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John 20:19-23 Pastor Bill Uetricht Pentecost 06/12/11

You and I live in a culture that has a strong sense of the importance of personal space. Many of us get a little nervous and maybe a bit irritated when people invade our personal space. Perhaps you have heard someone say something like, “She got in my face today.” And generally, that is not a compliment, nor a reality that is appreciated. She got in my face means that she invaded my space in a literal kind of way or in a metaphorical way. She got in my business, maybe confronted me. And I wasn’t necessarily comfortable with that.

From my perspective, Jesus is getting into our faces today, in a very literal kind of way. John tells us that on the day that Jesus was raised from the dead, he appears to his disciples, a bunch of scared men who have locked themselves up behind closed doors. When he appears to them he gives to them the very thing that they needed to deal with their anxiety and fear: peace, shalom. And then we are told, he gets in their faces and breathes on them. Just as in the book of Genesis God had gotten close and personal with the earth creature, dusty, Adam, and breathed into this earth creature the breath of life, Jesus now breathes life into the disciples, recreating them.

The gospel of John tells us that God, the Father, was close and personal with Jesus. And Jesus was close and personal with God, the Father. It’s almost as if they shared the same personal space. Jesus wants that kind of intimacy to be what his disciples experience with him and among themselves even when he is not around. And so gets in their faces and breathes on them. You have got to enter an individual’s personal space if he or she is going to be affected by your breath. I know that bad breath can travel a long distance, but for the most part, experiencing the power of a person’s breath requires that he or she be

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near to you. Jesus gets in his disciples' faces—and in this case such an action isn't necessarily a bad thing, although as we will discover, it still can be an uncomfortable thing. He gets in their faces and breathes his breath, his wind, his energy, his life into them. He's going to be gone from them, but his energy, his life, his spirit will remain in them. That spirit will be deeply rooted in them as they are sent forth.

Just before his breathing on them, he said to his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." As they are being sent forth from this locked room that they are in, Jesus breathes on them his breath, his Spirit. Their work, their mission is going to be one that is accompanied by who he is, by his life, by his energy.

And what will his life, his energy, his spirit mean for them and for the people they will touch? Note his words: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any they are retained." To be a part of a community in which Jesus' breath is all-pervasive, a community where his energy prevails, a community in which he gets in our faces, is to be in a community in which forgiveness is key and king. The center of our mission, the center of our sent-ness is forgiveness. To live in light of the One who breathes his Spirit into us is to share, proclaim, live out, embody forgiveness.

Now in many ways, this sounds great and wonderful. And it is. There is something truly remarkable about knowing, trusting, and living out that we are released from the power of our sin. It is amazing to know that in the world of God our sin doesn't determine our future. In a very real way the past has been let go. And my, how I wish that we would grasp this! You over at your house probably heard me growling this past week as I was watching a news story about a community in Grand Rapids that is trying its darnedest to make sure that those who

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have been convicted of a felony are never allowed to run for public office. Come on, now! The center of our sent-ness is announcing and living out that we have been released from the power of our sin. The energy of the Spirit of Jesus is an energy that propels us forward, that is about setting people free. I, in no way, want to suggest that people don't need to pay for their crimes. For the sake of an orderly culture, they must. But sometimes it seems that we have gotten to the point of thinking that the future of a person or persons is simply shaped by their pasts. That is not how we in the community that is shaped by the breath and spirit of Jesus operate. Thank God, this is not the way God operates with us.

Jesus gets in our faces and breathes on us the breath of forgiveness, the breath of release. And in so many ways, that's good news. But let's admit it: Jesus getting in our faces with the forgiveness message can make us a little uncomfortable. The breath and spirit of forgiveness can unsettle us. It challenges the little systems that we operate with. You know, at least I am not like so and so. I should get the goods because at least I didn't misbehave in the past. How many little justification schemes that we come up with are threatened by the proclamation of forgiveness? What if the reality of forgiveness means that I cannot live with the score card that makes me feel good at the expense of someone else? Forgiveness isn't as easy as we think.

And let's be honest. Forgiveness isn't as easy as we think not only because it threatens how we measure ourselves against others; it isn't easy because sometimes we ourselves aren't ready to be released from the power of the past over us. Our situation may be ugly, may be miserable, may be remarkably unhealthy, but at least it's familiar. It's easier to stay in bondage. So Jesus is really getting in our faces when

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he breathes on us his energy, when he breathes on us the power of release, the power of forgiveness. What might our lives be like if we trusted that we have been set free? Some of us are too anxious to find out. We would rather stay behind locked doors. So we avoid people, avoid relationships, avoid community, avoid commitments, avoid service. You see, we believe that what we've done or what has been done to us in the past is truly what shapes our future. And Jesus gets in our faces and says, "If you retain the sins of any, they are retained." In other words, I guess you've got the right to stay stuck. You've got the right to be unhealthy. You don't have to be released from the power of your sin and your past. You can stay stuck!

Oooh! I think Jesus is getting in our faces. He's invading our personal space. He is breathing on us his breath. And while that breath may make us a little uncomfortable, let me tell you: his wind is the wind of the Spirit of God. His breath is the breath of God, the breath that makes alive, the breath that energizes, the breath that empowers, the breath that sets free, the breath that takes us out of death into life. Oh, I know. Breathing in that breath is threatening. It means that I may be sent out of my comfort zone. It means that I may not be able to stay stuck. But why would I want to stay stuck? Why would I want to be enslaved to the past? Why would I not want to go where the Spirit of God will take me? This Spirit, by the way, took Jesus from death to life.

So why wouldn't we pray: Come, Holy Spirit! Come breath of God! Come spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness, set us free! Come and fill us the very life of Jesus! Come enter our personal spaces! Come and get in our faces and renew the *face* of the earth.