

August 9, 2020

Psalm 69

Luke 18: 9-14

Borrowed Breath

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I learned to swim by what my Dad called the “Rapid Immersion Technique.” He claimed that it was a method learned in lifeguard training in the Navy, but I have my doubts. It worked like this: my mother would stand in the pool, positioned some 15 feet from the edge. Dad would sweep me up in his arms and launch me skyward toward my mom. He’d do the same for my brother. We’d hit the water with a splash, gasp and sputter. My mom would catch us, help us take a big breath, and push us back to the edge.

Soon, my brother and I turned this exercise into a game to see how long we could hold our breath underwater. We’d gulp down as much air as our lungs could hold, jump in the pool, and sink to the bottom, and count. The one who could stay on the bottom the longest was the winner. Mom would time us from her lounge chair. I do not remember how long I could last, but of course, every time, never fail, there would come an instant when, lungs bursting, I would explode off the bottom, break the surface, exhale stale air, and greedily gulp down fresh air.

As a child, I had no sense of the science behind this phenomenon. It was a game and also a process that I could not control. Try as I might to pack more air into my lungs, even into my tiny cheeks, I was always hungry for air. It felt like someone else was drawing the air into my body, and then forcibly expelling it. As a child, I did not possess the awareness to understand that my experience of breath as a gift was very close to that of the ancient Hebrews at the moment of creation: ***“then Lord God formed [the human creature] from the dust of the ground, and breathed into [Adam’s] nostrils the breath of life, and the [creature] became a living being” (Genesis 2:7 NRSV).*** Life begins as a gift from God!

When we know that each breath is borrowed air, then I believe our basic response to being a living, breathing creature is gratitude. As Tom Troeger has observed, “every breath is a gift, and every breath is an offering returned to God.”¹

¹ Tom Troeger, in a presentation to Westminster Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, Virginia, April 2013.

The moment we emerge from the womb something amazing happens; we breathe for the first time. We gasp, on our own, for the gift of air. No one teaches us to do this: it's an act of instinctual and reflexive genius.

Breathing is, in a way, a very human response to the terrifying reality of our mortality. We have a divine impulse to breathe because if we don't breathe, we die. Without thinking, we inhale, exhale, and then repeat, and repeat again. Our very first breath is a gasp to grasp the gift of our lives, our souls.

By faith, I understand that our first breath is drawn from God. In terror and in indignant anger, I wonder how to respond when our final breath comes by way of hate or indifference. Eric Garner and George Floyd are but two black men whose final breath was stolen from them in an act of violent police brutality. They pled for the chance to inhale, exhale, and repeat. But they were denied and dying left us with a haunting cry, "I can't breathe."

I think that when we lose our sense of wonder at the marvel of life and the gift of breath, then the shape of our lives turns away from gratitude toward presumption and contempt, the underlying theme in today's reading from Luke. We assume that we deserve to exist—that our life is a right and not a grace-filled gift. And in our fragility, we assume that some others are not entitled to share that gift. And we lose our memories and forget that we had absolutely nothing to do with our creation. Our thanklessness turns into an inflated sense of self-importance, and then into a kind of scornful, ethical arrogance that we find featured in Luke's Gospel that cuts us off from the full humanity of all God's people: ***"God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector" (Luke 18:11).***

Jesus' parable is a slice of life that unfolds like this: The priests are up before daybreak. In the half-light of dawn, they sleepily stoke the great fire at the altar in the Temple, and then fall into familiar routines. The musicians wander-in slowly, gather their instruments, tune their strings, and complain about the early hour. It's cool in Jerusalem, so the ram's horn player warms his hands and horn under his cloak until the instrument is warm enough so that his lips won't stick to the mouthpiece. Then, he plays a few notes. An assistant priest collects a young lamb from the pen, lassos his legs, and carries it to the altar. Just as sunlight begins to stream over Jerusalem's great walls, the ceremony begins. The musicians take up the familiar strains of the Psalms as the priests enter the Temple in a solemn procession. A lamb is offered in sacrifice, and a priest sprinkles blood on the fire at the great altar and on the immense table. The sacrifice of atonement is made; the sins of the people are covered. The people pray aloud just outside the inner sanctum. The priests light incense and the column of smoke rises to heaven, carrying along the prayers of the people to God. All is right with the world.

Who knows what the tax collector had been up to all night? He looked like he hadn't slept at all, his hair all unkempt, his clothes crumpled, and an awful taste in his mouth. Whatever it was that he'd been up to, he felt badly about it. Felt so badly about it, he stood far away from the other worshippers, in a back corner of the temple and averted his eye. He would not look at anyone else, and he beat his chest in a furious display of emotion usually practiced by women at tragic funerals. He was panting for breath.

Remember that the tax collector was a sort of white collar crook. He was Jewish, but he worked for the Roman government, holding a franchise which entitled him to collect taxes. The Romans gave him a figure he owed them. Anything else he collected above that number was his to keep. It was like a giant pyramid scheme with

decent, tax-paying, law-abiding citizens at the bottom. The Pharisee came to the Temple early, looking quite refreshed. Maybe he'd enjoyed a good night's sleep, and been to the gym. He moved prominently to the front of the worship space. He also stood apart from the rest of the worshippers; he feared touching any person who did not strictly keep the law. Any brief contact would make him unclean, and force him into a tedious ritual of cleansing baths and prayers. He openly adopted the prayer position for the day, and then raised his arms with his palms up and open-facing. He looked around, took stock of the crowd around him, raised his eyes to God and prayed loudly enough to make his prayer a mini-sermon for anyone within earshot. ***“God, I thank you that I am not like everyone else...”*** Thank you, God, that I am not like other people, who don't care about You. Thank you that I am not a scoundrel, like that tax collector over there, weeping and trembling against the back wall. What is he even doing here? I fast twice a week, and I tithe 10 percent of my gross income. God, I have done what is right.” Jesus, for his part, agrees with that part of his self-assessment.

Jesus uses this parable to lure us into a clever trap. Hearing it, we cannot help but be thankful that we are not like this defensive Pharisee. If we are thankful that we are not like him, then we are just like him.

This parable Jesus tells of the Pharisee and the tax collector reminds me of one of the flies I use when fly fishing. It's flashy, colorful, appealing and lures me in just like the fish, but it also has a sharp little barb! The clash between the two characters highlights an elemental piece of Gospel wisdom that makes life worth living, that all of life—beginning with every breath of air we breathe—is a gift from God, and that gratitude and humility are at the heart of being a faithful creature: ***“For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 18:14 NRSV).***

Jesus, I believe, leads us along through a series of successive scenes in the early morning light of the Temple to stop us and enable us to see ourselves as God sees us.

Both the Pharisee and tax collector are like characters ripped from the pages of a Flannery O'Connor short story. They are over-drawn, exaggerated foils for our imagination. Have no doubt: the Pharisee was a good man who kept the faith with diligence and precision. He's not sinister; he's a better man than I am and perhaps better than you.

But as he prays, he carefully checks out the people around him. ***“God, I thank you that I am not like everyone else...”*** Really? With a sideways glance he refuses to acknowledge his fundamental kinship with the people gathered around him for worship. Scanning the room, he loses contact with the Creator who has given him the gift of the breath of life. Here he crosses from the language of gratitude into the grammar of scorn and

supremacy and smugness. It's a subtle line and we almost never notice when we cross it, but we do it all the time. One of the wise desert fathers, Abbas, used to say, "There is no other sin than that of being scornful."²

What exposes us is when we refuse to acknowledge that each breath we take in our lives is a borrowed breath, just like everyone else. For honestly, we are the same as other people: we are living, breathing, sinning, thinking, serving, loving beings totally dependent on the Creator who makes and sustains us and the Christ who rescues us from our sin and covers them with the gift of his life. With the Psalmist, we can say,

"My help [and my very being] comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth" (Psalm 121:1-2).

When we acknowledge this elemental piece of wisdom and combine it with the acumen of Luke the Gospel writer, we grasp that gratitude and humility are at the heart of being a faithful creature: ***"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted"*(Luke 18:14 NRSV).**

When we go to work in our world marred by racial inequality, we can begin by losing the defensiveness. It's the wedge that divides us from our neighbors and co-workers who are Black, Indigenous and people of color, and it's no more appealing on us than it was on the Pharisee. We usually associate losing something with deprivation, but as Peter Marty says, our claw marks do not set us free. According to Jesus, giving up our fragility and supremacy can be a ticket to an abundant life. We can no longer live racially unaware lives in this era. Some discomfort is useful. Do the work and lose the brittleness for the Lord assures us that we don't have to secure ourselves against insecurity.³

To know that all of life is worship, praise and gratitude, is to say it, to live it, to shout it and even to sing it. Thomas Troeger, a wise teacher, gifted poet and musician has penned a poignant hymn, "Each Breath is Borrowed Air." Maybe one day soon we'll sing it together, as it should be, but today I'll end with its opening stanza:

***Each breath is borrowed air, not ours to keep and own;
And all our breaths as one declare what wisdom long has known.
To live is to receive and answer back with praise
To what our minds cannot conceive, the Source of all our days.***⁴

***Each breath we take is borrowed air, not ours to keep and own;
To live is to receive life as a gift and answer God back with praise!***

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² Roberta C. Bondi, "Sin of Scorn: Luke 18: 9-14," The Christian Century, October 2019, 2004, p. 22.

³ Peter Marty, "Becoming Less Defensive about White Privilege," The Christian Century, July 6, 2020.

⁴ Thomas H. Troeger, Above the Moon Earth Rises: Hymn Texts, Anthems and Poems for a New Creation, "Each Breath is Borrowed Air" (New York: Oxford Press, 2000), p. 8