

Wesley United Methodist Church
February 21, 2021
Listening to God
To Find Your Breath
So I Can Talk to God
Scripture: Romans 8:26-30, 38-39
John 20:19-22

Have you ever wanted to pray but had no idea what to say? I have. I suspect we all have found ourselves in this situation at one time or another – maybe many times.

At those times I think about the story of a child who was sitting quietly with her head bowed and her hands folded in prayer. Her grandfather looked on as she slowly repeated the alphabet 5 times. When she was finished, Grandpa asked her about what she had been doing. She replied, “I didn’t know what words to say, so I just said my ABC’s and knew that God could put them together to make the right words.”ⁱ

It’s a cute story, isn’t it? But the reality is that we have probably all had times when we did not know how to pray. Sometimes we simply don’t really know what to pray for. Sometimes we just don’t know how to put the cry of our hearts into words.

The Apostle Paul recognized this in his letter to the church in Rome. In the 8th chapter of his letter to the Romans, we heard these words, “Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” We don’t need to have fancy words to say when we pray. Our prayers don’t have to be masterpieces of speech.

Many years ago, a colleague told me about a trustees meeting. At the beginning of the meeting, the chair said they needed to begin with prayer. As I recall her story, he said something like this. “Ok, God. We’ve got some really tough stuff to deal with tonight, so we need you to send that Holy Spirit thing to help us, because we need your help. Amen.” That was more than 30 years ago, but I’ve always remembered it, because to me it was one of the most beautiful prayers I’ve ever heard. It was the heartfelt words of a man who didn’t need fancy words to talk to his God. He could say whatever was on his mind and trust that God would hear him and understand.

As Paul tells us, when we don't know how to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And God knows and understands. Paul didn't say that the Spirit intercedes with poetic words, or beautiful imagery but with "sighs too deep for words."

On the day when Jesus rose from death, he appeared to his disciples who were locked together in a room out of fear. John tells us that Jesus "breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'". Jesus breathed on them proving that he was alive once more. I think it's significant that he "breathed on them". He didn't touch them; he didn't preach to them; he simply breathed.

Maybe you can begin to see the significance and the importance of breath, of breathing in scripture. We all know that breathing is essential to life, but it is also important in prayer in ways we might not have previously considered. A couple of days ago, I read an article called, "Why Learning to Breathe May Be the Best Way to Pray."ⁱⁱ It was written by a therapist who described how important Breath prayer has become in her professional practice and in her life.

She noted that, "Breath prayer provides Christians a simple, sustainable way to gain the benefits of mindfulness while deepening our relationship with God. ... The impact of this kind of prayer can be profound." She goes on to point out that studies have found that contemplative prayer – and breath prayer is one example of this – can help us manage stress better. It can help us better evaluate the things that normally stress us, and it can increase our spiritual awareness.

Eighteen years ago, this past week, Rhode Island experienced the great tragedy of the Station Nightclub Fire killing 100 people and injuring another 230. I was one of the pastors called to be present throughout the week to sit with families, to participate in death notifications, and to do a lot of listening. Frequently, we would find ourselves gently reminding people to simply breathe. When their anxiety or fear level increased dramatically, we would often suggest that they take a couple of slow deep breaths. This would generally result in them calming down a little and becoming better able to focus on what was most important for the next moment.

Being intentional about breathing interrupts the emotions that are trying to run away with us and allows us to slow down, calm down and function better. When we

combine intentional breathing with focusing on God, contemplative prayer, or a breath prayer can decrease symptoms of worry, depression, anxiety, and stress.

When Jesus breathed on the disciples and told them to receive the Holy Spirit, he was connecting the breath of creation, the presence of the Holy Spirit within us, the breathing that we do every day without even thinking. When Paul reminded us that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us in our weakness, praying for us with sighs too deep for words when we don't know how to pray, I believe he was modeling and giving permission for us to pray without words.

Sometimes the very best prayer is to simply sit in God's presence. That's one of the things we are doing during this Lenten season. Following this message, there will a brief time, as there was last week, when you will be invited to simply sit and be with God.

Breathing a prayer to God is a simple way of using your body to engage your mind on the Word of God. Very simply a breath prayer involves being aware of your breath and then with each breath silently or softly praying a word of Scripture or a simple prayer to God. As you breathe in you say aloud or silently one phrase and as you breathe out the second word or phrase.

For example, while breathing in, one might say, "The Lord is my shepherd" and while breathing out, say, "I shall not want." Now, I find it nearly impossible to pay attention to my breathing and speaking at the same time, so for me, and probably for many others, the breath prayer is a silent prayer.

Whispering, or praying in your heart the words, as you breathe slowly and deeply over and over, can help you to abide in Christ Jesus. I know that it helps me draw closer to Jesus. Repeating the same verse or phrase over and over allows the verse to sink into you as you sink into God. In 1st Thessalonians 5:17, Paul advises us to "pray continually". Now, unless we live a cloistered life, most of us may find this impossible to do. The ancient Desert Fathers and Mothers in Christianity were likely the origin of the breath prayer. But for us today, it can be a way to help live out the scripture call to pray continually.

Breath prayer offers stressed our Christians a simple way to respond to stress by turning our attention to the presence of God and reaching out for God's grace.

When we silently turn our attention to the most basic function of living – breathing, we can acknowledge our great need for God. We can recognize our need for God to equip us with wisdom and courage. As a simple reminder to breath often calmed the anxious families awaiting news after the Station Nightclub fire, a breath prayer can simultaneously relax our overwhelmed bodies and at the same time fill us with the confidence of God’s love and presence.

We don’t need to be a poet to talk with God. We don’t need fancy words. We can talk with God just as we would talk with our best friend, or we can sit quietly and just be in God’s presence, or we can allow our breath to be a prayer to God.

Let us pray:

Loving God, we are grateful that we don’t need fancy words to talk with you. We are grateful that at creation you breathed life into us, and after Jesus’ resurrection, he breathed the Holy Spirit into us. We are grateful that Paul reminds us that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words when we don’t have the words. Remind us, that even our sighs, even our breath can be a prayer, a way to talk with you, when we allow our breath to draw us closer to you.
Amen.

ⁱ Source unknown. I’ve heard this in several different variations.]

ⁱⁱ Ramsey, Katie Jo. [Why Learning to Breathe May Be the Best Way to Pray | RELEVANT \(relevantmagazine.com\)](https://relevantmagazine.com/why-learning-to-breathe-may-be-the-best-way-to-pray/)
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