

I Can't Breathe



Bro. Mickey O'Neill Mc Grath, OSFS has done a series of the Stations of the Cross throughout his remarkable career as an artist and retreat master. This particular station (I can't breathe) comes from a recent trip to Kenya. My interpretation of the station is that to describe Jesus' passion and suffering in his full humanity, Mickey takes the words infamously first uttered, I believe, from Eric Garner who was detained with a chokehold by one New York police officer with multiple officers restraining him over the alleged selling of single cigarettes from packs without tax stamps. Eleven times he uttered the words, "I cannot breathe." Garner lost consciousness and would die later in a hospital. Five years later, we see the scene eerily similar repeated with George Floyd being detained by four police with one pressing his knee into George's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds while he shouts out in desperation "I can't breathe." For what? Passing off a forged \$20 bill. **And the other three cops did nothing.** Of course, racism rears its ugly head again. Amid the Coronavirus Pandemic, the mayor of Minneapolis called racism a pandemic that has been going on for 200 years. "I can't breathe." Breath is life-giving and life-sustaining.

It was the breath of God that hovered over the waters in the loving act of creation. That same spirit or breath led Israel out of slavery, gave voice to prophets, allowed Mary to rejoice in God her Savior and guided her son's ministry until he breathed his spirit up on Mt. Calvary. On Pentecost, the Spirit appears in a breath giving life to the Church, birthing it into being. The breath undoes the arrogance and confusion of Babel and allows the disciples to preach, all Galileans, but understood by people of so many different tongues or languages. The breath in the Gospel, sends the disciples, missions them to forgive the sins of those who want to be forgiven. For Christ, all is through love, nothing through force (or fear).

Breath is life-giving. Recall what it feels like if you were ever out of breath. The breath we need is this same spirit of Pentecost that allowed the disciples with the same language to be understood by people with a great diversity of languages. The spirit we need to breathe life into us is one that allows us to see sameness in difference. The breath of this New Pentecost allows us to see the same being, the image and likeness of God that resides in each of us as an irrepeatable gift of the divine within us. The sameness embraces the diversity of race, creed, gender, preference, interest, ability and the like. Salesian Spirituality has coined the term *university* to express the many different gifts shared among the human race (diversity) given to us by the One God (*unitas*). It's God sharing of himself with each of us.

Meanwhile, both men running for president took their time to denounce the incident. Add to the list other silent politicians. National Catholic newspapers questioned the bishops' delay in condemning the violence. Add to the list other silent priests, religious and people of faith. All out of fear of what and how to say that it may go over well, and we may not offend or lose

voters or contributions. The New Pentecost we need is this breath of the spirit to take over us to speak up and out. Sr. Joan Chittister, who has never had a problem discerning how the spirit guides her, exhorts us to awaken our prophetic voice in her book, The Time is Now: A Call to Uncommon Courage. She tells us to stand up and say, "I think differently," this is wrong and needs to stop. We must get out of the rooms of fear that paralyzed the disciples and often us and denounce injustice, speak for the voiceless and bring into community those on the periphery. Chittister intimated that we do not want to have it said of us "you did nothing."

We are called to embrace difference while encountering the other. This is my take of the term "Culture of Encounter" popularized by Pope Francis. We meet the person first, accept her image and likeness. Then, we can deal with what may differentiate us. We hear of our need to accompany others, be with them, stay with them. It's all about the "remaining." Perhaps the spirit will speak a lesson of **love and acceptance** that is understood by all. Jesus gave us **one command** to love one another.

If we just pray "Come, Holy Spirit" every morning we are blessed with the gift of a new day, then we may find that uncommon courage to speak up and out and to forgive one another's sins as we journey with them. Then, **we can be love** which is the universal language understood by all. Then we can "live Jesus" as we say in Salesian language.

"I can't breathe." I can't help think Jesus Christ **still** utters these words so often when we turn to violence and hatred, when we discriminate and alienate, rather than accept and appreciate, when we turn to selfishness and personal comfort, when we have the opportunity to be generous and reach out to another, when we fail to recognize so many good cops because of a few severely misguided ones.

I hear Jesus utter **"I can't breathe"** when we choose to exacerbate an horrific situation, like the one facing us now, by destroying people's livelihoods, stealing, rioting and looting, violence (and destruction) for the sake of violence. It does nothing to help the cause, address the situation, keep alive the victim's name and memory. Not only can't Jesus breathe, but he weeps over us, the new Jerusalem. "What are they doing? For what did I die?"

A familiar chant uttered in peaceful protests is "say his name." We can name him "George Floyd" when we resolve to work together to breathe life back into our world again in healing and resolving these deep-seated issues with which we continue to wrestle but now, more resolved to get it right! We can name him "George Floyd" when we admit our own racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and those other illnesses that divide us from God and one another. We can name and honor "George Floyd" when we seek to do something about this as an individual, church, society, nation and world.

I also think Jesus would like us to chant "say his name" in reference to him in our society that has forgotten him. There is a link in our forgetfulness of Christ and what it is yielding. We need a New Pentecost. We need the breath of life. We need Jesus Christ.

Come, Holy Spirit. Give us your spirit to accept and embrace rather than to neglect and tear down. May your spirit be upon us to recognize you in all others, so that with your spirit guiding us, "we may renew the face of the earth."