



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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### “Breath In. Breathe Out.”

Acts 2:1-12, 42; Psalm 150

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Are you familiar with competitive breath holding? Yes, there are people who practice and train in order to hold their breath for long periods. The current world record for unassisted breath holding is eleven minutes and thirty-five seconds. The record for oxygen-assisted breath holding, when the competitor breathes pure oxygen before competing, is an astounding twenty-four minutes and three seconds. No surprise, this activity takes a toll on participants. A recent study found that people who regularly hold their breath for extreme lengths of time experience irreversible losses in cognitive function.<sup>1</sup>

Which raises the question: why do people do this? Why do people intentionally not breathe? It makes no sense to me. Personally, I'm in favor of breathing. Breathing is a good thing.

It's a good thing that's easy to take for granted. We've been doing it since the minute we were born and we will continue breathing until the very end of our lives. On average, a person at rest takes about 16 breaths per minute. This means we breathe about 960 times in an hour. The person who lives to eighty will take about 672 million breaths in a lifetime. That's a lot of breathing.

Those among us who practice meditation know that focusing on breathing is a powerful way to shape our lives. Controlled breathing has been shown to reduce stress, increase alertness and boost our immune system. Studies have found that breathing practices reduce symptoms associated with anxiety, insomnia and depression. Breathing intentionally grounds us, calms us and connects us to God.

Baseball players have all sorts of rituals when they enter the batter's box. Some spit on their hands. Others stomp their feet. Many tap the ground with their bat. Most take a few practice swings. I know an eleven-year-old baseball player who does an interesting thing when he enters the batter's box. He settles himself and then slowly breathes in and he slowly breathes out. He does it every time he bats. You can see him do it. After he does it, a stillness takes over his body. And he's ready.

He's a pretty good hitter.

Breathing is that powerful. And necessary. That's why it's so frightening when we struggle to breathe. If you have ever had a panic attack, you know what that feels like. It can make you think you're dying. It's the same thing if you've ever had the breath knocked out of you. Breathlessness can occur in all kinds of ways—asthma, hard falls, heart failure, sudden violence. Who can forget Eric Garner in a chokehold, lying face down on a New York City sidewalk eleven times saying, “I can't breathe”?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/pushing-the-limits-of-extreme-breath-holding>

<sup>2</sup> <https://chapel.duke.edu/sites/default/files/04.23.17%20Barbara%20Brown%20Taylor%20Sermon%20-%20Take%20a%20Breath.pdf>

This past Thursday, June 6, the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day I was trying to imagine the experience of allied soldiers as they approached the beaches of Normandy. As the landing craft drew close to shore, the soldiers, average age of 26, could hear the German artillery rounds crashing all around them. I wonder if these young men took deep breaths before they plunged into the icy water. I wonder if they struggled to keep breathing as fear threatened to overwhelm them.

The instinct to keep breathing is powerful. Breath is life. That is especially true in the Bible.

In the Book of Genesis, God forms a human creature out of the dust of the ground and then breathes life into the creature. That action is repeated on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit breathes life into the church. In both Hebrew and Greek, the word for wind and breath are the same. On that first Pentecost, the wind or breath of God blows among the disciples and they breathe in life and hope, purpose and meaning.

It's a gift that keeps on giving. Every time we gather as the church, we breathe in those same things. We breathe in God's mercy and peace and strength.

I could end the sermon here – it would be a good place to end. We could leave here feeling filled with the Spirit – supported and empowered. We could leave here reminded that breath is life and focusing on breathing helps us find peace and become a better hitter and improves our health and these are all good things but the story of Pentecost doesn't stop there. It doesn't end with breathing in God's gifts. The story of Pentecost is also about breathing out.

Pentecost, you see, is relentlessly outward focused.

That first Pentecost begins with a bunch of scared people in a room. Pentecost begins with the disciples inside, isolated, disconnected from the larger community. And then the Spirit, the breath of God, gets a hold of them. By the end of the day, they are outside, engaged, connected.

The church goes outside that day – sharing good news, healing, teaching, feeding, inviting others into community. Because, the breath which is the Spirit of God does not leave us as we are. It calls us out into the world. The gifts the church receives on Pentecost are meant to be shared.

Which reminds me of something that happened years ago. It was a meeting full of ministers and rabbis. We were trying to pull together a coalition of congregations to help better address homelessness in New York City's Upper East Side. This was not our first meeting. Because the ministers and rabbis liked to talk more than they liked to listen. At this particular meeting, one of the ministers was making quite a speech. "This is just so beautiful," he said, "this fellowship we have, this camaraderie – Christians and Jews working together, it's just beautiful. Even if we don't help a single homeless person, we have done something good and holy here...."

The heads around the table nodded except for one head – the head of my pastor. She was the youngest and the only female in this group. I saw her shake her head and then take a deep, deep breath and in a quiet but firm voice said, "No, that's not good enough. That's not close to being good enough. This isn't about us – it's not about what makes us feel good about ourselves. It's about the folks who don't have anywhere to live. If we don't actually help them, we will have failed to do our job. And, we will have failed God."

Her comments lit a fire under that group and believe it or not they did some really great work together.

That's the story of Pentecost. That's the story of the church at its best. That's our story.

The church breathes in:

in worship  
in praying for one another  
in Bible study  
in choir practice  
in times of talking and laughing in the narthex  
in caring for one another

The church breathes in.

And then the church breathes out:

when we invite people to church  
when we open the doors of the food pantry  
when elders take communion to the homebound  
when our youth go to Washington D. C. on a mission trip  
when we go Christmas caroling at Westminster Thurber  
when strangers come into our midst and we welcome them as God's own

The church breathes in...the church breathes out...

This morning, this Pentecost morning,

- Breathe in God's mercy. Breathe out God's mercy for the world.
- Breathe in God's love for you. Breathe out God's love for all.
- Breathe in courage and strength. Breathe out commitment and service.
- Breathe in God's forgiveness; breathe out God's grace that is available to all.

On this Pentecost morning, breathe in.

Breathe out.

Repeat.