

So I'm going to start this morning by sharing some of the same thoughts about the letters to Timothy I shared at Bethlehem and Zion last week. I think it can help us think about how to read and interpret scripture.

The letters to Timothy are among my least favorite in the whole Bible if not the least. I have typically avoided preaching on them.

The first letter to Timothy has this gem: ¹²I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.

None of us would be here if we believed that was meant for us. But there is a sizeable chunk of Christian denominations who do.

The household codes in the letters to Timothy are also problematic in our own time. They are used as justification for an authoritarian male head of household as the only legitimate family structure. They say that women will be saved through childbearing. And Timothy is also one of the books that was used as justification for slavery.

So maybe a good question to start with is how do we decide what is meant for us and what is not? The best way is to not read any part of scripture in isolation.

So, for example, If we take this business of women being silent, we can also find plenty of places in both the gospels and Paul's letters where women are in fact leaders and teachers.

The first witness to the resurrection was Mary Magdalene. So the overall witness of scripture as a whole tells us that the decree in Timothy for women to be silent was bound to that particular time and place for reasons we're not told.

The same might be said about household codes and ordering of the church. It seems likely that those were meant to help Christians live faithfully in late first century Greco-Roman Ephesus and not everywhere for all time.

But today's reading is one that has all kinds of useful things for us in our own time, and they jive with other teachings in the gospels and Paul's letters.

I've always loved the verse about the faith of Timothy's grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice now living in him.

It brings to mind those loved ones in our own lives whose faith inspired and shaped us. Those of you who join multiple generations of your family worshiping in this place maybe find this especially meaningful. It reminds us that faith is a living thing that is passed on from generation to generation.

But like all living things, it needs to be tended. And sometimes it needs to be rekindled. The fire of faith is a gift from God, but human worries can dim it.

I think the times we are living in right now might be the hardest collectively to keep faith burning. We've likely all had personal times when it has been...times of illness, grief, severe stress, and so on.

Timothy is leading a church in Ephesus. Ephesus was a classic Greco-Roman city. The chief goddess was Artemis, but Apollo, Zeus, Athena, and Asclepius were also worshipped there.

Ephesus at this point was apparently very tolerant of religious diversity, so persecution wasn't really a thing. But the variety of gods likely still claimed the attention of Ephesians who had converted to Christianity.

Life was lived under occupation by the Roman Empire with its high taxes and oppressive inclinations.

In addition, there seemed to be false Christian teachers who had moved in and were trying to influence the congregation as well. The author of the letter reminds Timothy that the Apostle Paul was willing to suffer in prison for the sake of the true gospel.

The times definitely had some similarities to our own.

We have our own set of idols – wealth, which we talked about last week. Power is another. Perhaps the biggest idol right now is the false god of Christian nationalism. And Christian nationalism is a false teaching.

It is vocal and influential. And it can sound really right and patriotic. But it's neither. I'm not going to go into detail here, but I wrote about it in my last newsletter article so take a look if you haven't read it.

It's a false teaching that is the opposite of what Jesus taught and how he lived and died. And it's the opposite of what we are called to do as followers of Jesus – love our neighbors, feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, and so on.

The divisiveness and chaos of our present time are exhausting to many of us. The need to rekindle a faith that will give us courage to stand for the true gospel is real.

A living faith is one that breathes. We breathe in God's love for us, and we breathe out action for the sake of the world God loves.

One of my daily meditation resources comes from the Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico. It was founded by Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and mystic.

His classic quote is that the most important word in their name is neither contemplation nor action, but rather the word and.

Contemplation nourishes us. Practices like silent meditation, solitude, prayerful scripture reading, making music, time in nature, hearing the word and receiving the sacraments in worship. Those things feed us and help rekindle our faith. Those practices connect us to the Holy Spirit that lives within us.

But contemplation by itself can become self-serving navel gazing. What contemplation does besides open us up to God is open us up to the suffering of the world around. When we encounter the Spirit within us, we encounter the Spirit who makes us one with all the world. We begin to see that we can't just separate ourselves from the suffering of others.

And that drives us to action...to acts of charity and generosity...to peacemaking and caring for the vulnerable...to advocating for justice.

On the other hand, action without contemplation – always breathing out and never breathing in that nourishment from God can leave us burned out and angry.

And action also rekindles our faith. We come alive when we are serving and acting on behalf of the gospel.

A few months ago immigration officers moved into Minneapolis in a massive, heavy-handed and often unjust way.

I went to seminary in St. Paul and the Twin Cities probably have the most per capita number of Lutheran churches of about anywhere in the country. I have a lot of colleagues and friends who are pastors in Minneapolis.

One of those colleagues serves a church in the heart of an immigrant neighborhood. Through posts from colleagues and friends, I saw daily how they lived out their faith in that breathing in and out...they gathered for prayer and worship and then hit the streets.

Yes, they marched in non-violent protest – you may or may not agree with that. But they also did grocery drops for immigrant families afraid to leave their homes.

They frequented the immigrant owned businesses to help support them when their neighbors were afraid to come.

They raised money for legal fees.

That action rekindled their faith massively. But it was also exhausting, and church leaders throughout the area emphasized the need for times of quiet and solitude and prayer.

That's the breathing in and out of faith. Both rekindle.

When we are truly answering our call as disciples, we remember that we are not given a spirit of cowardice. Instead, we are given a spirit of power...a spirit of love. A spirit that calls us to proclaim and live out the gospel word of love. In a world that seems ever drawn to rage and hate, that can take real courage.

We spend time in silence, prayer, worship, and contemplation to build up the faith and courage we need to live in a world often hostile to the gospel. We connect to the Holy Spirit within us, and we are given not only guidance, but the will and courage to act.

And then we return once again to contemplation...to connect with that Spirit within us to recharge.

We breathe in, and we breathe out. And the God who lives within us rekindles that flame of faith.