

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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April 28, 2019 – Second Sunday of Easter

## **The Spirit's Breath**

Then Jesus took a deep breath and breathed into them.

"Receive the Holy Spirit," he said. – *John 20:19-31*

Someone wise [St. Augustine?] once said that “to sing is to pray twice.” To sing is to pray twice. When we pray, we put our highest hopes and desires into words. We offer those desires and hopes to God, and in the process of offering them, we test whether our hearts are really aligned with God’s. Perhaps you’ve had this experience, that someone really pisses you off and you are really angry. You might be so angry that you might wish that person were to suffer some really horrible fate, like they would get such bad zits that their nose will fall off or something like that. But if you were to pray, “God, please give Fred (are there any Fred’s here? – ok then we need another name!) Please give Fred such bad acne that his nose will fall off,” wouldn’t you feel just a little bit silly about praying that to God?

This doesn’t always work of course. Some people quite comfortably ask for horrible things to happen to someone they dislike. There is a country song, for example, by Jason Lowenstein, that talks about a preacher telling this fellow to pray for those who have done him wrong. So he does. But he prays like this:

I pray your brakes go out runnin' down a hill

I pray a flower pot falls from a window sill

And knocks you in the head like I'd like to

I pray your birthday comes and nobody calls

I pray you're flyin' high when your engine stalls

I pray all your dreams never come true

Just know wherever you are, honey, I pray for you

Now, I think that song is supposed to be funny, and it is funny because we understand that praying for someone is supposed to be wishing them well, not ill. I

don't think it would take very long before someone who started praying, realized that it wasn't right to be praying that Fred's nose would fall off, or that their dreams would never come true.

That is because, in praying, we are talking to God and so in bringing our requests to God, we have to test our hopes and desires against what we know about God, and if we realize that God wouldn't like what we hope and desire, then we have to come up with new hopes and desires. Instead of hoping that Fred's nose will fall off, perhaps you remember that Jesus taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who treat us badly. So you pray instead that Fred will be a nicer person, that he will stop being so obnoxious. So that's to pray once.

But now can you imagine singing "God, please help Fred not to be so obnoxious?" Can you? Do you think that would be a popular song, that people would sing decades from now, like some of the music we are singing today? Probably not! Partly because it is still a pretty self-centred song. It's not a prayer that lifts us past what we already are and helps us to be better people.

When we sing together, we use words that the faith community have found deep and profound and healing. Instead of "please help Fred not to be so obnoxious," we sing, "God, please help me not to be so obnoxious," or as St. Francis put it, "make me a channel of your peace. Where there is hatred let me sow love." Do you see how the words of a song are already helping lift our prayers and make them more aligned with God's hopes and desires for us?

Now add a melody to those hopes and desires, then our hopes and desires are lifted to God in a whole new way. Singing joins words and melody in something that touches us at a very deep level. And it also joins our voices to those of others, so that our prayers bring us together in sharing common hopes and desires. So much of choral music, for example, music that people sing together, takes the form of prayer and worship music, because prayer is the highest expression of what we really hope and long for.

I've titled this service and this sermon, "The Spirit's Breath" because I believe that singing joins our breath to God's breath. Those of you who sing in bands and

choirs know that breathing is really important. You have to know when to breath and how to breath and how to pretend to look like you are still singing when you have run out of breath and are trying desperately to suck in more air. Singing is a lot about breath. And the Spirit is God's breath.

You may know that in Hebrew and Greek, the languages that the Bible is written in, the words for breath, wind and Spirit are all the same – *ruach* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek. God's Spirit is breath, wind. God's breath is God's Spirit.

Ever since Jesus first breathed God's breath into his disciples and said, "receive the Holy Spirit," his followers have been singing. We join our breath to God's breath. Our singing is "the Spirit's Breath."

And that is why to sing is to pray twice!

So when you are singing today, sing knowing that God's Spirit is singing through you. And when you are listening today, listen for the Spirit's Breath blowing on you, just as Jesus blew the Spirit's breath on his disciples long ago.