

18 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24 – Year A – October 19, 2011 - Homily
Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22
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Okay everyone, please sit up straight, uncross your arms and legs, and get as comfortable as you can, just as if we were entering a period of silent meditation. We're not going to meditate tonight, but we're going to prepare as if we were. So, it's okay to keep your eyes open, or feel free to close them, and slowly breathe in deeply, and then gently exhale. Be aware of the air filling your lungs, bringing life-giving oxygen to every part of your body. Let your shoulders relax as you breathe out slowly, letting go of the day's stress and worries. Taking a regular breath now, breathe in the Holy Spirit, and breathe out all anxiety. Since we're now breathing consciously, let's imagine what it would feel like to be constantly aware of breathing in the power of the Holy Spirit, and feeling that energy and life force inspiring our hearts and minds. What is it like to consciously experience that kind of intimacy with the creative force behind the life of the entire universe, a power beyond our imagining, yet so gentle that He will never hurt or harm us? In Michael W. Smith's song, *The air I breathe*, he sings, "This is the air I breathe... Your holy presence living in me. This is my daily bread... Your very word spoken to me."

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is an inspired prayer of gratitude, bursting with joy for the faith, love, and hope he sees and hears about in this community. His sharing of the good news by word and example has prompted a glorious conversion amongst the Thessalonians. Their transformation is already rooted so deeply in Christ that their work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness in hope is a living and vibrant example to other communities in that region. It can only be the holy presence living within them. The air they breathe is like their daily bread, sustaining them and inspiring them, despite suffering and persecution. Paul notes how he sees God with the Thessalonians in an active, empowering, encouraging and persistent way. Empowered action isn't something we can conjure up, but is central to the cooperative way God works in the world through the faithful. The Holy Spirit builds a community of people, and each individual, within the Body of Christ. We are thus enjoined and empowered to joyfully serve the world together in His name.

The Thessalonians participate in joyful service, even though they are in anguish. It can seem almost impossible to give of ourselves when we are suffering in any way. Our desire is to turn inwards and wait until we're feeling better, or until our circumstances improve. Yet, God comes to us constantly, and is always willing to use us if we're willing to give of ourselves, despite or perhaps because of our circumstances. Ministry happens in the midst of daily life. Whatever is going on, we can still serve God and our neighbor in some way. We don't have to wait until everything is put right in our lives before we give for the sake of others. This is how God's holy presence works within us, reminding us to make the most of each moment in love. Take another deep breath, feel the air fill your lungs, refreshing your body. Be aware of the power of the Holy Spirit energizing every cell, transforming us from the inside out.

Paul clearly considers himself as part of a team working with all members of the church to share the Good News of Christ Jesus. Yet he's also aware that we can do nothing without God's help. Part of our mission is to watch and wait for Christ's coming again in glory. In the context of our daily lives, and of all the blessings we have in our care, waiting patiently reminds us that God's timing is perfect, and that quite often we just need to get out of God's way. The Holy presence is

already amongst us, He is constantly preparing the way before us, until Christ's coming again in glory. When we're tired, overworked and stressed, when we feel like nothing is moving forward or changing for the better, the Holy Spirit is here to guide our restless hearts into the loving arms of God. Jesus is still listening to our prayers and interceding on our behalf, and God is still working to redeem all things. As we come to the Lord in prayer, recognize His presence in the face of others, by the power of the Holy Spirit, He empowers and gives us rest in Him. We are not alone. We are never without the Holy presence filling us, feeding us, and guiding us. We are always partners in mission, and part of a greater whole as members of Christ's Body working in and with Christ. It is said that Christ holds us, and the whole world, in His gracious, perfectly just, merciful and wounded hands, healing us and restoring us by His love and grace.

The Thessalonians' new life in Christ is embodied in faith, love and hope. It is a Trinitarian experience of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. God the Father chooses to love us all, and in turn, we offer ourselves to Him in deep gratitude. Our Lord Jesus rescues us from ourselves, from our sins, and from all danger. We love, obey, and imitate Him, as we know Him in Scripture, the breaking of the bread, and in our relationship with Him. The Holy Spirit empowers and inspires us to do the work that God has given us to do. There's an amazing relational texture in our expressions of God's love and our faith in Christ Jesus in this community and in the wider community. Just as Jesus developed close relationships with His disciples – both men and women – Paul too has strong relationships with each of his communities of faith. Being a servant of the Living Lord is a commitment that requires our whole self: body, mind and spirit. Our own relationships are enriched and emboldened by giving thanks at all times and in all circumstances. A spirit of gratitude motivates us to live and grow in His service. Our transformed lives witness in word and deed to Christ's love, our faith and hope in Him. This is the air we breathe, Christ's holy presence living in each of us, Christ the Word speaking to our hearts and minds, so that we too might share His love, faith and hope with all those we meet.

Amen.