

## **Pentecost 2020 Bishop Reddall 'Breathe on Me Breath of God'**

This Sunday in our churches, we will hear the story from the Gospel of John describing Jesus' appearance to the disciples on the evening of Easter Sunday, when he says to them, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And then he breathes on them, and says "Receive the Holy Spirit."

He breathed on them . . . The Spirit is given to us by Jesus as breath.

And now we hear -- once again -- those chilling words "I can't breathe" from a black man as he is asphyxiated, slowly, by a police officer. The Spirit of Life extinguished from George Floyd in an act of violence that mirrors so many other murders of our African American siblings: Eric Garner, whose dying words were also "I can't breathe" as he was put in an unapproved choke hold by a NYPD officer. Philando Castile in Minneapolis a few years ago. Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor more recently. And so many countless others through the decades.

The work of giving breath is the work of the Spirit. It is the foundational work of the Spirit and of the Church. Wherever breath is stolen through injustice, Jesus cries out for change. And Jesus cries out for the church to have courage. Jesus does not breathe on us and say "keep this to yourselves." Jesus breathes on us and sends us out to do the work of the Spirit in the world. To give breath.

And speaking from Arizona, I would be remiss if I did not note that breath is being stolen through a virus particularly in our Native American communities, exacerbated by a similar strain of injustice and historic racism that has left so many people on tribal lands so vulnerable.

If I was asked to speak about racism 20 or 30 years ago, I would have said very different things than what I say now. Decades of listening to people of color and observing and witnessing their stories, reading books, has transformed my own thinking and convinced me of the reality of systemic racism and injustice, and of the need for continued broad action to combat them, in ways that I might not have imagined 20 or 30 years ago,

when I would have said that racism was bad,  
but I would not have been able to identify how I had benefited from being born white,  
or have believed that police, judges, store clerks-- and even church leaders –  
treat people differently, even when they do not consciously want to,  
based upon the color of their skin.

And that gives me the little sliver of hope today,  
to accompany my mourning and grief and anger.  
It is possible for someone who is white to be converted; to see racism differently;  
to believe the stories of people of color; to learn our history; and to act against racism.  
It is not easy, and it is not nearly as frequent as Jesus would like it to be.

The story of Pentecost in the book of Acts is about a diverse group of people –  
who do not get along or admire the disciples particularly –  
gathering together and having the Word of God cut through their divisions  
and speak in words they could hear.  
Words that they understood. Words that changed them.

I invite everyone who is hearing this homily to pray this Sunday for George Floyd  
and his family and all those who are mourning him. Say his name.  
And I invite those who are hearing this homily and who are white  
to read one of the books listed below.  
Commit yourself, through the power of the Spirit, to opening your ears,  
and upholding the breath of our siblings who are suffering.  
God bless you. And God bless the work ahead of us.  
May the Spirit blow powerfully through our streets and our institutions,  
and shatter the forces that keep us in this endless cycle of violence and hatred. Amen.

- *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* by Jim Wallis
- *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart* by Christena Cleveland
- *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander
- *The Sin of White Supremacy: Christianity, Racism, and Religious Diversity in America* by Jeannine Hill Fletcher