

## **Breathe in New Life and Give it Away: Forgive**

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year C. April 15, 2007. (Text: John 20:19-31)*

How many of you have had CPR training? Good for you! The Red Cross urges everyone to learn how to perform CPR – cardio-pulmonary resuscitation. You never know when you might be able to save another person’s life.

Even people who haven’t taken a CPR course know something about how it works. It involves what we call “mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.” The person who is giving CPR puts his or her mouth over the mouth of the traumatized person, pinches the victims nostrils shut, and *blows* the breath of life into that person’s lungs. Your breath helps get the other person’s lungs working again, and stimulation of the heart gets it beating again.

It isn’t my purpose today to give a pitch for CPR training – though it’s a good thing – but rather to remind us all about something we already know. That is: breath gives life; breath *is* life.

In the second chapter of the Book of Genesis, there’s an ancient Hebrew story about how God created the first human being. It says, “*The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.*” Obviously, this is a very primitive story. It describes God as making a human being out of the earth itself – like we’d make a clay statue. Then God *breathes* his own Spirit into the clay, and the lifeless image comes alive and becomes, as the Book of Genesis says, “a living soul.” Whatever we might think about the historical value of this story – and I am not interested in conflicts between creationism and evolution – the *spiritual* message is clear: we human beings *live* because God has shared his life with us. In both Hebrew and Greek, the two languages of the Bible, the same word means both “breath” and “spirit.”

Now jump to the New Testament, to the Gospel we just read. On the Day of the Resurrection, Jesus came to his disciples as they were behind locked doors, hiding from the Temple authorities. After showing them his wounded hands and side, he said to them, “*Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*” And then it says he “breathed on them.” — Maybe he went from one to another, carefully blowing his breath in the face of each one. Maybe he just took a deep breath and exhaled over the whole bunch of them. We don’t know exactly how he did it, and that doesn’t matter. — But the Gospel says that when he breathed on them he said “*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*”

When he had risen from the dead, Jesus breathed *his own life* into his disciples. In a sense, he “re-created” them. It was like the Genesis story, where God the Creator breathed life into the human being he had formed from the dust of the ground.

The breath of Christ is the Holy Spirit of God, the animating power of God, and the Spirit gives a *new* life to those who believe in Jesus.

We’re renewed, we’re re-created by the Spirit. Jesus “breathes out” the Spirit, and we “breathe the Spirit in.” To go back to where I started, it’s like a kind of spiritual CPR. Because Jesus lives, we too shall live. And we can become “life-givers” ourselves. We do it through the practice of *forgiveness*. The Gospel shows that the re-creating gift of the Spirit and the first Christians’ sense of empowerment to practice forgiveness came from their first encounter with the Risen Christ. Jesus said to his friends, “*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*” Then he breathed on them and says, “*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.*”

We who believe in Jesus are sent in the power of his Spirit to do what God sent Jesus himself to do: to set the world free from the destructive power of sin and evil and hatred in all its forms. Jesus died and rose again so that we all might be forgiven and have a totally new kind of life. The gift of the Risen Christ to us is the spiritual power to forgive.

On the interpersonal level, *forgiveness* itself is life-giving, isn't it? When two people have offended one another in some way —when they've sinned against one another— their relationship is broken. It's dead. The offenses and the bad feelings that follow when one person has been wounded by another simply cut off the life of whatever relationship there used to be.

I expect that every one of us here in church this morning has experienced at least one broken relationship – most of us probably more than one. If this has never happened to you, then you're a very extraordinary person indeed. When a relationship has been broken, the only way for it to live again is for there to be *forgiveness*. And the new life the relationship will have is not going to be the same as the old life that ended. It will be totally new. If one person can take the initiative and choose to forgive, then life can be restored. A *new* life, a new relationship, can be formed. But one person has to take the initiative. One person has to take the risk. One person has to *choose* to be like Jesus, who didn't wait for us to become worthy of his love before he freely offered it.

To forgive others doesn't deny that anything bad ever happened. It doesn't mean that we pretend there was never any offense or any pain. No. Sin is real; it's not just a state of mind. But to *forgive* is to “absorb the loss,” to forego our self-righteous demand for compensation, revenge or punishment. That, in fact, is what happened on Good Friday. When the Son of God died on the cross, it was God himself “absorbing the loss” caused by our sin.

Absorbing the loss isn't easy. In the non-spiritual, purely worldly realm of thinking, it's utterly impossible. That's because our visceral instinct is *not* to forgive; it's to take revenge. Our reflex is to get even, to punish the people who have offended us. We want to lash out at them. Or, at the very least, we want to cut ourselves off from them and never have anything to do with them again as long as we live. We certainly don't want to let them off without any negative consequences.

To forgive from the heart is a costly spiritual act, an act that's only possible because we have “breathed in” the Spirit of God that Jesus who died for our sins and “absorbed the loss” for us, has “breathed out” on those who love him. When people forgive one another they give evidence that they've received a *new life* from God. And when *we* forgive, we give new life to others.

We who have *received* mercy are people who can now *show* mercy. We have “breathed in” the life of the Risen Christ; and because we've done that, now we can “breathe out” the words and deeds of forgiveness that have power to change not only our relationships with people we haven't spoken to in years —but power to change the world.

Breathe in the new life of Christ and then give it away. Practice forgiveness.