

“A journalist assigned to the Jerusalem bureau takes an apartment overlooking the Wailing Wall. Every day when she looks out, she sees an old Jewish man praying vigorously. So, one day the journalist goes down and introduces herself to the old man.

She asks, “I notice you come every day to the wall. How long have you done that and what are you praying for?”

The old man replies, “I have come here to pray every day for 25 years. In the morning, I pray for world peace. I go home have a cup of tea and I come back and pray for the eradication of illness and disease from the earth.”

The journalist is amazed. “How does it make you feel to come here every day for 25 years and pray for these things?” The old man looks at her sadly. “Like I’m talking to a wall.”

Our world hungers for peace. Just this week large protests broke out in Venezuela because of food shortages and political unrest. There is a serious scarcity of bread and the nation is facing ballooning inflation which some suggest is in the triple digits. I can hardly imagine walking into a grocery store to encounter prices that had suddenly doubled, or more.

Prayers for peace, working for peace, it can seem as if we are “talking to a wall.”

We meet the disciples in John’s gospel today. They have heard Jesus was raised from the dead and they are scared. Scared of the Jewish Authorities, scared of Roman authorities, scared of what it might mean if this is true after all of them deserted him on the cross. They are so scared they are confined in an upper room; behind solidly locked doors.

William Sloane Coffin, the renowned preacher once said, “As I see it the primary religious task is to think straight. You can’t think straight with a heart full

of fear, for fear seeks safety, not truth. A heart full of love, on the other hand, has a limbering effect on the mind.”

There was no limbering going on in the mind of those disciples, until, mysteriously, miraculously Jesus appeared before them. His first words, “peace be with you.” No fear. No scolding. No judgement. Only peace.

Our story today is 12 verses long and in that short window Jesus says “peace be with you,” three times. And when he isn’t talking about peace he is talking about another tough topic, forgiveness. Eugene Peterson puts Jesus’ message to his disciples this way, “If you forgive someone’s sins, they’re gone for good. If you don’t forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?”

Frederick Buechner, author, theologian and preacher once said, “When you forgive somebody who has wronged you, you are spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride. For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each other’s’ presence.”

Martin Luther, the reformer, suggests Peace is not possible without forgiveness. He added, “Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude.” The way children can learn the habit of forgiveness is by seeing us, their parents and other adults, forgive others and forgive ourselves.”

The freedom to be at peace in our own skins - that’s what forgiveness allows. If we all agree our world needs more peace, John’s gospel today suggests forgiveness is a part of making real and lasting peace.

Dr. Frederick Luskin is the Director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project, and a Professor in the school of Psychology. His research suggests 4 steps we can take, when repeated often enough, can help us find real forgiveness:

1. Close your eyes, and for about 20 seconds, picture the person who hurt or angered you. Let all your grievances come up. Notice what happens in your body.

2. Now let go of this image and take some slow, deep abdominal breaths. Take about five breaths. If your mind goes back to the person who hurt you or anything else, bring the focus back to your breath.

3. Bring into your mind an image of someone you love very much, or a place of peace and beauty. Allow yourself to be flooded with the positive feelings this image elicits. Now bring those feelings down to the area around your heart.

4. Lastly, keep breathing the good feelings into your heart. Now take a look again at the person you are angry at. Let the good feelings protect you.

Dr. Luskin adds, "Resentment is a habit, and habits take twenty-five days to change." So, if you do this exercise each time you think of the person who hurt you over twenty-five days, you will literally change your mental and physical reactions.

He adds, "Sometimes we need to forgive without reconciliation." In these times, we must dip deep into our own souls and see if we are willing to forgive anyway.

In closing, as we hear about this breathing exercise recommend by Dr. Luskin, I imagine some of you are skeptical. Maybe some of you are wondering what sort of weird "new age" thing Pastor Bill is into this week? What Ancient Eastern custom has he been reading about?

Well, it's called the bible, here in John's gospel, in that locked room it is Jesus' breathe, the divine wind, or spirit, which empowers the disciples. In this story, Jesus deeply connects spirit or breathe, to forgiveness and peace making. This is nothing new, or new age'y. In fact, from the beginning in Genesis, God seeks to create and recreate persons in God's own image by breathing life into humankind."

Through the Resurrection of Christ, God breathes the Spirit which becomes the foundation for all forgiveness and peace making.

PRAYER: Great God, we pray this time of worship might offer each of us the Spirit we need for today and tomorrow.

Amen