

## **Racism, Demonizing and the Breath of God**

Lord, have Mercy! Pope Benedict XVI taught a lot about a “life without God.” To see a “life without God” we only need to recall the image of George Floyd crying out “I can’t breathe” as he was being suffocated by a knee full-throttle to his throat. Gasping with all his might for the breath of life, he was denied. None of the four officers thought that George Floyd’s life was more important than his death. Literally his life breath was mercilessly taken from him and he died. This is a life without God.

Obviously, this has opened all of us to the 400 years of visceral suffering from racism in our land. Subjugated, enslaved, devalued, dismissed, denied community, treated like animals, persecuted, mocked, whipped and killed. This is a grave sadness and God cries? Do you and I?

From this unhealed pain we see all the looting and rioting. We know all this only increases our suffering and never get us to the healing we all long for.

Last weekend we celebrated Pentecost. The church was given the gift of the Holy Spirit, the breath of God! Just as the Spirit formed us out of the clay of the ground blowing the breath of eternal life into our nostrils making us living beings (Gen. 2:7), so the Spirit brings the church to life! And as church we are sent to bring all people to this same eternal life through the breath of God. This is not an option but rather our duty and the central purpose of our lives.

It is ironic that as George Floyd’s life was choked out for lack of breath on the streets of Minneapolis, we in the church celebrated the Holy Spirit giving us the breath of eternal life. I think about his cry for breath and the cry of breath from the black community for hundreds of years. Not just the cry of physical breath but the cry for the eternal breath of God where all people- red, yellow, black and white- are fully healed, whole in dignity, and united as ONE family in God. So, as we prayed to receive the breath of God at Pentecost, George’s breath was taken as he cried out on behalf of millions of black people over four centuries for the breath of God.

A big thing that the breath of God has taught me is that I can demonize. If someone looks, acts or thinks differently from me then I tend to cut them off. I distance myself from them and stay safe in my own controlled world.

Mind you, this world is small, suffocating and dying because it doesn't not have the breath of God which is for everyone, all the time, offering the fullness of life (John10:10).

Demonizing is saying that someone is "other." When we live like that we are "othering." But there is no "othering" in our faith! That is not of Jesus and that is not the way of the church! There is no "other." No, it's only and always, "Us!" We are all sinners who Jesus died for! The next person you see, whether red, yellow, black or white- say to yourself, "Christ died for this person." Every person has inherent, infinite dignity and we are sent by Christ to use everything we have and are so that all might be forever alive in the breath of God.

I find it next to impossible to continue demonizing someone after they have shared their suffering and pain with me. As a matter of fact the exact opposite happens. When I come to know personally and deeply another's burdens, all that is in me just wants that person to be well and whole. As I reflect on this spiritual reality for little ole me and consider how much infinitely more that Jesus wants that to happen, my heart bursts with hope for a day when we will all live united in love. Jesus, the God of the universe, died to put an end to our demonizing. Pray for the breath of God to put an end to demonizing in our hearts and this world!

Frankly, without the breath of God racism, hatred and division will never end. Union in love will not happen and if we continue to demonize it could cost our lives and the lives of us all.

Church, we need to be the breath of God to our world! Yes, we can read about this, think about this and maybe even cry. I wouldn't say I have cried over this. Maybe I'm not close enough to the situation. Maybe it's not real enough for me. And maybe that's my problem. Am I close enough to the situation? Will I just stare at the news and have pity from afar but do nothing to get closer to our brothers and sisters in clear pain? Will I act?

I feel like I preach about the Gospel a lot(DUH- I'm a priest) but how much do I live it? Often I feel like there are way too many words and way too few good works. I'm pretty insular and prone to naval gazing. I know I need to get face to face (not virtually through things like zoom!) and enter in with

those who are different, poor and marginalized. To come close, befriend, serve, listen, be blessed and bless- all with the breath of God.

It just can't be in my mind, what good is that? I've got to move my body and enter into relationship, especially with those who are different than me. It's about drawing close and touching the wounds of Jesus' hands and side. It's all about expressing love in relationship. But how can express love to someone I do not know? You cannot love that which you do not know! It's time for a lot more knowing in this world so that there can be a lot more loving.

So how can we at St. Charles respond to the Holy Spirit's promptings in light of racism, hatred and division? I think it is important to be with the different, poor, suffering and marginalized. To this end, I would like to start a social justice ministry here. I don't want to call it a social justice group but I do want it to be a relational, ongoing ministry. Maybe we can call it "Sent" or "Breath of God" or "We" or "You are Loved Ministries" or ? How about partnering with a less materially fortunate parish in San Diego. That way we can be close, hands on and face to face. As we enter into relationship we can come to know and our love will grow. What are your thoughts? Please let me hear from you. Let's move on this... Love does!

Come breath of God! Come, Holy Spirit! Let the Fire fall! Love always seeks to enter into deeper relationship. And in our faith we believe love always wins and it is the only win.

Praying that we will live on earth as it is in heaven,

+Fr. John Amsberry