

# SERMON • AUGUST 23, 2020

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I'd like to begin with a story. It's a mashup of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and the Gospel.

## TOE BREATHING

Not too long ago there was a small town in North Carolina where the people learned that they could breathe through their toes. It took some effort, but you could do it. And after a while, they began to feel that toe breathing was in fact the way one *should* breathe. It was a sign of education and breeding. You didn't want to be a mouth-breather.

Of course, breathing through your toes is hard work. You don't get a lot of air that way. So life had to shaped around the priority of breathing through toes. You certainly could do no hard physical work. That had to be left to others outside of town. And toes had to be protected at all costs. At great expense he town created carpeted sidewalks. The touching of toes was as delicate an act as kissing. The church found its mission in helping people be generous and kind and prayerful, given that their lives had been made so small and their loves so tepid by the requirements of toe breathing.

Jesus came to this town. People saw the exuberance, the wholeness, and the power with which he lived and related. He did things that God was supposed to do, like healing, and making community, and giving meaning to life. But what he was asking of them, to follow him, was difficult to do while toe-breathing at the same time. How can you love that big, that open, that free? It became a big question, how do we breathe as we know we should, through our toes, and follow Jesus at the same time? Some began to suspect the truth: Jesus was in fact, breathing through his mouth. He was offering a way of life that could not actually be done while toe breathing. The clergy were pretty clear: they had to get rid of him. There was always that cliff on the hill outside of town.

## YOU ARE THE MESSIAH

I tell this story because in today's Gospel we have the story of Peter confessing Jesus as "Messiah, the Son of the Living God." On the strength of this confession, this faith, God builds God's church.

And when we say with faith that, Jesus is Messiah, the Christ, we mean that he is the one in whom God's plan for humanity and creation is finally fulfilled. And God's will for us is not merely fulfilled in Jesus, like a spectacle we get to admire, but it's made accessible for us *through* him. We get to live it too! He is the one through whom all of God's desire for us, our full and true humanity, is made available. In him, we get to be creatures whose glory makes God sing.

## THE GOOD NEWS

So this is good news. You and I, have, one way or another found ourselves into the Church. And what we are being told today, thank God – is that the church is not just about values or morals. It is not just about being good or doing good. It is not merely a comfortable place of repose or inspiration.

No, we are being told today that in Jesus' community, we have the chance to become the kind of human beings that God so desperately wants us to be: authentic, true, loving, deep, fully alive. We can then become ambassadors for this divine life in the community around us.

## **THE BAD NEWS**

The bad news attendant on this good news is however, that like the toe-breathers in the parable, our deepest assumptions about what life is about, and what we need to be happy, and how we are going to find life, actually run counter to the life Jesus would give us. This is what you call Original Sin. Given this, what we usually do is to take a little bit of Jesus and add it on to the lives we already have. But that's hard when you have to breathe through your toes while the life that Jesus gives assumes you are breathing through your mouth. It's like we can only barely squeak out, with great effort, something like christian life. Church becomes something about making us comfortable or keeping us inspired for our great effort, but not really calling us to the life that Jesus has.

## **SOMETHING ABOUT THE GOSPEL**

I feel, brothers and sisters, something brand new about the Gospel, something brand new at least for me. For so long I have labored in the fields of prayer, and spiritual practices. And for all the good this has done, I think I have tried to stay keep breathing through my toes.

**What I think what I'm discovering is that what God is about right now in our country at this particular time, is leading people from all different backgrounds, suburbanites and poor white country people, mentally able and those who have a disability, black, white, and brown people, to sit around one common table and to see and love the image of God in one another.** At God's table, we all have equal standing, whether we are a a disabled beggar in a slum or a powerful person supposedly in charge of things. And at God's table, we learn to see those who have traditionally been on the underside of things, who have had no power, have in general a greater insight into the ways of God.

[Remember this: the God of the Bible is not the God on the side of those in power to preserve the status quo. That is precisely the God of paganism, whose priests use fear and sacrificial violence to shore up power for the status quo. The God of the Old Testament, of our reading today from Exodus today, and of Jesus Christ, is the God who is known in a special way among the slaves and the oppressed. Blessed are the poor; the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs].

Now I know that we all theoretically agree that human beings are equal, and that God's kingdom will have all kinds of people in it. Yes, yes. But what I am coming to see is that this is not a pipe dream for beyond the grave. It is happening now, and we can be a part of it!

In a time of unprecedented division, animosity, conspiracy theories run amok, fear, and scapegoating violence, the systematic and cynical manipulation of others with lies, what God is doing now is radical. God is inviting people to come together to make a different kind of community, around Jesus, Messiah. The toe-breathing we have to give up is that the only way to live is to stay separate in our little enclaves, that we need to externalize poverty and suffering to be happy.

And I guess what I am becoming aware of is that the new life the God wants to give me, the fulfillment Jesus offers as Messiah, is found precisely through becoming a part of this community, where people wait with each other long enough that they can begin to see the simple image of God in one another and so in themselves. We walk around shining with God. That is the truth. Seeing this is like becoming just a little less blind. Living like this requires breathing just a little bit through the mouth.

Jesus, Messiah, is making something new, what we have called Beloved Community, and we can go be a part of it, day in and day out. Jesus is making this for us because he loves us and wants to give us his life. It just takes a little breath, a little trust, and someone taking our hand and showing us the Way. But the gracious lover of souls, the God of Jesus the Messiah, loves all of us too much, too deeply, ever to leave us as we are, to stop inviting us on.