

Serenity to Accept What I Cannot Change

Luke 9:21-22, 22:39-53

²¹He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, ²²saying, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

³⁹He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. ⁴⁰When he reached the place, he said to them, “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.” ⁴¹Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed, ⁴²“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” [⁴³Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. ⁴⁴In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.] ⁴⁵When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, ⁴⁶and he said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”

⁴⁷While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; ⁴⁸but Jesus said to him, “Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?” ⁴⁹When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, “Lord, should we strike with the sword?” ⁵⁰Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. ⁵¹But Jesus said, “No more of this!” And he touched his ear and healed him. ⁵²Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, “Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? ⁵³When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!”



When the students in his 2nd grade class sat learning about butterflies at the museum, Matthew pulled at his mother’s hand and said “go home”. “Go home!” he shouted. His classmates looked briefly at him and then turned their attention to their museum guide. Matthew has autism.

Matthew’s mom, Lisa, kept including him in the field trips hoping that he would show an interest. Each time she prayed, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.”

Diane and Matthew’s educational assistant, Diane, agreed that it was time to go. As they left the group, they came upon a room that was filled with a miniature train. Matthew’s attention and excitement focused on the locomotives.

20 minutes later, at the sound of approaching footsteps, Matthew again grabbed his mother’s hand and said “Go home”. They passed the butterfly displays and Lisa hoped that Matthew would take an interest in them, but he did not. “Go home” Matthew said to his educational assistant.

On the way home, Matthew listened to music on a headset and his mother’s mind wandered. She remembered another field trip that ended prematurely for Matthew. As his classmates were

preparing for a scavenger hunt, they were leaving for their van. Along the path, however, a blue jay streaked across the path, squawking loudly as it went. Matthew stopped and laughed from his toes. In a moment the jay squawked its way to another tree and Matthew laughed again a full body laugh.

Lisa looked into the rear view mirror at her little boy, smiling as he listened to his music, that same boy who is still happy with parallel field trips with his class. And she realized that her for serenity, for acceptance of what cannot be changed had been answered.¹

Serenity.

We can feel for a moment while listening to a water fountain or the gentle sounds of a harp. How would you describe it:

Beautiful
Delightful
Wonderful
Peaceful
Joyful

The Old Testament calls it “shalom” and the New Testament “eirene” for peace.

The expectation is that there is a serenity available to us by faith.

In the 23rd psalm God leads the person to green pastures and still waters while in the valley of the shadow of death. A great image of serenity.

And then there was Stephen, the first martyr, who, like Jesus, was neither frantic nor panicked, but prayed that God would forgive those who in violence were taking his life.

And then there was Jesus who accepted that he would suffer and die.

At the moment of his arrest, Jesus showed that for people of faith, there is something beyond the fight or flight instinct within us...and that something is the serenity to accept what we cannot change.



The Serenity Prayer is a prayer that has been committed to memory and become a major spiritual tool for many. One Christian man said that after the Lord’s Prayer, the Serenity Prayer has become the prayer that he relies on most to guide him on his spiritual journey.²

¹ See “The Other Field Trip” in James Stuart Bell and Jeanette Gardner Littleton, Living the Serenity Prayer, Adams Media, Avon, Massachusetts, 2008, p. 4ff

² Philip St. Romain, Reflecting on the Serenity Prayer, Liguori Press, Liguori, Mo, 1997, p. viii

The Serenity Prayer became widely known and used after William Griffith Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous printed it in modified form and distributed it. He had read it in a quote by Reinhold Niebuhr in 1941.

Several years ago there was some questioning whether Niebuhr was the original author. After additional research, the editor of the Yale Book of Quotations said, “By ...Goranson finding it in 1937 with an attribution to Niebuhr at that time, that makes it much more reasonable to conclude that he did originate it.”³

What matters to us is that so many have found this prayer so helpful.

And so we begin today our three part focus in worship.

Let’s begin by praying the prayer together. You will find it at the beginning of your bulletin:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

How often do we find ourselves butting our heads against matters that we cannot change:

Illness
Some physical condition
Unemployment
A child’s predicament
A parent’s increasing age

And all our efforts to change the unchangeable lead us to feelings of

Frustration
Powerlessness
Helplessness
Hopelessness
Despair

As someone said, “a negative judgmental attitude will probably only aggravate the health problem, increase the pain and add more fuel to the fire of resentment.

But is it possible to accept what we cannot change?

Victor Frankl was a prisoner in a concentration camp in World War II. In his famous book Man’s Search for Meaning, Frankl writes,

The experiences of camp life show that [people do] have a choice of action. There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome,

³ Religious News Service, quoted in “The Christian Century”, December 29, 2009, p. 15

irritability suppressed. [People] can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.⁴

First, what is serenity?

Peace as the world gives happens when everything in our lives is aligned according to our desires.

We imagine our vacations and summer even strolls, and moments with the grandchildren where everything is going just as we would hope.

The problem with such worldly peace is that it can be taken away in a moment

By a word spoken in anger
An event happens beyond our control
In a word – something rains on our parade.

But there is another kind of peace, this serenity that is not dependent on the circumstances of our lives, that serenity of which the psalmist spoke, and Stephen gave witness to, that serenity of Jesus at the moment of his arrest and later on the cross.

Katherine Swartz speaks in poetic voice.

Serenity Is Not⁵

Serenity is not
A quiet mountain lake,
Nor a nature preserve
With only the birds for company
Nor release from responsibility:
For the soul determined to fret and worry
Is little swayed by circumstance.
Serenity can be
Found in a blighted inner city
Where every night is shattered by gunfire,
Or in solitary confinement in a dirty cell,
Or amid the onslaught of a dozen demands,

⁴ Victor Frankl, quoted in Philip St. Romain, *Reflecting on the Serenity Prayer*, p. 12-13

⁵ Katherine Swartz in June Cotner, *Serenity Prayers*, Andrew McMeel Publishing, Kansas City, Missouri, 2009, p.

For the soul that rests in God's peace
Is little swayed by circumstance.

Serenity is possible for those who realize that the world's peace, wonderful as it is, is not our hope...because it can be taken from us in a moment.

Rather, the serenity of the psalmist, of Stephen and Jesus at his arrest is something different.

The Serenity Prayer reveals that the serenity which has been the blessing of so many who have prayed the prayer has come as a gift of God.

Whatever our ideas of God may be, the prayer teaches us that God is one who has the power to give us this gift of serenity.

For some, that is a welcome word, an invitation gladly accepted. For others, that word pushes them outside of their comfort zone.

One woman who has overtime embraced the Serenity Prayer said that before this prayer, "God had only be one half of a swear word."⁶

Another man said that before taking the leap to pray the Serenity Prayer, he thought was of the opinion that "religious people were not very thoughtful and thoughtful people were not very religious."⁷ But this prayer was written by one who gave his life to thinking deeply about God.

If you are to have hope of this prayer becoming a prayer of your heart and mind, it requires of you to consider that many thoughtful people are religious, and that countless people who did not trust God have grown beyond trust in God to discover that God answers again and again the simple words of this prayer.

But the prayer words are not magical. Accepting what cannot be changed is not (normally) an immediate response.

You may remember that before his arrest, Jesus spent the night praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was deeply troubled and sweat drops of blood.

He did not know for certain God's will and sought, if possible, to avoid the arrest and crucifixion that seemed to be coming his way.

Richard Foster is a Quaker who has written extensively on the subject of prayer. He writes of Jesus time in Gethsemane,

⁶ Barb Rogers, Twenty-five Words: How the Serenity Prayer Can Save Your Life, Conari Press, San Francisco, CA, 2005, p. 8

⁷ William V. Pietsch, The Serenity Prayer Book, HarperOne, New York, NY, 1992, p. 4

Gaze n adoring wonder at the scene. The solitary figure etched against gnarled olive trees. The bloodlike sweat falling to the ground. The human longing: “let this cup pass.” The final relinquishment: “not my will but yours be done.”

He really did want the cup to pass, and he asked that it would pass. “If you are willing” was his questioning, his wondering. The Father’s will was not yet absolutely clear to him. “Is there any other way?” “Can people be redeemed by some different means?”

Foster then writes of the necessity of struggle. Struggle as we saw in Jesus is important because this prayer is not about fatalism – whatever will be will be.

Likewise serenity is not simply detachment – distancing ourselves from our dreams and desires. Rather, what we see in Jesus is a letting go...with hope! It is a trust that God is good and out to do good to us always.

As Paul wrote, “God works for the good in everything with those who love him and are called according to his purpose.”

Part of the serenity that comes through this prayer is the trust that God is up to something good. That accepting what cannot be changed is “trusting that there is a bigger plan that we can’t see” and “making room for something more”.⁸

But rather the realization that at a very deep level – all is well with the world
There are injustices, tragedies, griefs
But believing that the whole world is in God’s hands => that God bends evil
toward the good.

Welcoming Angels⁹

In the arduous simplicity of this moment
I open my heart, mind, and soul to stillness.
In the deeper quiet
I sense the greater Life that is my life.
I do not live only; I am lived.
I do not breathe only; I am breathed.
I am not only the one I appear to be
But also the One who appears in me.

⁸ See Eileen Flannigan, The Wisdom to Know the Difference, the Penguin Group, New York, NY, 2009, p.198

⁹ Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro in June Cotner Serenity Prayers, p. 4

I Must Walk Again the Wooded Path¹⁰

I must walk again the wooded path;
I must stroll the country lane
Where sunsets fall like summer plums
And stardust falls like rain

I must chase again the firefly
On the honeysuckle vine.
And watch an eagle spread its wings
Above the tallest pine.

I must see once more a hummingbird
Where hollyhocks grow wild.
And run barefoot through Autumn leaves
Like I did as a child.

I must stand atop a mountain
When the valley's white with snow.
And linger there till purple haze
Spreads twilight far below.

I must do these things lest I forget
How precious life can be.
I must walk again the wooded path
Of quaint simplicity.

Drop Thy Still Dews of Quietness¹¹

Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace.

The serenity prayer is a prayer

Joan Chittister on prayer

Therefore,

- 1) That spiritual serenity is more a possibility than we currently experience – trust

¹⁰ Clay Harrison in Serenity Prayers, p. 8

¹¹ John Greenleaf Whittier in Serenity Prayers, p. 13

- a. The example of Jesus
 - b. The word of Scripture
 - c. The witness of others
- 2) That serenity is a God-thing, a gift from God received through prayer - hope
- 3) That this is a prayer for all people – so I invite you to pray it each day for 21 days. - pray
- a. This week you may pause and reflect no accepting the things you cannot change

Acceptance is not about doing nothing. Susan Silberstein is the founder of the Center for Advancement in Cancer Education. Dr. Silberstein writes about one of the common traits of those people who experience remarkable recoveries: “They accept the diagnosis but reject the prognosis.” That is, they practice serenity and courage at the same time. They accept the reality of their disease but they do all that they can to change what they can which will be our focus next Sunday.