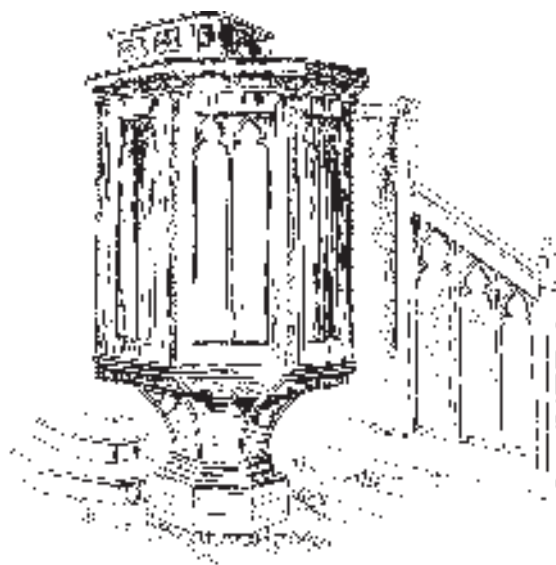


March 29, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Breathing God

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Acts 17:22-28

I'm told that the Eskimos have 25 words for snow because snow is such an important part of their lives. If prayer were a more important part of our lives we'd have a lot more words for it. Of course, we have all experienced different kinds of prayer: the desperate gasp of asking for help in a hospital room, the pastoral prayer of our weekly worship together, saying grace before meals, prayers of confession, prayers at graveside, the Lord's Prayer, bedtime prayers. We have all prayed in different ways and in different circumstances.

This Lent many of us have tried to pray in an intentional way each day. A number of us have participated in classes about prayer or read daily devotionals. Some of us have made covenants with others to be prayer partners for these 40 days.

Even before the Lenten focus the pastors have tried to introduce you to different methods of prayer: the Prayer Prompts method that was the focus of our worship last week, Lectio Divina that some folks do before worship each week, and walking the Labyrinth, which has been a new and meaningful experience to many of us. Today, I hope to encourage you in what may still be another way to pray—breath prayer.

Like its counterparts in Hebrew (*ruah*) and Greek (*pneuma*), the Latin word *spiritus* originally meant breath as in expire or respiratory. Breath is what you have when you are alive and don't have when you

are dead. Thus, spirit = breath = alive. Our breath is a sign of life, of creation, of God's spirit. To speak of a person's spirit is to speak of the power of life that is that person. When the spirit of a person is unusually strong, the life in him or her is unusually alive and he or she can breathe it out into other lives, that person becomes literally in-spiring.

God also has a spirit—*is* Spirit says the apostle John (4:24). Thus, God is the power of life itself, and has breathed and continues to breathe herself into her creation; in-spires it.

Many spiritual traditions, not just Christianity, have found that being attentive to our breathing is a helpful way to become focused or centered on our inner world. Breathing attentively, at an easy, regular pace, slows us down and calms our rushing mind and body. Deep, open breathing helps us express our acceptance of life. Tense, short breaths usually accompany anger and frustration. Paying attention to our breath can help us notice our emotions. Watching our breath focuses our attention and calms the mind.

In this kind of prayer, a word or brief phrase is suggested for you to say when you are breathing in and another word or phrase as you are breathing out. This is symbolic of the filling and emptying of our lives. It is called breath prayer. The idea has its roots in the Psalms where a repeated phrase reminds us of an entire Psalm, for example, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me" (Ps. 139:1).

Author Anthony de Mello tells of a Jesuit friend who sought instructions from a Hindu guru in the art of prayer. The guru said to him, "Concentrate on your breathing."

My friend proceeded to do just that for about five minutes. Then the guru said, "The air you breathe is God. You are breathing God in and out. Become aware of that, and stay with that awareness."

My friend followed these instructions—for hours on-end, day after day—and discovered, to his amazement, that prayer can be as simple a matter as breathing in and out. And he discovered in this exercise a depth and satisfaction and spiritual nourishment that he hadn't found in the many, many hours he had devoted to prayer over a period of many years.

We're going to try it right now. Please get into a comfortable position, but not so comfortable that you prefer to sleep! Backs straight. Feet flat on the floor. No slouching. Let your bodies demonstrate that you are open and attentive, ready to listen and receive what comes. Now close your eyes.

To begin, just pay attention to the breath. Breath is spirit, life. In Genesis we remember that God blew into us the breath of life. Note this holy breath. Watch it, follow it...in and out.

Slowing down to listen or feel God's presence is difficult because we need to slow down the body, too, which depends on the breath. Mostly we breathe short, shallow breaths. They don't go anywhere. We end up hyperventilating much of the time.

Notice how you inhale and exhale. Follow these. To help you notice them, count them. Begin breathing more slowly and more deeply. Notice that the deeper breaths come from the lower abdominal area. Fill your whole body with God's breath of life, the supreme gift.

Inhale with the intent of inhaling God's spirit, all that God is for you. Exhale what is not of God or that which stands between you and God.

Keep breathing deeply and slowly. Now I will give you a phrase to inhale and exhale. Inhale on the first part; exhale on the second part.

I trust you...
with my life.
(Repeat the verse twice.) Amen.

Listed below are other breath prayer phrases. Breathe in on the first line and breathe out on the second.

Faithful love...
dwelling in me

I am...
a love song

Your power...
moving through me

Guide me...
guard me

O, Mystery...
alive in me

I listen...
you are here

Filling up...
emptying out

I am ready...
I receive

God...
My beloved

Loved, Loved...
loved as I am

Create in me...
a clean heart, O God

Send your light...
send your truth