



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Just Breathe”

Romans 8:26-35, 37-39

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When I was a young adult, I had a doctor who regularly did something a little unusual. When you had an appointment with her, she met with you twice, the first time with all of your clothes on. The first time she met with you she asked questions about your general health and well-being and listened carefully to the answers.

I remember one such visit. When she asked me about my health, I shared with her a list of symptoms that sounded pretty serious to me. Rather than ask me to describe them in more detail she said, “What do you think is wrong with you? What are you afraid of?”

Much to my surprise, I answered, “I fear that I have ovarian cancer.” “Why do you think that?” she asked. “In the past month, I’ve officiated at funerals for two women that died of ovarian cancer, one not much older than me,” I said.

She assured me that I didn’t have cancer. I would never had known that I was carrying around that fear if she hadn’t asked me the question: “What are you afraid of?”

A few years later, I was sent in by the Presbytery to help a church that was experiencing conflict. The session, the governing body of the church, wasn’t allowing the pastor to play any role in the financial life of the church. They wouldn’t let him see the financial statements and tried to keep him out of the budgeting process.

I met with the pastor and then the session and then all of them together. And I was mystified. The members of the session seemed to trust and respect the pastor. The pastor trusted and respected them. I couldn’t figure it out.

Then I remembered the question: “What are you afraid of?” I asked it and one of the session members answered: “I fear that the pastor will steal money from the church.” Everyone looked taken aback by that answer but not surprised. “Why would you think he would do that?” I asked. “Because the last pastor did,” another committee member said.

Bringing that fear to the surface changed the situation. The church members realized that their fears had nothing to do with their current pastor and their current reality. The pastor started to gain a deeper understanding of his parishioners.

“What are afraid of?” is a great question. It can be a helpful question to ask of others when we find ourselves in situations that are puzzling or mysterious. It’s the kind of question that can break things open and transform a situation.

It’s a great question to ask of ourselves. It can help us identify fears that aren’t rooted in the reality of our situation. Honestly answering that question helps us let go of some of our fear. Here’s the thing. Some fears are real. Some things are worthy of our fear. How do we keep our fear from incapacitating us? What is the antidote for fear?

More sermons can be found online at <http://bspsc.org/AboutUs/SundayMorning/Sermons.aspx>

In preparation for this two-week series on fear, I've been asking people that question. I've received lots of answers:

- Trust
- Hope
- Love
- Gratitude

Those are good answers but I have to say they are a little vague for me. In the middle of a justified panic attack, I need something a little more specific.

The second I heard the fire alarm go off I knew it wasn't a drill. It was the middle of the night and I was instantly fully awake. I could smell smoke. I ran to the window of my 6th floor apartment. I saw flames pouring out of a lower floor. I grabbed the first pair of shoes I could find, my purse and keys and ran out the door and headed for the stairs.

I saw no one else on the staircase. Was there some fire escape plan that I wasn't aware of? I made it down one flight of stairs and then I stopped. Paralyzed with fear. Shaking with fear. Just then a fireman in full fireman gear entered the stairwell. I said, "Should I keep going downstairs?" "Yes," he said and, then he gave me some very good advice as he rushed past me.

Breathe. Don't forget to breathe.

And that's what I did. I headed down the stairs and out the building.

Working on this series, I've been thinking a lot about that advice and the relationship between fear and breathing. If you or anyone you love has ever had a panic attack, you know what fear can do to you—the pounding heart, the flop sweat, the shallow breath. It can make you think you're dying. It's the same thing if you've ever had the breath knocked out of you. Breathlessness can occur in all kinds of ways—asthma, hard falls, heart failure, sudden violence. Who can forget Eric Garner in a chokehold, lying face down on a New York City sidewalk saying, "I can't breathe" eleven times?¹

No breath means no life. No breath means fear wins.

On the most basic level breathing helps us control our fear. Breathing deliberately slows down our pulse, quiets our nervous system and allows oxygen to get where it needs to go. Those among us who practice meditation know how important breathing is—breathing centers us, empowers us, heals us, frees us.

Focusing on breathing pulls us into the present. Fear flourishes in speculation about the future. We fear the unknown—that which we can't plan for, control or predict.

Breathing reminds us of our status. We are alive! We are creatures existing in this moment on planet earth. Preacher and author Barbara Brown Taylor writes about breath,

if you have studied earth science, then you know that our gorgeous blue-green planet is wrapped in a protective veil we call the atmosphere, which separates the air we breathe from the cold vacuum of outer

¹ <https://chapel.duke.edu/sites/default/files/04.23.17%20Barbara%20Brown%20Taylor%20Sermon%20-%20Take%20a%20Breath.pdf>

space. Beneath this veil is all the air that ever was. No cosmic planet-cleaning company comes along every hundred years or so to suck out all the old air and pump in some new.

She continues.

The same ancient air just keeps recirculating, which means that every time any of us breathes we breathe star dust left over from the creation of the earth. We breathe brontosaurus breath and pterodactyl breath. We breathe air that has circulated through the rain forests of Kenya and air that has turned yellow with sulfur over Mexico City.... Every time we breathe, we take in what was once some baby's first breath, or some dying person's last. We take it in, we use it to live, and when we breath out it carries some of us with it....²

Breathing connects us to everyone and everything. Breathing connects us to God.

We breathe in God's love for us. As we breathe out, we let go of fear.

If you would like something to say or think about during all of that breathing, may I suggest some of the words from today's passage?

For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

OK, that's too much to say in one breathe but it can be summarized. As you breathe out, let go of all that separates you from God, all that separates you from love, from community, from connection, from meaning. As you breathe in, take into yourself—deep into yourself—Paul's magnificent claim that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Paul names things that might separate us from God's love, things that we fear. His list includes suffering, famine, peril, death.

Our list might include:

- Addiction
- Depression
- Injustice
- Physical pain and illness
- Public failure
- Private disappointments

These are things that we fear.

Amidst an avalanche of fear, Paul invites us to breathe. Because nothing, including death, can separate us from God's love. Nothing. Nothing.

Someday, we will take our last breath. Someday, those we love will take their last breath. That is bearable because nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, Home by Another Way, pages 142-143.

In the meantime

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Repeat.