

## **“Just Breathe”**

Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that your breath might be our breath  
and our trust and faith might grow. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Poor Nicodemus! It's really too bad he didn't have Romans to read. Here he was, a leader of the Jews, presumably a comfortable, well-respected man in the community, and he was so fearful of associating with Jesus that he chose to do it under the cover of night. Then once he got there, he had such trouble embracing the invitation Jesus was offering; he was trying to make biological sense of a spiritual, metaphorical matter. What was his spirit enslaved to that it kept falling back into fear, as Paul would put it?

He may not be the most well-known biblical character, but there's a lot going on in the story of Nicodemus that is strikingly similar to our own times. These common dynamics mean that there are important lessons we can learn from Nicodemus. The fact that he felt he had to sneak over to where Jesus was staying at nighttime, instead of just talking with him openly when Jesus was teaching in the temple tells us a lot. This was a society that was sharply divided. People must have been quick to make accusations of guilt by association. If someone with a reputation as good as Nicodemus' could be ruined that easily, there must have been a low level of trust in society, with the benefit of the doubt rarely given.

Does any of that sound familiar? We may be living in a period with record low levels of trust. We've been lied to so often we've stopped believing anyone is ever sincere. If they're telling the truth, it's probably just an accidental moment when it worked to their own advantage. The lines that divide us have rarely been as sharply drawn as they are these, with multiple indicators of which side you're on, from what kind of vehicle you drive, to where you shop, to the color of your hat. When society is that starkly divided, guilt by association is a constant threat, because many of us are going to have reason to interact with people on the "wrong side," whether they're family members, co-workers, or neighbors.

With all of this brokenness in society, it would be no wonder if we found ourselves living with a spirit of fear. And often, we respond to that in ways that are similar to what Nicodemus did: we try to justify ourselves, digging deeper and deeper into the technicalities and literal meanings in ways that ignore the more important truths that could set us free. It's what Paul would call "living according to the flesh." And this may not sound like Paul, but what I think he's telling us today is "Relax." Jesus is saying it too. "Relax. Just breathe." You don't need to justify yourself. You don't need to understand the mysteries of God. You don't need to worry about what anyone else thinks of you or whether God is trying to set up traps to catch you. God is sending you the Spirit to bring you into the family. Just breathe.

Nicodemus seems so anxious and hung up on the details of how. And what does Jesus say to him? "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that

everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

This is good news! Stop worrying. Just breathe. Jesus is sending you a Spirit of adoption. You are chosen, sought out, beloved, not enslaved or condemned. What would it mean to live as though we believed this good news? What would it be like to restore trust in our lives, in a world that sees trust as weakness? What if we could let go of needing to explain and justify our faith, and just give thanks that we can cry out to God and know that we will be heard?

There is nothing wrong with working through our convictions to get to a place where they make sense to us. But “making sense” can also be a barrier to faith, if we allow the things that don’t add up logically to block what we know as true deep within our souls. When we arrived at those moments in our lives when all we could do was cry out “Abba! Father!” and we knew ourselves answered, we weren’t reassured because we could explain what happened. What happened was an answering in our spirit that is beyond understanding. The challenge is whether we allow ourselves to trust that or not. Can we just breathe?

We’ve been called upon to trust a lot in recent times. With a disease that science hadn’t met before, we were called upon to trust people who have studied things we have not, who were learning as they went, and offering us the best they had at each moment, knowing it could and would change as more information emerged.

As solutions emerged in the form of vaccines, we were called to trust again, not just with our minds and our behaviors now, but with our bodies. Many are still struggling to trust the good news of vaccines. Given the sheer amount of information out there, and the proportion of it that is false, it's hard to blame them. So how do we help people trust in the right things? How do we sow trust in life-giving answers, when the spirit of fear is still so rampant in our midst?

Is it enough to just breathe? Can we believe that if we lean on the Spirit, it will give us what we need? Could our lives become testimony to a re-birth of hope? Our culture is so quick to condemn. But what if we lived and breathed the good news about a God who so loves the world? What if that spirit of adoption was for all of us? How can we breathe that in, to restore our own souls, and breathe it out, into a world in desperate need of healing?

The breath of God within us that gives us life is the most precious mystery of our bodily existence. That's why when a black man lies restrained on the street, gasping out "I can't breathe," it is a searing indictment of our collective failure to eradicate racism. That breath being stifled is our breath; it is the breath of God. It is violence against the very body of God, the Spirit being choked off into deathly stillness. It is not enough to try to trust that we ourselves are beloved children of God, adopted heirs of the promise. We must hear Jesus and embrace his truth that God wasn't just interested in Nicodemus being re-born; God so loves the whole world. God wants to save the whole world from perishing.

If we're going to get in on that, it's not going to be with a spirit of fear. It's not going to work if we give into divisiveness and accusations of guilt by association. It's not going to work if we cannot trust things we don't entirely understand. There will be a lot to do, but first we need to just breathe. We need to breathe in that spirit of adoption, trusting that it will bring us the re-birth required to live in a new way. We need to breathe out that good news that God is not about condemnation. We need to breathe in that promise that we are beloved children. We need to breathe out that promise that everyone else is also a beloved child. Breathing the breath of God, the breath of God's compassion, the breath of God's courage, the breath of God's justice and wisdom and mercy – this is how we are re-born. This is how we leave behind our fears, our self-centeredness, and our stubbornness. This is how we live as heirs to the promise that Christ revealed. Just breathe. Hallelujah and Amen.