you might walk past a school and pray for the students and teachers or walk past a hospital and pray for the health care staff and the patients. Our bodies bring us into a first hand encounter with those for whom we are praying and, as is true in all forms of body prayer, our hearts tend to follow where our bodies lead.

Finally, a last form of body prayer is a prayer with set movements that have meaning attached to them. You may remember a couple of months ago when I taught a body prayer in worship. That prayer was based on another body prayer first taught by the 14th century Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich. In her prayer, there are four postures and four intentions through which we listen for the still, small voice of God. First, we await a sense of God’s presence however it may come. Then, we allow a sense of God’s presence to come. Third, we accept whatever comes or does not come and accept that we are not in control. Finally, we attend to whatever God has called us to do in the world. Await. Allow. Accept. Attend.

Whether you pray with your breath, breathing in God’s Spirit which both calms and energizes us, or through the movement of your body, prayer that connects your physical self to your spirit and then extends up to God and out into the world helps us to embody God’s love and acceptance. In a world in which bodies are misused and commodified, where we learn to dislike our bodies often at an early age, and where some kinds of bodies are privileged over others, praying with and through your body can be a way to celebrate the beauty of all of God’s children regardless of skin color or size, gender or abilities.

Thanks be to God. Amen.