

## **The Air We Breathe**

May 17, 2020

John 14: 15-21

*15 Jesus said to his disciples: If you love me, you will do as I command. 16 Then I will ask the Father to send you the Holy Spirit who will help you and always be with you. 17 The Spirit will show you what is true. The people of this world cannot accept the Spirit, because they don't see or know him. But you know the Spirit, who is with you and will keep on living in you. 18 I won't leave you like orphans. I will come back to you. 19 In a little while the people of this world won't be able to see me, but you will see me. And because I live, you will live. 20 Then you will know that I am one with the Father. You will know that you are one with me, and I am one with you. 21 If you love me, you will do what I have said, and my Father will love you. I will also love you and show you what I am like.*

Acts 17: 22-28

*22 So Paul stood up in front of the council and said: People of Athens, I see that you are very religious. 23 As I was going through your city and looking at the things you worship, I found an altar with the words, "To an Unknown God." You worship this God, but you don't really know him. So, I want to tell you about him. 24 This God made the world and everything in it. He is Lord of heaven and earth, and he doesn't live in temples built by human hands. 25 He doesn't need help from anyone. He gives life, breath, and everything else to all people. 26 From one person God made all nations who live on earth, and he decided when and where every nation would be. 27 God has done all this, so that we will look for him and reach out and find him. He isn't far from any of us, 28 and he*

*gives us the power to live, to move, and to be who we are. "We are his children," just as some of your poets have said.*



Last Sunday we heard the call to be living stones as we seek to be like our cornerstone, Jesus Christ. The call was to follow in his footsteps, to do what Jesus did, to offer new life to those living in darkness. Today, we begin to understand our relationship with Jesus as the very air we breathe. Let us pray...

Today, as we turn to John 14, I begin with a little context to this passage. Jesus has just washed the disciples' feet and has foretold his betrayal by Judas and his denial by Peter. The facts that one of them would betray him and that another would deny him must have left the disciples' heads reeling. In between these last two events Jesus again tells them that he will be with them for only a little while longer. Following this sad and hard news, Jesus gives the disciples what has become known as the "new commandment". In John 13:34, Jesus tells the disciples to *"love one another just as I have loved you"*. Taken all together, it is a bit hard to imagine what the disciples were feeling and thinking at that moment. As I considered their place, I imagined that it must have felt like it felt to me when I suddenly and unexpectedly lost a loved one. Perhaps you too have felt that feeling – the sucking out of all the air from your lungs, the immediate feeling of being all alone and lost. As I thought back over my life experiences, it dawned on me that such times felt a lot like drowning. When I was a junior in high school there was a flood all along the Connecticut River.



The heavy rains swelled the river and all the streams and rivers that fed into the mighty river. One of those was a small stream in South Glastonbury. Roaring Brook was usually about a foot deep and flowed smoothly past as it neared the Connecticut River. It was appropriately named for what it was when Mark and I decided to take his family canoe for a ride. It was about eight feet deep and was rushing violently towards the very swollen Connecticut River. As I think back, I cannot help but ask, "What were you thinking?"

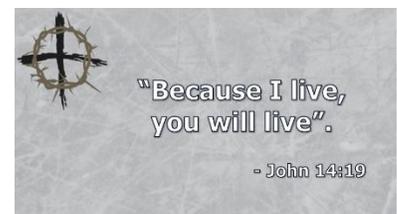
That day Mark and I drove to our friend Tom's house along the stream and we found a little inlet that we could launch the canoe from. No life jackets, no one knew what we were doing. We were just a couple of stupid seventeen-year-old teenage boys. Mark was in back and I was in the front of the canoe when we launched. Immediately, it was fast and furious and full steam ahead. Until we got to the bridge that crossed the stream in the heart of South Glastonbury.

Adjacent to the bridge, on the downstream side, sat a package store with a big concrete wall that jutted out kitty-corner in the stream. The South Side Wine and Spirit Shoppe sits there today. Normally that wall just gently redirected the flow of the stream westward towards the Connecticut River, which lay just a half-mile from the bridge. But that day the wall was creating waves that were working back against the main flow of the current. We hit those waves and were tossed upside down and found ourselves in the water. At the speed of the swollen stream, we'd be in the massive Connecticut River in a matter of seconds. I held onto the canoe until my leg hit a big log submerged under the rushing water. It jolted me from the canoe and soon I was swallowing lots of water. Then suddenly I was tugged to the side of the bank. Mark had caught ahold of a little tree there along the bank and snagged me as I rushed by. We pulled each other

out of the water and up into the bank where we lay there spitting up water. A few days later we were brave enough to go and see if we could find the canoe or one of the paddles. As we walked along the bank west of the bridge, here is something very close to what we saw. There, a few hundred feet past where we crawled out of the stream, Mark's family's canoe was wrapped around a tree. As I think back on those seconds in the water, I imagine that is what the disciples felt as Jesus warned them that he would soon be leaving them. How in the world would they survive without him? He was like the very air that they breathed. They could not imagine life without Jesus.



Jesus must have sensed their fear growing, their anxiety escalating, their doubt rising. In our passage from John 14, Jesus first reminds them of the new command that he has just given them. As our passage begins, in verse fifteen Jesus says, *"If you love me, you will do as I command"*. He is reminding them that no matter what happens, if they want to demonstrate their faith in Jesus, then remember to love one another. Remember to love one another. When they do that, Jesus promises to *"send you the Holy Spirit who will help you and always be with you"*. Jesus is telling them that they won't ever really be without him because God will send his Spirit to live in them. He encourages them further, telling them that they *"know the Spirit, who is with you and will keep on living in you"*. He promises not to leave them as orphans. Jesus assures them that he will come back to them and then offers these wonderful words: *"Because I live, you will live"*. We know those words. We have lived those words.



When we feel like we are drowning in life and cannot possibly draw another breath, the Holy Spirit whispers those words to us. Yes, life will go on. Yes, we will breathe again. Yes, Jesus is with us. Then, in that moment. Forever.

Jesus continues in our first passage to further define the intimacy of the new relationship that he offers through the presence of the Holy Spirit. In verse twenty we read these words, *"Then you will know that I*

*am one with the Father. You will know that you are one with me, and I am one with you"*. One in Christ. One

with Christ. That is the relationship that Jesus offers one and all. He wants to be as near to us as the very air that we breathe. He wants to live in our hearts.



In today's second passage, in Acts 17, Paul is speaking to people who are like many of the people that we encounter today. They are unfamiliar with the stories of

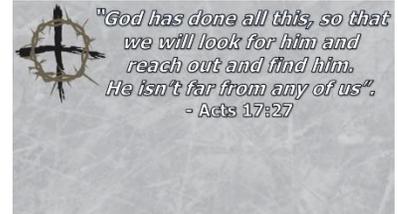
Jesus, they do not know his miracles, and they have lots of idols in their lives. Do you know some people like this? Do you know some folks who live like there is no God, who chase one thing after another? Do you know some folks like this? Can you picture one or two in your mind? Good. Now that I have primed your judgmental pumps, let us look instead at how Paul models approaching such people. To understand how Paul connects with the people of Athens, look back with me to the section that begins with verse sixteen, when Paul arrives in Athens. Upon arriving, he is *"upset"* to see all the idols in the city. Instead of being judgmental though, he seeks to understand.

While in the market he encounters some philosophers and is eventually invited to come and speak to them about this "*new teaching*" about "*foreign gods*". In preparation, he walks around the city to learn what he can about the religions of Athens. Paul wants to have some understanding about what makes them tick before he tries to share the good news of Jesus with them. He is seeking to build a bridge that he might walk them across. That bridge that Paul finds is the people's desire to be known and their desire to know something greater than themselves. This is what Jesus is talking about when he shares that the Holy Spirit will come and dwell in the disciples, making God and Jesus more known to them even as they themselves are more fully known by God.

As Paul walked around the city and took in what the Athenians worshipped, he came upon an altar with the words, "*to an unknown god*". As Paul began to dialogue with them, he shares that he observed that they worship this god that they do not really know. Paul knows that they long to connect to something greater, to draw close to that force that is so much greater than they are that it draws them to search for and seek to know the truths that can be revealed. Paul simply says to them, in verse 23, "*I want to tell you about him*". He begins to do so in verse 23, where we read "*This God made the world and everything in it. He is Lord of heaven and earth, and he doesn't live in temples built by human hands*". The Greeks studied and marveled at the created world. That were fascinated with learning. To hear about the source of that creation and to envision a god that was bigger than any temple that they could ever build – it began to draw them in. As Paul continues to share that God "*gives life, breath, and everything else to all people*" there is an 'I-can't-live-without-this-god' feeling beginning to build. You can sense it, can't you?

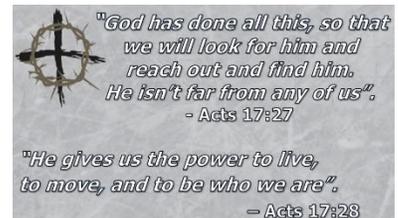
And then, in verse 27, Paul makes a subtle shift. He wants the people of Athens to know that this big and powerful God is also a personal and intimate God. This is far away from anything they would think about when they consider the gods or idols that they worship. Then, in verse 27, Paul explains why God has created the world and has orchestrated all of this beauty and

wonder. It is amazing. Read these words with me: *"God has done all this, so that we will look for him and reach out and find him. He isn't far from any of us"*. God has



done all of this to attract us to him, to lead us to reach out for him, to guide us to finding him. All of this to make himself known. I love that last line: *"He isn't far from any of us"*. We would maybe say God is as close as our next breath.

And the clincher comes in the next verse: *"He gives us the power to live, to move, and to be who we are"*. God created each of us to be his children. To love him and to be loved by him. To know him and to be known by him.



To be known and to know God. To be known by the one in who we live and move and have our being. God is like the air to us, like the sky to the bird, like the water to the fish. We cannot imagine living without God. And we would not be truly alive without the breath of God in us. For those of us who know Jesus, there is also a deeper understanding about what God's Spirit living inside of us really means. God's indwelling presence, the living and resurrected Christ within us, the Holy Spirit, frees us from all of our earthly constraints and powers. In defeating the power of sin and death, the Spirit frees us from all that keeps us experiencing life to the full: fear, doubt, hunger, loneliness, isolation, illness, poverty, racism, prejudice. The list goes on.

When we confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we are taking a stand on that chief cornerstone. In claiming resurrection life, we are claiming freedom from these earthly limits of this human experience. It is in that freedom that we can *"live and move and be who we are"*. It is there that we find out what it truly means to know and be known, to love and to be loved.

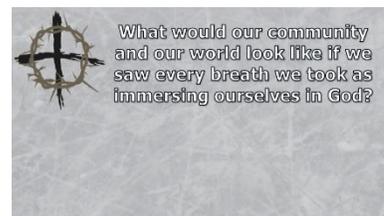


Does this sound like a bridge that some who are lost and broken and struggling might like to walk across? Do you know someone who is racing through life, feeling like they are in the midst of a rushing stream, hoping and praying that someone will reach out and save them? Do you know people who are searching, people who desire to be known and to be loved? Do you know someone who is wandering through life, lost in the craziness or overwhelmed by the busyness, longing for someone to give them permission to step away or to slow down enough to find true joy and meaning in life? My friends - all of this and more – that is what our Jesus offers.

As we begin to draw near to a close, let us look at Paul's model and think about how we could use this model as we seek to help others to know our Jesus. Paul's model begins where our practice needs to begin: with the belief and faith that we are known and loved by God and that we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to help others know our Jesus. While our belief and faith in Jesus give us hope as we face life's trials and sufferings, the freedom we find in Christ also shapes how we live together and how we relate to one another. As we look at the disciples' ministries and at Paul's ministry, this freedom empowered them to boldly proclaim their faith, even in hostile environments.

If the freedom we find from the cares and concerns, the doubts and the worries of this world are in the very air we breathe, we will exude the hope and peace that we find in Jesus Christ. Through our witness others will be led to Jesus.

I close today with two simple questions. First, what would our community and world look like if we saw every breath we took as immersing ourselves in God? And second, what would our community and world look like if we saw every exhale as an opportunity to breathe God's love out into the world? My fellow disciples, what would they look like? Let us pray...



### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) Grow. What specifically has Christ freed you from during this pandemic time? How can that be something you share with others?
- 2) Pray. How can more of your breaths be immersed in God? Take a few minutes to pray for God to work deeper into your life and faith.
- 3) Study. Where or to whom do you feel led to offer freedom? Have a few conversations or do some research into the conditions or factors involved.