

*Witness to the Breath*

A Sermon on 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 by the Rev. Philip Major

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There is an empty space in our soprano section this morning. For many of us, there is an empty space in our hearts today. There has been an empty space in my heart since Monday morning, when I was given the sad news that Neva Pilgrim had died in the night.

There is a space in our hearts because we will not hear the sound of her voice. We will not see the kindness of her eyes. We will not hear Neva's thoughts, full of grace and devoid of judgment. Yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia. The creativity, hope, and love that ran so strong and deep in Neva's life will never end. If you did not have the opportunity to know Neva Pilgrim, a reflection from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians might help explain the gift of her life.

You may have noticed we have been reading a series of passages from 1 Corinthians in recent weeks. 1 Corinthians is a foundational book of scripture for Jesus' disciples, so the people who put together the Revised Common Lectionary made the wise decision to distribute portions of the letter among each year of the three-year cycle of readings. This year most of our passages come from the middle portion of 1 Corinthians. In these chapters, St. Paul was responding to concerns that had been brought to his attention by various members of the church. It seems that several members of the congregation wrote letters to Paul to share their concerns or ask for guidance.

Reading between the lines, we get the idea that there were at least three or four distinct groups of members in this congregation. For instance, we can tell that many of the members of the church were poor. We know several women acted as leaders of the congregation. You might recall a verse where Paul says, "It has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you." It also appears that a group of the members were wealthy and highly educated, and thought of themselves as better than the rest of the congregation.

People who study Paul's letters to the Corinthians have given this group a name you might find a bit humorous: they are called the 'Super Christians'. We can tell a fair amount about what the Super Christians were thinking, because they wrote letters to Paul. Paul includes quotations from the letters written by the Super Christians in his letters addressed to the entire congregation.

That's what we find in today's passage. In today's passage, Paul is responding to the concern that some members have been participating in Roman religious ceremonies. At these ceremonies, animals are offered up as a sacrifice to the Roman gods. At the end of the ceremony, the roasted meat is shared. At least a few members of the congregation have been attending these ceremonies and joining in the festive activities at the end, including eating the roasted meat.

The individuals who have been attending the Roman religious festivals and eating the meats that were barbequed in honor of the Roman religious deities are the ones we now call the Super Christians. We hear their arguments about why it is not a problem for them to join in the festivals at the Roman temples in today's passage. They say, "*all of us possess knowledge.*" They argue that their participation is harmless because *no idol in the world really exists,* and "*there is no God but one.*"

From this passage, you can see why all of the New Testament scholars call them 'The Super Christians'. They are supremely self-confident. They are sure they are right and their opponents are wrong. They are extremely individualistic, not unlike many people who call themselves Christians today. They think the point of religion is for them to be successful, to gain superiority and some sort of advantage over others.

Of course, Paul's message about the faith of Christ Jesus, and a life lived in the faith of Christ Jesus is quite the opposite. A life inspired, guided, and directed by the faith of Christ Jesus is a life of service and community. It is a life where we are constantly looking out for the other person. It is a life

where we use the gifts we have been given, not to show our superiority or our excellence, but to share goodness with others.

As we read this middle part of Paul's letter to the Corinthians let's keep in mind the trajectory of Paul's argument. These middle passages are leading us to chapters 12 and 13. The main idea of chapter 12 is that we are following Christ when we work together as the body of Christ. The hand cannot say to the foot, "I have no need of you!" We cannot be doing God's work and living in the faith of Christ Jesus if we are not working together and appreciating the gifts brought by each person. This is the core principle of Christian community.

Chapter 12 is itself leading to chapter 13. Paul ends chapter 12 with these words: "Keep listening and I will show you a still, more better way." Then we arrive. We arrive at the center of our Christian life. This is not a message for a wedding day only. It is a message for every day of the year. *If I speak with the eloquence of an angel, but do not have love, I am nothing but a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand every mystery in the world, and have more knowledge than anyone else, but do not have love, I am nothing.*

For us who follow Christ, love is the center of everything we do. For us who follow Christ, there is richness in the many gifts God has given us, to the degree we remember that we have been given these gifts, not for ourselves alone, but for the sake of a community which is the body of Christ.

This was the truth Neva Pilgrim held in the center of her life. Neva might have had the most beautiful voice I have ever heard, but her approach to the world was as if she was just another member of the choir. Neva might have been one of the most creative, energetic, knowledgeable people I have ever met, but her attitude was that she was just a hand or an ear, just another member of the body.

Neva was a powerful example of what it looks like to share the gifts God has given us in a spirit of love. That is why this past Monday morning, I heard myself gasp for breath as I read the news of her death. At noon, at our Monday Bible Study, I heard the same sound. Someone let out a little gasp, as I told them of Neva's death. For many of us, our response was to gasp for breath, hearing that her life, so full of love and creativity and kindness, was finished.

These little gasps from you and me are important. These little gasps are but faint echoes of a much larger, cosmic breath: God's spirit breathing life and creativity into our lives. We may not have heard the actual sound of the divine breath, bringing life to the world, but we see the results. We hear the results. We witness the results of that breath of God.

85 years ago a little baby in rural Minnesota began to sing: with the power of God's love in her she shared her music and her love, and she nurtured the gift of life in her community. In your life this week, surely you have witnessed the results: some act of kindness and goodness from the person working at the counter, or driving the bus, or walking down the street. We are witnesses to the breath of God, breathing life and creativity and goodness into the people around us.

God breathed life and goodness into Neva Pilgrim 85 years ago. God breathed that same power and goodness into your life. Make space for that breath of God in your life. Nurture the gift God has given you. Be a witness to the breath.