

“Flourishing in This Time”
May 9, 2021

Isaiah 66:12-14

John 15:9-17

Are you languishing or are you flourishing?

Two articles in *The New York Times* this past week raised that question for me and many others.

Languishing is, apparently, the mood for 2021. In the past year we’ve learned new skills, created new schedules, and in some ways changed for the better. At the same time, we have put off and postponed; we are on hold, we are weary and worn out as we wait for life to return. We’re not even waiting for life to return to normal—just to return. The organizational psychologist, Adam Grant, suggests that for many, the over-all feeling is “blah.”

A lot of people are languishing right now. Maybe you are. And if you aren’t, you probably know someone who is.

Flourishing is the opposite—a feeling of purpose in what you are doing, the sense that you are moving forward and living in a way that is fulfilling. And the *Times*—helpful as always—not only provided a ten-question quiz to assess your flourishing, it also provided an article with “seven simple steps to get you thriving again.”

It’s always good to learn that something will only require “seven simple steps.”

The God who comforts the people as a mother comforts her child speaks through the prophet: “Your bodies shall flourish. Your hearts shall rejoice.

“I appointed you,” Jesus says, “I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.”

These are images of the human flourishing that God desires for all. We listened last Sunday as Jesus told his followers: “I am the vine, you are the branches.” As we listen further this morning, perhaps you are beginning to sense that we, the branches, are being invited and equipped to thrive.

External circumstances can and do help with this: the warm beauty of springtime, the growing number of people vaccinated, the reconnecting with family and friends that some have already experienced contribute greatly to human flourishing.

But let us remember that Jesus speaks as his hour of betrayal and arrest and death has come. Facing the worst in life, Jesus of the love that is at the root of all human flourishing. As is often the case his words are as difficult as they are comforting:

“Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends...I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends...”

This, then, is the love with which we are loved.

This is the love with which we are to love.

These words are difficult because we have lived for over a year in a time when many friends have been lost—lost to Covid, lost to other illnesses, lost to us in the myriad of ways that bereavement comes.

How do we flourish when faced with the great loss of friends and family?

I received some help with this recently in a small book called *The Order of Time*, of all places, by an Italian theoretical physicist who teaches in France, Carlo Rovelli, of all people.

Rovelli is writing about the mystery of time. I won't pretend to understand all that he writes.

But in the midst of that discussion, he tells of two American physicists—his “spiritual fathers,” he calls them—John Wheeler and Bryce DeWitt. Recalling the last time he saw Wheeler, Rovelli says:

“I went to see him at Princeton [and] we, took a long walk together. He spoke in the soft voice of an old man: I could not make out much of what he said but did not dare ask him too frequently to repeat what he was saying. Now he is no longer with us. I can't question him anymore, or tell him what I think. I can no longer tell him that it seems to me that his ideas are correct, and that they have guided me through a lifetime of research. ...Because he is no longer here—here and now. This is time for us. Memory and nostalgia. The pain of absence.”¹

That is a profound expression of the sadness that so many feel because of the losses of the past year—and, really, because of all the losses of life.

What Rovelli says next helped me—so I want to share it with you. After writing of “the pain of absence,” he continues:

“But it isn't *absence* that causes sorrow. *It is affection and love*. Without affection, without love, such absences would cause us no pain. For this reason, even the pain caused by absence is, in the end, something good and even beautiful, because it feeds on that which gives meaning to life.”²

The losses that so many of us have known, the losses that weigh heavily on our hearts because they are so new, the losses that weigh heavily on our hearts after so many years—in some sense we can call them “good and even beautiful” because they grow out of the love that we have known from others and the love that we have shown to others.

And here's how all of this is related to time:

“As human beings,” Rovelli writes, “we live by emotions and thoughts. We exchange them when we are in the same place at the same time, talking to each other, looking into each other's eyes, brushing against each other's skin. We are nourished by this network of encounters and exchanges.

“But, in reality, we do not need to be in the same place and time to have such exchanges. Thoughts and emotions that create bonds of attachment between us have no difficulty in crossing seas and decades, sometimes even centuries, tied to thin sheets of paper or dancing between the microchips of a computer. We are part of a network that goes far beyond the few days of our lives and the few square meters that we tread.”³

Hasn't this been our experience in the past year? We are isolated, we are separated—and yet the bonds between us have grown and we have even developed new attachments to new people.

Those bonds have transcended time and space, nourishing us when we languish, helping us to flourish.

And isn't this our experience with all whom we have lost—a continuing presence, what we call the *communion* of the saints.

Perhaps then, we can see in a new way the deep bond that we have with the One who two millennia ago invited us “Abide in my love.”

We abide in a love—and that love abides in us—that is beyond the strictures of time and space.

This is how God wants to love us in Christ—as friends.

This is how God wants us to love one another and as we do, to love the world as well.

We have a proficiency and a proclivity in this congregation to make love known in public, which is how Cornell West describes the work of seeking justice. We get enraged. We get engaged. We love out loud and that love bears fruit.

But the living Christ also calls us as friends of one another to love one another—to do the simple and challenging work of seeking the good of those whom we know well, those whose foibles and failings we know well, and those who know our shortcomings. A congregation—and *this* congregation in particular—is made up of people whom we look upon with affection, whose well-being we seek—even when we have known them for 10, 20, 50 years.

The words Jesus spoke to his followers near the end of his life were not for them alone. Across time and space, they speak to us, telling us that we are profoundly loved, inviting us to love one another so that in our time, our joy might be complete.

Across time and space, Jesus continues to speak to our languishing hearts, calling us to renewed flourishing, to resurrected life.

¹ Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*, pg. 120-121.

² Ibid.

³³ Op. cit., pg. 122-123.