

We all know that breathing is essential to life. What is amazing about breathing is that it is an involuntary action—we don't even think about it. Our brains are programmed to instinctively monitor the balance between oxygen and carbon dioxide levels. When we breathe deeply, our brains send a message to the rest of our bodies to calm down and relax. When we breathe, we can intentionally lower our heart rates and bring down our stress levels.

According to the Mayo Clinic, breathing "may help ease symptoms of stress-related disorders and mental health conditions such as anxiety, general stress, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder." With all of this in mind, Apple has created a notification App for their watch called, Breathe. The App reminds users to be mindful and focus on what is important in the moment.

The problem with the Apple watch is that notifications can be turned off or simply ignored. We can do the same thing with the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is the very breath of God, when it comes to forgiveness.

Today's gospel states that Jesus gave his followers the Holy Spirit by breathing on them. He then tells them they must be a people of forgiveness. It would be a mistake to understand this passage as only referring to the Sacrament of Reconciliation Confession or Penance, as important as this sacrament is for the care of God's people. Breathing and forgiving: One follows the other. Forgiveness, as Jesus makes clear throughout his earthly ministry, is part of the deal for all who call themselves his disciples.

"All Jesus does is breathe forgiveness," says Franciscan Father Richard Rohr in his book, "The Wisdom Pattern: Order, Disorder, Reorder." "It's interesting," Father Rohr continues, "that Jesus identifies forgiveness with breathing, the one thing that we have done constantly since we were born and will do until we die. He says God's forgiveness is like breathing. Forgiveness is not apparently something God does; it is who God is. God can do no other."

Forgiveness is something we seek and offer, as is clear at each Mass.

1) In the penitential rite, we confess our sins and we hear the presider ask, “May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins and bring us to everlasting life.”

2) In our profession of faith, we proclaim our belief “in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.”

3) And when we pray the Our Father, we ask the Lord “to forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who have trespass against us.”

What else but forgiveness could be our response after mass as we go in peace having remembered the sacrifice of Christ for us?

C. S. Lewis said” “Every one says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.” But if we hold on to the hate, the bitterness, the anger attached to an offence committed against us — real or perceived — who does that hurt? Spoiler alert: not the offender.

What I have learned — slowly, I admit — is that if I want to move forward in my life, I need to let go of the negative feelings that come with being offended. I need to make peace with my offender. I need to acknowledge that this person, no matter how serious and hurtful the offence, is a creation and child of God like myself, and for that reason alone deserves to be treated with the respect and dignity that all of God’s creation deserves. That includes offering forgiveness.

Which isn’t to say that forgiveness means we tell our offender, “Hey, whatever, no problem,” any more than we should expect the same response from those whose forgiveness we seek. We would hope that the action of forgiving is accompanied by a sincere resolve and effort to change for the better.

No, we can’t control how others respond. But we can choose to move forward and not “retain,” as Jesus said, the anger, bitterness and hurt. Think of the psalm for today: “Lord, send out your Spirit and renew the face of the earth.” Exactly how does the Spirit renew the face of the earth?

Through us, it would seem. Pentecost Sunday's first reading reminds us that the descent of the "tongues of fire" upon the disciples of Jesus so filled them with the Holy Spirit that they began chattering in different languages "of the mighty acts of God." Soon those disciples "moved forward" to spread the good news — to breathe new life into a world that needed renewal. Sound familiar?

Indeed, in these times when so much vitriol and vilification is in our midst, what could happen if each of us took time to really reflect upon the hurts we've been dealt and made a serious effort to "breathe some forgiveness" into this world?

I know one thing: When I am able to forgive or when I am forgiven something very powerful and wonderful takes place inside me. I feel like I can breathe, as if a great weight has been lifted off my chest. Letting go of anger and bitterness and hurt is an amazing gift to myself. When I forgive, I have let God into my life in a way that heals and renews.

So I now conclude with this prayer from an unknown author:

Lord Jesus,
You opened the eyes of the blind,
healed the sick,
forgave the sinful woman,
and after Peter's denial confirmed him in your love.
Listen to my prayer:
forgive all my sins,
renew your love in my heart,
help me to live in perfect unity
with my fellow Christians
that I may proclaim your saving power
to all the world.