



What does it mean to flourish in faith? Definitions of flourish include growing in healthy and life-affirming ways. Or growing in maturity and understanding of the world you live in and your place in that world. Or even a bold and extravagant gesture.

The second letter to Timothy continues the plea that Timothy flourish in faith. To do so means that Timothy and all others who hear or read this letter, are encouraged to deepen their relationship with God and with each other.

In the Episcopal Church, we talk about a three-legged stool. We say that our understanding of God and our faith is based upon Scripture, Tradition-meaning the church from the very beginning-, and reason. While Scripture is paramount, the things we have experienced and learned in the time since the death and resurrection of Jesus are important as the tradition of the church. While Scripture is paramount, God gave us reason with which to question, with which to learn, with which to flourish.

As we consider the lessons for today, each helps us deepen our relationship with God and each other. In Jeremiah, the prophet tells of a new covenant between the people of Israel and God. Even though the people have had the tablets- a concrete, external listing of the covenant, the people have not done so well in keeping their side of the covenant with God. Even though God was faithful, the people were not.

God continues loving and caring for the people. God now will create a new covenant- a new agreement- and this one is no longer external but internal. This covenant will be so ingrained in the hearts – and the minds- of the people that they will no longer need to teach one another. Rather, this covenant will be so ingrained in their very souls that they will not be able to act in contravention to the covenant.

Wouldn't that be wonderful? A world where people acted from a heart of love and compassion rather than from greed or self-interest. A world where we might actually get along, even with those who see and understand the world differently than we do. No more daily stories of car bombings or murders. No more daily stories of sex trafficking or pirates or kidnappings.

This theme continues in the second letter to Timothy. Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed. Use your reason to know what is true and good and what builds up rather than tears down. Use Scripture- which in Timothy's case would have been what we call the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible. Use Scripture and know that it was inspired by God. Or as some translations put it: God-breathed.

God-breathed bringing back images of the creation of the world when God breathed upon the void and God breathed upon the waters and God breathed into the dust that would become humankind. God breathed life into us and we flourish when we live a life consistent with that breath.

Just yesterday Malala Yousafzai met with Queen Elizabeth. You will remember, I hope, that Malala is the young Pakistani girl who was shot and nearly died. She was targeted because she wants girls to have an education. "Malala's activism started after the Taliban banned girls from schools in Pakistan's Swat Valley in 2009. She anonymously blogged for the BBC in opposition to that order and became an open advocate for girls' education.

In 2011, Malala told CNN, "I have the right of education. I have the right to play. I have the right to sing. I have the right to talk." A year later, at age 15, she was riding the bus home from school when a Taliban gunman climbed aboard and shot her in the head. She nearly died. Since then, Malala has recovered and continued advocating for girls' education, despite ongoing death threats from the Taliban".¹

Malala is an example to us of someone who carries within her the breath of God. She has endured suffering and she is doing the work of an evangelist and carrying out her ministry. While her evangelism and her ministry focus on education particularly for girls, she is an example to all of us of what is possible when we focus and when we are willing to be persistent.

The parable of the "unjust judge and the widow" can be viewed in several ways. The most traditional reading of the parable used by Jesus to encourage his disciples to pray always and not to lose heart is that God is different from the unjust judge. God will quickly grant justice without our pounding and crying and carrying on. That God is not like this judge who has no respect for anyone.

For those of us who have prayed and prayed and prayed and still seen no response- or at least not the response we were praying for, is that this is not always a great analysis of the parable. What if we are the unjust judge and God is the widow? What if we are the ones who do not fear God and who have no respect for people? God keeps after us until we finally give in. But is that the picture of God you have in your head? A continual nag? So maybe that's not a good analysis of the parable either.

Let's go back to second Timothy. Read and study scripture. Understand that scripture always has something to tell us if we will be open to it. And what I understand and what you understand may not always be exactly the same. That doesn't make you or me wrong- but it does offer us an opportunity to flourish in faith. To use Scripture, tradition and reason- our three-legged stool, to be with one another as we seek to flourish in faith. To be persistent in our faith whether the tie is favorable or unfavorable. To be patient. To discern what is true teaching and what is not. To be wary of those with itching ears or those who turn away from listening to the truth. To be an example of what is possible when we acknowledge the breath that God has breathed into us so that we might have life and have it most abundantly. **Amen.**

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2013/10/18/world/europe/uk-queen-malala-yousafzai/> (October 20, 2013)