

BYOB (Bring Your Own Brain)

Serenity Prayer; a way of life

August 7, 2011

A Pentecost 8

Matthew 14: 8 ff loosely on all texts

*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.*

(The Serenity Prayer above is used by AA and is based on Reinhold Niebuhr's prayer printed below.)

GOD, give us Grace to accept with Serenity the things that cannot be changed, Courage to change the things that should be changed, and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

Today's BYOB Bring your own Brain sermon is based on 3 of your questions. The first reads, "*I would like to hear a sermon on unanswered prayers because I have been through a lot growing up. And it seems that my prayers are not answered.*" I know a bit of the story of the person who wrote this and he has been through a lot. I want to assure him that God does care and God often works through other people and the church and so if you are in a real pickle maybe we can help.

A second request reads, "*I would like to hear a sermon on how to stay positive. I know God is always there for me but how can I "feel that?" How do I find peace and hope in the midst of despair?*"

I think, though that we all have a version of this prayer going through our heads. When our lives do not change we begin to wonder if God answers every prayer.

The simple answer to that is yes. God does answer every prayer. The difficult answer is that God does not give us specifically everything we ask for. That's hard to hear, I know. But even the best parents don't give their children everything they ask for, nor should they.

Perhaps our problem may be in part that we too often pray “Gimme prayers” and when we don’t get what we want, we think God has not answered our prayers.

God does answer every prayer first and foremost with the promise, “I love you, and then with “You are mine forever and I am with you always. I will not abandon you.” And in the end that is perhaps the best to any prayer.

Which leads me to an anonymous request. It reads:

“I would like to hear a sermon on the words of the serenity Prayer—the message of the words and how to carry that out in real life, because I need help to decipher the difference between what can and can not be changed.”

Today I am going to reflect on the Serenity Prayer which you will find printed on an insert. Right away you are going to notice that there are two versions, one on each side.

1. The *original version by Reinhold Niebuhr* asks God to **give us grace** and the courage to ***change things that should be changed.***
2. On the other side we have the version that is used by 12 step groups with the permission of Niebuhr and it reads, ***grant me the Serenity and courage to change things I can.***

One emphasizes the need for community and our work together while we lean on God’s grace and that some discernment about ethical/moral choice should be made.

It’s not just a matter of **can we** but **should we.**

The other version is an individual prayer about my personal stuff.

I would guess that Niebuhr believed that the individual could only do so much alone and that when addressing ethical issues the greatest work happened in community and I would guess that those who pray this prayer as an individual practice would say that individuals need to know their stuff before community work can happen. I also know though that the group is essential in every 12 step program.

Both are good and useful but perhaps for different circumstances.

The theology behind **serenity and peace,** reflected in these prayers, goes back at least as far as scripture. In today’s texts,

Elijah learns to listen to God.

The Psalm writer sings of serenity and peace,

The Roman’s text reflects wisdom,

And in Mathew, Peter discovers courage in trusting Jesus.

Reinhold Niebuhr, a wonderful American Pastor, Teacher and Theologian of the 20th century, was the first to write it down in prayer form and used it in a sermon he preached in the 1930's.

He was a professor at Union Seminary and very involved in a number of social and ethical issues including war and peace, civil rights and race relations and labor, unions and unemployment.

He wrote this prayer during a ghastly time of human history when the horrors of Nazism were being revealed. He was calling his listeners to action, where they could make a change and should. Later copies of this prayer were distributed to soldiers in WWII.

So let's look at Niebuhr's prayer but remember that it has value for us as individuals too.

GOD

The Prayer begins with **God**.

It all begins with **God**.

All life begins with God.

All change and transformation begin with God. All forgiveness and reconciliation begin with God.

It all begins with **God**

Beginning with the word "**God**" is a reminder that there is "a higher power" something beyond me and my little realm. Beginning with the word "**God**" is to surrender to the understanding that it's not all about me.

There is more in the world than what I can see and touch and understand.

It is also placing my self under God's authority.

For some "God" is the group or reality.

Today I am a pastor preaching a sermon, so I'm free to say Christians understand this God in the fullest sense... Father Son and Spirit, the Trinity.

As Christians, we also look to the death and resurrection of Jesus for clues as to who God is.

GRACE

Niebuhr's prayer begins with a request for grace—God's undeserved love or as we say in Confirmation, **God's Riches at Christ's Expense**.

Asking for grace, reminds us that, though we can work toward **serenity, courage and wisdom**, ultimately, they are a free gift of God's grace.

That's important to remember because it keeps us humble.

SERENITY to change

Serenity is closely linked to peace but not the kind of peace that the world gives but the peace which surpasses all understanding. Serenity does not rely on existing circumstance. Quiet harmony is not a requisite of serenity.

I found a great image for serenity . Homiletics:

Serenity begins with an orientation toward God:

There was a legend that a rich merchant scoured the Mediterranean world looking for the distinguished apostle Paul. He encountered Timothy, who arranged a visit with Paul, who was a prisoner in Rome. Entering the jail cell, the merchant found a rather old man, physically broken down. The merchant was amazed at Paul's personal peace and serenity . . . they talked for hours. The merchant left with Paul's blessing and prayer ... Outside, the merchant inquired, 'What is the key to Paul's power? I have never seen anyone like him in my entire life.' 'Haven't you figured it out?' asked Timothy. 'Paul is in love ... Paul is in love with Jesus Christ.' The man looked even more confused. 'Is that all?' With a smile on his face, the young preacher answered, 'Ah, but that is everything.'
--O. S. Hawkins,
Revive Us Again
(Nashville Broadman Press, 1990),107.**NOT USED**

An art competition awarded a prize for the best expression of peace. One painting depicted a deer and a fawn grazing at the skirt of a mountain meadow rimmed with pines and cedars stretching heavenward. Another showed a cat curled up in a basket, resting with all its being, as only cats can do.

But the first prize went to the painting of a tumultuous waterfall. Torrents rushed downward, crashing on the rocks below, sending spray high above a tree branch extended just above the mist, with a bird's nest in a fork. Safely within were the mother bird and two babies.

Serenity is not dependent on the setting around us; instead it is being in harmony, allowing God to fit all the pieces of our lives together. As we cultivate the presence of the Holy Spirit deep down, God grants serenity. (Homiletic Online)

So of course Serenity is rooted in acceptance, especially acceptance of what can not be changed. It is a process of let go and let God. The past is the past; the future is not yet; what we are left with is the moment.

Byron Katie in her book, **THE WORK, (as quoted in Homiletic)** says she can find only **3 kinds of business in the universe: mine, yours and God's.**

Stress comes from living outside of our own business and instead spending time in your business or God's business.

When I think about how you ought to be less negative and more forgiving or how you ought to get a better job or not smoke, I am in your business.

When I speculate about who is going to heaven or who God hates or when I am going to die or if my house will be hit by a tornado, I am in God's business.

When I am in your business or God's business the effect is separation—from you, from God and even from myself. Katie gives the example, “When I thought “My mother should understand me,” I immediately experienced a feeling of loneliness. And I realized that every time in my life when I had felt hurt or lonely, I had been in someone else's business.

She concludes by asking: So if you are living your life and I am mentally living your life, who is living mine?

Serenity comes when we accept and live our own lives. Furthermore it is only our lives that we can ultimately change. We can not change someone else's weight or attitude. We can only change ourselves, our attitudes and actions.

Now we don't need to agree or be happy or support others in destructive behavior but in the end it remains their business.

In Neibuhr's understanding of ethics, we do have a responsibility in community and global affairs to speak our truth. This was especially true with Nazi Germany. Niebuhr's German relatives were in favor of Hitler early on. After disagreeing with them, he eventually cut off his correspondence with them. Later when they asked for help after the war, he politely said he would help them only after he had helped all those who had been harmed by Hitler's policies. He kept his business clear and still worked for justice based on love and dignity for all.

This of course takes courage. We need courage to make the changes we make.

Courage is about facing the truth, my truth. It is about honesty and boldness. It is about living with questions. It is about doing the very thing we are afraid to do.

We can confess openly. We can ask forgiveness, we can forgive another; we can take the next step. We are never on our own though. God is with us. And no doubt many others are there to support us if we but look around.

Ultimately for Peter, it was Jesus who gave him courage and confidence when he needed it.

Finally, we prayer for **Wisdom**.

In times of difficulty, pain, or distress, our self awareness may be clouded. We may have blind spots. The world is a confusing place and it takes wisdom to discern what we can and cannot change. Answers and clarity come over time, from others who have been there, through personal reflection and as life unfolds.

Did you know that in the bible, Wisdom is another name for God? Actually it is the feminine name for God—Sophia and the Book of Proverbs tells us that all wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. (Not terror but respect—like at the beginning of the prayer, recognizing that it begins with God not me)

We are going to read together Niebuhr’s original version and then I am going to continue with the rest of that prayer that isn’t as well know;

God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.

Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.

Amen.

This is the good news of the gospel.