

**June 7, 2020 (Trinity Sunday) | Sanctuary worship service**

**TEXT:** [Matthew 28:16–20](#)

**TITLE:** **Connections That Matter/Breathe in, Breathe Out**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

To start with, I'm going to ask us all to do something—something simple we've all done thousands of times without even thinking about it. Take in a deep breath—hold it a moment and now let it out. Again, breathe in—and breathe out. There's a powerful symmetry to breathing. We take in air; then we release it. We gather it in; we send it out. There is probably no better metaphor for our lives in these troubled times than that of breathing in and breathing out.

There's an old hymn whose first verse is this: *Breathe on me, Breath of God; fill me with life anew, that I may love what thou dost love and do what thou would do.* The whole point of breathing in the breath of God is so that we might exhale it back into the world—loving what God loves, doing what Christ would do. This simple formula is at the heart of the verses I just read from the end of Matthew's gospel. The risen Christ appeared once more to the disciples. They were gathered together on a hilltop in Galilee when Jesus spoke to them and sent them out into the world—to love, to baptize, to teach, to do what Christ had shown them to do. They were gathered in and sent out. Breathe in, breathe out.

As we continue to grapple with the reality of the coronavirus pandemic, as of last Friday we were told that Allegheny County can enter the “green phase.” This allowed stores to open, people to gather, life to resume some semblance of what we would call “normal” even as people still keep safe distances from one another and wear masks in public and around groups. Most churches are still closed, although a few have begun to open again for worship and mass. Are some things moving too quickly—too heedlessly falling back into old patterns of gathering together in crowds? Perhaps. The next few weeks will tell.

But one odd thing we are having to re-learn is how to breathe. Am I taking in air that contains the virus? Am I breathing in air too close to where someone else just exhaled it? Can I trust the breaths I take in—and what other choice do I ultimately have since I have to breathe?

These are strange questions to have to ask oneself, but then we are living in strange times. One reporter noted that so far 2020 has felt like 1998 with an impeachment trial, as well as 1918 with a killer pandemic and 1929 with a shattering economic crisis, plus having the last weeks morphing into 1968—a time of social unrest, protests and riots. It is a lot to take in. If the symbol for the morning involves inhaling and exhaling the breath of God, it is a truly painful symbol right now because it literally embodies the source of our deepest anguish in the moment—the reality of George Floyd's murder by a police officer who knelt on his neck and stopped his ability to breathe. It was an unnecessary act—a racist act—a reprehensible taking of life that has collectively taken the breath away of people of faith here and around the world.

Breathe in, breathe out. Someone in our congregation wrote to Heather, Patrice and I asking how our church might respond to the death of George Floyd. It sparked an email conversation that continued in a conference call with the local chapter of the National Black Presbyterian Caucus. That led to the sharing of ideas as well as the naming of frustrations—that we are sick and tired of empty protests, of re-telling the same stories of American racism and a police force’s abuse of power over and over again. But it also led to the idea of a vigil around our church, not because that in and of itself is all that needs to be done—or even that it would be the best act of solidarity with grieving communities of color here in Pittsburgh. Mostly the vigil was just an act of exhalation—of breathing out, of naming our pain, of physically standing together encircling our church because we can’t hold it in any longer. Is one breath ever enough—one act, one vigil? No. But without exhaling, without breathing out and speaking up, we will surely die.

Jesus Christ gathered the disciples together on that hilltop and then sent them out. “All that is authoritative and true abides in me, so whatever ability you possess to do good comes from me. All nations, all lands and people, are now the places where you are to work—so don’t hide in bunkers or behind walls any longer. The time frame for this action, this ministry of love and justice, is all times—always—even to the end of the age.” With that, a breath of the Holy Spirit was exhaled, released, and the cycle of breathing in and breathing out using our spiritual lungs as followers of Christ fully began.

There are many ways we breathe out the spirit of loving-kindness and justice. We help small businesses open up again; we keep in touch with neighbors and those shut-in; we donate to charities and arts groups. Here’s another goal we can work toward. I don’t need to remind you how important a season we are living in, especially as we draw ever closer to another national election. Jared Diamond’s latest book is called Upheaval and it looks at how different countries have navigated times of national stress. Diamond points out that sadly America is one of the few nations that doesn’t automatically allow all its citizens to vote. Most democracies have an “opt out” model of voter registration—you are automatically given the right to vote unless you intentionally opt out. But here we require people to register, and much of this process is a remnant of racist policies designed to disenfranchise people of color. After the Civil War, whites were terrified of the power available to former slaves who could now vote in elections. So different barriers were set in place—literacy tests, poll taxes, residency requirements, and grandfather clauses. Grandfather clauses were particularly insidious because they said if your grandfather could vote, then you could vote—which barred ex-slaves from voting, but allowed illiterate, impoverished white citizens to avoid the poll taxes and literacy tests and vote simply by virtue of the color of their skin. As of today, 19 states have automatic voter registration, but Pennsylvania is not one of them. Working for this change, ensuring all Pennsylvanians can vote directly for their leaders and indirectly for the laws of this democracy is one critical way we exhale for justice, righteousness, equality for all.

Like the cycle of breathing, Jesus gathers us in and then sends us out. In John 12:32, Jesus said, *When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.* Inhale. In Matthew 28:19 Jesus said, *Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.* Exhale. Go out as vessels of the God who is over us, the Savior who is beside us, the Spirit that is within and among us. The Triune God, God the Creator, Christ the Savior, and the Holy Spirit, exist in eternal relationship, three in one. In a similar way, we too only discover who we are through our relationships with one another. In seeing ourselves reflected in the eyes of another, in giving of ourselves so we are included in the hearts of others, that is how we know we are truly alive. Those are the connections that matter for this one precious life we've each been given.

If you want to learn the meaning of life, don't climb a mountain to seek advice from a guru. Don't barricade yourself inside your room living on bread, water, and self-denial. Life's meaning is found in the space between you and the person next to you—the people around you, in this city, nation and yes, world. You become you only in relation to another. You breathe in what others have breathed out—just as they breathe in what you breathe out. When a knee on a neck stops this flow of air, all suffer. When fear and racism and political divisions make us believe others don't matter, all suffocate.

Matthew's gospel ends with the incredible promise of Jesus saying, "Remember, I am with you always to the end of the age." When we worship, Christ is with us. When we share a communion meal, Christ is with us. When we stand and hold signs and use whatever privilege this world affords us in order that all may be safe and well and loved, Christ is with us. Every breath you take is an act of faith. For you are exhaling what the world needs and trusting that there will be something there for you to inhale and fill your lungs again. So let God in Christ gather you in and the Holy Spirit send you out. Connect. Breathe in, breathe out. Now go.

AMEN