

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter
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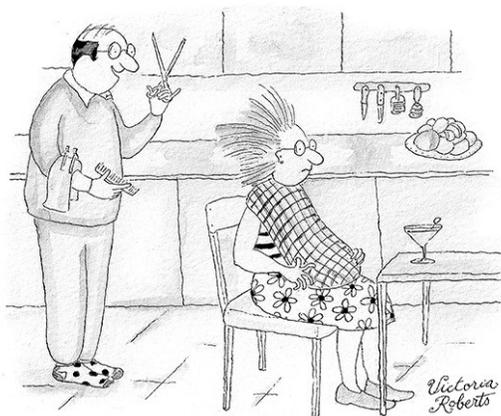
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Cartoonists have been working overtime during the pandemic to find the humorous side of the struggles we all face right now. Here are a few cartoons that I thought hit the reality of what we're dealing with and provided some humor.

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THE PRIEST CARVES OUT SACRED SPACE AT HOME IN ORDER TO RECORD LITURGY FOR SUNDAY.



"Trust me, Margherite—I'm an architect."



"I'm you from the future! Or the past. I've completely lost track of time."

QUARANTINE FATIGUE



"OH, AAAAAGGGGGHHHHH!"

I think this one to the left pretty much sums it up for most of us.

And then, on this Fifth Sunday of Easter, the words of Jesus break into the midst of our struggle: "do not let your hearts be troubled." Ok, Jesus, great, thanks, that's good advice – any pointers on how to do that when the world seems to be spinning out of control? I think Jesus does explain it more fully, this way of peace for our hearts, but to understand it we have to dive a little more deeply into what he tells the disciples a bit later in the conversation.

Later Jesus says "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." There are at least two ways you could read that sentence.

One way would be to imagine that Jesus is like a train ticket – if you have a ticket you can get on the train. He is the only way to get on board what the old gospel song writers used to call “the train that’s bound for glory.” This reading of Jesus’ words is the root of all the well meaning people who’ve approached us over the years asking whether we know Jesus as our Savior and whether, if we died tonight, we know that we would go to heaven. What they’re essentially asking us is whether we have our Jesus ticket for the train to glory.

The other way to read this sentence is to understand that Jesus is comparing himself to the air we breathe. Jesus isn’t a ticket we use, Jesus is the God who sustains our very existence moment by moment at all times. This way of reading it fits with the scriptures that say things like “in him we live and move and have our being” and “through him all things were created.” Just as breathing in oxygen is the way to be physically alive, breathing in Jesus is the way to be spiritually alive. Why? Because the Father created us to have our existence in the Son and to share in the Son’s relationship of love and communion with the Father. Just as we were created to breathe oxygen so we were created to live and move and have our being in the love, safety, and joy of God’s existence as the loving parent who embraces the beloved child.

So, how do we go about not letting our hearts be troubled? We breathe.

I remember when I was a kid I used to occasionally watch an exercise show on TV and the person leading the exercises would say “don’t forget to breathe!” Seven year old me thought that was the funniest thing I’d ever heard. How could you forget to breathe? It just happens automatically, right? But as I got older and did more running, and working out, and sports in general, I realized that it is entirely possible to completely forget to breathe. It is entirely possible to be so caught up in pain, or exertion, or fear that we just stop breathing. And when that happens it creates its own special kind of hell – burning lungs, diminished strength, and evening passing out if you’re not careful.

It’s the same with the spiritual life. It is possible to become so caught up in the pain, the work, and the fear of the crisis in which we find ourselves that we forget that Jesus is our life and that we live and move and have our being in him. We forget that Jesus is like the air we breathe: he’s everywhere and everyone we meet – those we love and those we hate – all have their existence in him and because of him. He’s everywhere, even in the midst of our fear and frustration, and what we need to do is to remember to breathe in deeply of the spiritually life-giving oxygen that is God’s heart for us in Christ.

Maybe this is one reason that many deeply spiritual people throughout the history of Christianity, from monks to mystics to Saints and Sunday school teachers, have told us to first begin our prayers by taking a deep breath. Just pause for a moment and let that happen: take in a deep breath of God's life in Christ and exhale a long breath of all the fear and stress you've been bottling up for days and weeks.

Breathe, Jesus says, and do not let your hearts be troubled, because he promises to take us with him where he is going – and where has Jesus gone? Well, we have to acknowledge that Jesus went into suffering and death, so, yes, we will be going with him into suffering and death and he will be right there with us in the midst of it. But beyond the struggles of life, Jesus has gone into the depths of joy at the right hand of God in glory. So, we can breathe, and not let our hearts be troubled because we know that Jesus is taking us with him into the glory of eternal life.

Since today is also Mother's Day, I'll finish with this imagery: can you remember a time when you were very young and very upset about something? Maybe you skinned your knee, or the other kids made fun of you, or you lost a favorite toy. You didn't sit around with a troubled heart trying to somehow suffer in silence with a stiff upper lip – you ran crying to your Mom and she held you and comforted you. Jesus could have just as easily said "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Mother except through me." After all, elsewhere in the Gospels Jesus says God is like a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings.

And what would your Mom sometimes say when you were really upset, and crying so hard you sounded like you might hyperventilate? She'd say "take a deep breath, it's going to be okay."

Amen.