

Sermon - *Being disciples – Life in the Spirit*

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Text: Galatians 5:16-26 [NIV]

Prayer

As I begin, I invite you to centre, to focus, to slow down..

Place your feet firmly on the floor.

Allow your hands to rest on your knees, palms upwards.

Take a few deep, slow, cleansing breaths...

Pause

Know that in the centre of your being,

God is present, inviting you to

“Be still and know that I am God”.

Let these words echo within you

“Be still and know that I am God”.

“Be still and know that I am God”.

As you continue to breathe slowly and deeply,
hold this present moment,
letting go, for a little while, of any issues or struggles....

Open yourself to the Spirit...

wait, trust, listen...

Christ Jesus,

Thank you that you are among us today.

Come Holy Spirit, breathe in us the life-giving words you need us to hear, this day, and fill us with your peace.

Amen

Breath

I wonder, if you were to set your mind to it, how many phrases could you come up with, that include the word Breath in them?

Here are just 4:

A breath of fresh air

To hold your breath

To get your breath back

With every breath

I'm sure you can think of many more! ... there are so many!

Breath, naturally, is so important to us – it has found itself very much part of our everyday English language.

And is used in different ways

It is a common word in the Bible too – in relation to the Holy Spirit – the Breath of God

Ruach (ruakh) Elohim in Hebrew

Right at the beginning in Genesis 1, ruach appears:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

The spirit of God here can be translated as either spirit or wind.

In John 20:22 Jesus breathed on the disciples and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit."

The Spirit brings about life:

Cambridge theologian Nicholas Lash says:

"whether sent forth from God, breathing all creatures into being, renewing the Earth and filling it with good things; whether whispering gently to Elijah, or making the 'oaks to whirl, and [stripping] the forests bare'; or breathing peace on the disciples for the forgiveness of sins – it is one wind, one spirit, which 'blows where it wills and we do not know where it comes from or where it goes'." ¹

God's Spirit is as close as the air we breathe.

Breathe in with me..

And breathe out...

Don't forget to keep breathing!

I'll come back to the Spirit a little later.

But first... let me bring you up to date with where we are

Being Disciples series

We're in the last week of the Lent Season and the last week of series of Being Disciples. If you've been away or here for the first time, or simply need a reminder..

Here is a summary of the last 5 weeks:

¹ From Lenard Sweet: Nudge, page 283

We've been working through Rowan Williams' book by the same name: Being Disciples.

we have been examining life as a Christian disciple:

someone who follows Jesus and who tries to live out Jesus' teachings

Someone who is *attentive*

Who abides *with Jesus*

Who prays with expectancy

asking for needs to be met and trusting that God will take care of them

Disciples understand themselves as forgiven and are willing to forgive

We have *faith* in God who loves us and does not let us go

We have *hope* because whoever we are God *loves* us now as much as God loved us in the past and will continue to love us into the future. And it is this hope that sustains us because of God's great faithfulness.

Victoria preached about holiness... challenging our ideas about what holiness means and inspiring us to keep our eyes fixed on Christ, to be captivated by the love and extravagant grace of God, and in so doing to be transformed ourselves and made holy – helping all we meet to be captivated by the wonder and awe of the God we worship.

Then, last week I spoke about the ripple effect – like a drop in the water - each of can have a big impact on others – as the waves grow wider and wider.

one person's actions can have long lasting influence for generations afterwards.

Williams says that the greatest public influence that can be exercised by Christian disciples is through the messages we give in the way we behave – messages that embody the radical respect we have for fellow human beings and for our dependence on one another. To show that we are all called to see others, and especially others in profound need, from the perspective of the eternal gracious love of God.

And I introduced the new Uniting Church resource – which I hope you now have been able to access: Our Vision for a Just Australia

- a nation where each person and all creation can flourish and enjoy abundant life.

If you want to catch up all of these sermons are available to listen to or read on our website or on the sermon.net app.

So, last week we talked about what influence Christians can have in shaping a moral society – this week we turn back to our own spiritual lives and how we receive moral guidance through our walk with the Spirit as Christian disciples.

Breathe in...

And

Breathe out

Galatians

Our bible reading was from a letter to a group of churches in Galatia which Paul saw to be in crisis. When Paul had last seen them, all had been running well, but now it seems, they were heading off track. Some other missionaries had arrived and were teaching a 'false gospel'.

Some of his concerns were:

- that they were emphasising the importance of circumcision and strict observance of the Law – which then cancelled out the sufficiency of God's grace, shown through Jesus' death on the cross.
- And they underestimated the power of the Holy Spirit to animate and guide the life of the faithful community. For Paul, following the life-giving Spirit is enough to be able to remain focussed on Christ and be restrained from destructive behaviours ²

.. due to the desires of the flesh –

What did he mean by Desires of the flesh?

It is when our self-seeking human desire opposes itself to the will of God and the wholeness of the community.

'Live by the Spirit', Paul said, that is the way of life – 'for if you do, the fruit is love, joy, peace, patience (forbearance), kindness, generosity (goodness) and faithfulness.'

Or another way of putting it, using Eugene Peterson's words in The Message:

'Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness.' (Gal 5:16)

'what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.' (Gal 5:22-23)

² The New Interpreter's Bible. Volume 11. P186

and this is what Rowan Williams' last chapter is all about.

This 'life in the spirit'.

Living freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit.

Or, as Williams suggests:

Coming alive in Jesus

Breathe in with me

And breathe out

In this final chapter Williams suggests 4 ways to help us in our Life of discipleship:

Self-knowledge

The first is through Self-knowledge. This is about being able to step back and look at how I (you) am thinking and feeling – with a bit of distance. Am I capable of taking my intense feelings, positive and negative, out of the depth of my guts for a moment, and put them where I can look at them – and where Jesus can look at them?

Can I stand back and allow those feelings to breathe, to give myself room to breathe.

Can I look at them intently and ask: "what's happening here? What's really going on?"

If we can do this, it helps to free us of the projections, the expectations, the busyness that constantly threatens to hem us in.

And we only get to do that when we make space in our lives to be still before God.

In the stillness, being open to hearing God breathe our name and reminding us who we are really are.

Stillness

The second then is Stillness. To hear what God is saying we need a degree of stillness – stillness of body, as well as of heart and mind.

"Be still and know" says the Psalmist (Psalm 46:10)

Francis de Sales, 17th century bishop and a saint in the catholic church was asked for advice about spiritual direction. He said:

I'll start giving you spiritual direction when you have begun to walk more slowly, talk more slowly and eat more slowly."

So, our stillness involved being aware of our behaviour in all these everyday matters.

And I ask this question as much of myself as I do of you:

Am I giving out the impression of always being utterly driven, compelled in everything I do, in such a way that I cannot stop and listen?

Are you giving out the impression of always being utterly driven, compelled in everything you do, in such a way that you cannot stop and listen?

Silence of word, stillness of body.

Lately I have been knitting as a spiritual practice. When I knit, I slow down, and my mind becomes focussed..

Try either being silent, or finding words that slow you down and settle you, short repeated phrases, like Come Jesus

Or Jesus remember me

Or Be Still and know that I am God

Williams challenges us with these words:

It has sometimes been said that the real problem in prayer is not the absence of God but the absence of us. It's not God that isn't there, most of the time it's we that are not. Our minds are all over the place, entertaining memories, fantasies, anxieties. God is simply there in unending patience, saying to us:

When are you actually going to arrive? When are you going to sit down and listen? To stop roaming about, and be present?

Breathe in with me

And breathe out

Growth

Self-knowledge, stillness and third, growth..

Are we expecting to grow in the life of the Spirit? Do we expect each other to grow?

Where there is growth, there is life!

Williams says that it's a sad reflection on any Christian if they come to the point of thinking "Well I've done my spiritual growing. I've reached a point that suits me. I've found a style of discipleship that I'm comfortable with."

It is important to find ways of being and praying and worshipping that work for us – but we still need to be open to being stretched and challenged.

And fourth, Joy

Joy

When we open ourselves up in this way – through self-knowledge, stillness and growth, we discover joy.

The sense that we are connected with something so real that it will break every boundary or container we might try to confine it in, a sense of overflowing, of pushing outwards.

“out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water, says Jesus in John 7:38

This is life in the spirit.

Overflow. Abundance..

Let’s share this life by showing our joy,

through our smiles, through our laughter, our openness, our graciousness and flexibility with each other.

Breathe in with me

And breathe out

Journaling

Self-awareness, stillness, growth and joy - I’d like to offer a practical way to give this a go –

Through journaling.

What do I mean by journaling? – it’s simply the practice of writing down (or drawing) your thoughts and feelings

Journaling is a record of our spiritual journey.

It doesn’t have to be done every day, however, if you do journal regularly it can set a helpful pattern which will be beneficial to you.

There is no right or wrong way to journal. Everyone is unique as our experiences, or style and our approach. Some might like to write in a book, while others might like to type, some might like to write lots of words, while others might like to draw images. Whatever works for you, the main thing is to set aside time and space, and give it a go.

Journaling gives us the opportunity to provide that distance needed for self knowledge – by writing down our thoughts and feelings and praying about them – then reflecting back on what we write later. They help us to withdraw from the rush and bustle of life for a while and to move to our inner world and discover our true selves, to search for meaning in our lives and to connect with God.

Through journaling we can become more in tune with our feelings, more observant of everyday events, more expectant for God to move, and more thoughtful in our relationships. We start to think more deeply and it can help us clarify challenges and questions we face and it's good for your mental health!

Over time your journal will change from a 'diary' to a 'dialogue' – a conversation with God

it may include your prayers and new awareness about yourself or others

every now and then go back and read your journal entries and see what you discover..

Are you ready to grow more as a Christian disciple? Are you ready to learn more about yourself? Are you ready to find ways to be still? are you ready for the overflow, the excess of joy that come with that? Through self-knowledge, stillness, growth and joy we are giving God the opening to enter our lives and be at home in us.

And we will be offering to God our longing to be with Jesus, wherever he may lead – and in so doing grow more and more as his disciples.

Breathe in with me

And breathe out

Bibliography:

Rowan Williams: Being Disciples

Stillpoint Spirituality Centre: Journaling as a spiritual discipline

The New Interpreter's Bible. Volume 11.

Lenard Sweet: Nudge