

DON'T HOLD YOUR BREATH

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 150; John 20:19-22

“Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!”

Psalm 150:6

In just a couple weeks, in dining rooms across America, families and friends will gather for a Thanksgiving feast. Chances are pretty good that somebody at that table will suggest the good old count-your-blessings exercise.

You know what I'm talking about. Take turns around the table, before you eat. Share a thing or two for which you feel thankful. “Blessings,” we call those things.

So, how many blessings do we receive, in the course of a day?

With the steaming roast turkey right there, all golden brown, somebody's bound to thank God for food — no surprise.

How many times a day do we eat? Three times, for most of us. Maybe a few snacks besides.

Maybe somebody will mention clean drinking water. How many glasses of water do each of us drink during the day? Common nutritional advice, these days, is to drink eight glasses of water per day. (Whether we achieve that goal or not, that's the ideal.)

So, three meals, eight glasses of water. That's 11 blessings. Not bad, for one day.

Maybe somebody will offer thanks for having a job. If each hour of work is a blessing, then that's eight more blessings. A total of 19.

If some wiseacre comes along next and offers thanks for sleep, at 8 hours per night that's another 8 blessings to tack onto the total. We're now up to 27.

I've got something we can all feel thankful for, that blows that number right out of the water. What I'm talking about is breathing.

Do you have any idea how many breaths the typical person takes during the day? I didn't know, so I looked it up. An adult who's in a resting state breathes about 12 times per minute — give or take. Multiply that out by all the minutes in a 24-hour day, and the figure you come up with is 17,280 breaths. That beats eating and drinking and working and sleeping — combined — by a long shot!

It's ironic, though: few of us spend any time at all thinking about our breathing. Our Creator has graciously arranged that breathing takes place automatically, whatever we happen to be doing — even when we're sleeping!

Most of us are only conscious of our breathing when it doesn't come so easy: after a hard workout at the gym, or if we've got some respiratory problem.

I can attest, from my own personal experience with pulmonary embolisms a

few years ago, that when you can't draw a deep breath it's hard to think of anything else. Anybody who suffers from asthma or COPD knows the feeling of panic that comes when it's hard to breathe.

You and I are breathing creatures, my friends, and we live in a breathing universe. All around us are other people, not to mention animals — and even plants, who breathe after a fashion. All these are constantly sharing oxygen. It's a great global exchange, every minute of every day: breath for breath, life for life — and it's all part of the Creator's grand design!

Our lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning, Psalm 150, ends with this resounding exclamation of praise: "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!"

Breathing, of course, has two aspects: inhaling and exhaling, breathing in and breathing out. Now here's a question for you: Which of those two aspects of breathing is most essential? Which one — inhaling or exhaling — is the true essence of breathing?

It's a nonsensical question: impossible to answer. They're two sides of the same coin! Just try to stop one, but not the other. Just try stopping your exhaling, but keeping up with the inhaling. It's not just impossible: it makes no sense!

Breathing is a process, a steady exchange. Try to stop the process, try to interrupt the exchange, and you lose it all.

If that's true, though — and here's the main question I'm posing for you today — why is it that, when we count our blessings, we tend to focus only the things that go in, and not the things that go out? Why do we focus on what we have, paying little heed to what we offer up to God and others in return? Why are so many Thanksgiving table graces little more than a self-satisfied accounting exercise?

Does the Lord really mean for us to live our lives constantly inhaling, never exhaling? Does God want us to rake in all those good things that come our way, then simply hold onto them, hoarding them up to gratify our need for security?

In J.R.R. Tolkien's novel, *The Hobbit*, the most fearsome monster is the dragon, Smaug. In the story's climactic scene, the hobbit Bilbo has snuck into Smaug's fortress under the mountain. His goal is to reclaim a precious, magical gem known as the Arkenstone. One of Bilbo's traveling companions — the Dwarf King, Thorin Oakenshield — is the rightful owner. With this magical stone, he can reclaim his kingdom.

The scene in Peter Jackson's movie version is unforgettable. Through the

magic of CGI, every space in this cavernous underground hall is overflowing with piles of gold and jewels. Sleeping underneath one of the largest piles — like a beachgoer snoozing under a heap of sand on a hot summer's day — is the dragon himself.

Smaug is a creature so consumed by greed, so obsessed with his golden horde, that he seems to know the location of every coin, every golden bowl, every shimmering gemstone in that vast and silent hall.

Try as he might to be silent, Bilbo arouses the dragon: who rises up out of the piles of gold to his full and fearsome height. The little hobbit tries to negotiate. He tries to sweet-talk the dragon into giving him the Arkenstone. But it's not easy sweet-talk a dragon!

Bilbo tries another approach. He challenges Smaug to a contest of riddles. The dragon plays along for a while, enjoying the diversion. But eventually he grows weary of the game.

Speaking of the Arkenstone, he says: **“I am almost tempted to let you take it, if only to see Oakenshield *suffer*. Watch it *destroy* him. Watch it corrupt his heart and drive him mad. But I think not. I think our little game ends here. So tell me, thief — how do you choose to die?”**

Bilbo escape, of course — by a stroke of luck, and with the Arkenstone in

hand — but not before hearing the dragon growl, **“I will not part with a single coin! Not one PIECE of it!”**

Tolkien’s genius in creating this character is that the scaly beast behaves as though he were human. He displays a very human vice: the sin of greed.

Smaug is utterly possessed by greed. It’s as though this dragon only inhales, never exhales. He gathers to himself all the glittering treasure of the country round about, but never does anything with it — other than make his bed among those piles of gold. There he sleeps away the decades in a greed-induced stupor.

Does Smaug ever experience the subtle wonder of gratitude? Does he ever feel thankful for his incredible wealth? This well-spoken, sentient beast displays no hint of that virtue. No, in Tolkien’s novel, Smaug is the ultimate expression of the “self-made man.” He’s narcissistic. He cares for no one. He needs no one. The only virtues he cherishes are possession and power.

There’s nothing wrong with counting our blessings, and using the list to populate our Thanksgiving table grace. It’s a good thing. But it’s only half the story. The real question for us — at this and every Thanksgiving — is not just what we breathe in, but what we breathe out.

It’s just as I showed the kids, during the children’s sermon. A great, big

breath of fresh air is a good thing, but you can't hold onto it for very long. In a very short time, the blessing becomes a kind of curse.

It's that theme Tolkien carries forward into the novels that follow *The Hobbit*: his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. You probably know that at the center of those novels is a magical ring. It makes its wearer invisible. But the magic of the ring is powerfully addictive. The thrill of crossing over into that alternate reality, the power it bestows, slowly erodes the soul of the ring-bearer.

Another hobbit — Bilbo's nephew, Frodo — is entrusted with carrying the ring of power to the volcano where it was forged, and destroy it. But the longer Frodo carries it, the harder it becomes for him to give up. As he stands beside the Crack of Doom, trying to marshal the courage to cast his treasure into the molten lava, the fate of Middle-Earth hangs in the balance.

Tolkien, as you may know, was a devout Christian. It's not hard to see how Frodo symbolizes an ordinary disciple, trying to live the Christian life. It was by no means easy for our Lord, in the Garden of Gethsemane, to offer up the treasure of his life on the cross. The Gospel-writer Luke tells us how, in his version of the story, Jesus prayed so intensely, sweat fell from his forehead like drops of blood.

At the end of the day, Frodo can't do it. He can't bring himself to destroy the ring. Gollum, his guide — the former ring-bearer who's even more addicted to

its power — lunges for it: and in that moment, falls into the flames, still holding his Precious.

For us to maintain the steady, in-and-out rhythm of our breathing is not especially difficult. The Creator has programmed the act of respiration into our nervous systems. None of us ever has to think about inhaling or exhaling. Our bodies just do it.

Yet, the same is not true of our souls. The Creator has given to us the gift of free will. That means gratitude and generosity — the spiritual equivalent of inhaling and exhaling — don't happen automatically.

Plenty of us, in our consumer culture, live under the illusion that we can somehow master the art of gratitude without generosity. But that's not how the spiritual life works. Gratitude is only the half of it. As followers of the one who carried the cross, our task is to give as well as to receive.

So, this Thanksgiving, try not to hold your breath. Breathe in deeply, aware of the wonderful gifts our Creator has bestowed: not only material blessings, but the blessings of human love besides. But know, as you count those blessings, that the Lord means you to breathe out as well: to take part in that endless rhythm of receiving and giving, a pattern as old as time.

Let us pray.

**In our lives, dear Lord,
make us not merely grateful,
but also generous.
May we trust you enough to breathe out,
knowing that another breath of fresh, sweet air awaits.
You are the giver of every good and perfect gift.
Give us the courage to follow that example,
and most especially the example of your son Jesus,
who gave himself for us. Amen.**

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