

The Serenity Prayer

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, Sunday, August 26, 2018

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #100, I've Got Peace Like a River; #205, Amazing Grace (tune sung on vowels Oh and Ah), #108, How Can I Keep from Singing. Reading: the current Serenity Prayer in many languages.

Personal reflection by Ginny Johnson (printed after the sermon text).

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” – popular version

“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.”¹ –original version by Reinhold Niebuhr, 1943

Sermon

As we heard it read in many languages just now, the familiar version of the Serenity Prayer is known around the world. It's been made universal by Alcoholics Anonymous and all of the subsequent networks of the 12-Step Recovery movement, like Al-Anon, Co-Dependents Anonymous, and Adult Children of Alcoholics.

There are numerous accounts of its origin, including ancient Greece, Rome in the Middle Ages, or Germany in the 1700s. Yet it's not that old, and it's American-made. Seventy-five years ago this summer, it was written and spoken at the Sunday morning service of a small-town church.

The place was the Union Church in a farming village called Heath, in the northwest corner of Massachusetts. At the time, Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr was a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. For two months almost every summer from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s, Niebuhr, his wife and their two children stayed at a cottage in Heath. Every summer the town was home to numerous professors, ministers, and government officials. The preachers took turns filling the summer pulpit, and Niebuhr was one of them. I will read you part of his original prayer:

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.²

We know it as the Serenity Prayer, but Niebuhr called it a Humility Prayer. It has made quite a journey out of that little church. About a year after that 1943 service, a version of the prayer was printed on cards and used by chaplains in the serving overseas during the Second World War. Some time later, the head office of Alcoholics Anonymous began printing it on small wallet cards for AA groups around the country. AA had been founded earlier, in 1935, by two men who had relied on support and accountability from each other to end their misery of active addiction. In 1955, at AA's 20th anniversary national convention, the delegates approved the Serenity Prayer as an official part of the movement. So far as I know, it's recited in unison at every kind of 12-Step meeting.

Moreover, it's part of many people's spiritual practice, whether or not we are in recovery.

Among others who rely on it, this prayer has been important to many parents—those with typical stresses of rearing children or adolescents and those whose children of any age are struggling with self-defeating behaviors or with mental or physical afflictions.

I don't recall hearing it in the church I grew up in, or in my family. I could have used it. It might have given me some emotional peace amid the turmoil around me—some way of keeping perspective on the alcohol abuse, resentments, anger and hostility I saw and feared. Furthermore, all of us could have used it, as a family practice. Perhaps Niebuhr's original words could have been a focus of conversation as a family:

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.

What a good practice it could have been if, sitting together, we had read those words once a day or once a week, and then reflected on the state of our family and each of our lives! We could have asked one another: Where do we need grace? Where do we need courage? What wisdom do we seek at this moment? Looking at the words from this perspective, they are not only a prayer but a tool for discernment—about our lives, our loved ones, and our whole human family, near and far.

Discerning between a situation we cannot change and something we could change is not easy. So this prayer is useful because it reminds us to ask the question. And the asking of it—and wondering and reflecting about it and then making a choice—this is where we need wisdom.

As a professor at a progressive seminary, Niebuhr was no doubt a source of wisdom and counsel to many people, but he was also provocative. His decisions about what we should try to change brought him a wide circle of colleagues—and outraged many more of them. I'd like to tell you about him.

Reinhold Niebuhr was born in Missouri in 1892. He died in 1971, in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. His parents were German immigrants, and his dad was a pastor to a German-speaking congregation. Reinhold and his brother, H. Richard Niebuhr, became ministers in a non-Lutheran Protestant sect in America which had originated in Germany.³

Reinhold attended a liberal seminary near St. Louis and then Yale University for his Ph.D. At age 21, he began serving a church in a small town in Illinois. Two years later he was appointed to a church in Detroit. There he became involved in labor-organizing campaigns and in the work of racial equality and integration. In 1928, he moved to New York City to become a professor at Union Theological Seminary. Many of his students later became notable preachers, teachers and activists.

His wife, Ursula, had their two children confirmed in an Episcopal church. Yet in her book about the Serenity Prayer, their daughter Elizabeth Sifton recalls that the family was inter-denominational. In fact, she writes: "Most of our closest family friends were cheerfully secular atheists or even somewhat anti-religious, or they were Jews or Catholics."⁴

In *The Great Thinkers of the Western World*, Rowland A. Sherrill calls Niebuhr the "foremost public theologian" of the first half of the twentieth century.⁵ His theology was anchored in the human issues of the day. The name for Niebuhr's theology is Christian realism. Niebuhr and other Christian realists did not withdraw from the world, did not preach about any kind of heavenly reward or escape. They did preach that God is taking note of how human beings treat one another, and especially how we treat the poor and vulnerable.

Christian realism affirms that every human being has dignity and worth, because all of us are created in God's image. At the same time, it says, we humans are fallible and foolish, given to pride, selfishness, and self-delusion. We stand under God's judgment both for our actions and our failures to act. Faithful people are called to resist evil and work for justice and freedom for all people. However, since we cannot be totally sure we are doing the right thing when we make a big decision, we must act with humility. We do what we can to

make a difference in the world, yet we dare not be convinced that we are doing the will of God. This is why it's good to pray for wisdom.

In 1930, early in the Great Depression, Niebuhr was the Socialist Party's candidate for New York's State Senate.⁶ He lost. Ten years later, in 1940, Niebuhr resigned from the Socialist Party to protest its position against U.S. involvement in the war in Europe. In published remarks he said: "The [Socialists] are right in insisting that the civilization which we are called upon to defend is full of capitalist and imperialist injustice, but it is still a civilization."⁷

Originally, he was a pacifist, against all war. However, Niebuhr came to believe that love is not enough to resist organized and systematic evil. To be sure, the Christian Gospels prescribe love between enemies as well as friends. Yet the personal virtue of love cannot stop impersonal systems of destruction and domination. Sometimes force is necessary, especially to protect those who are vulnerable. In his book *Beyond Tragedy* Niebuhr wrote: "[Human] Goodness, armed with power, is [easily] corrupted; [yet] pure love without power/ is destroyed." Grant us the courage to change what can be changed—indeed.

As the Nazis came to power in Germany, Niebuhr provided support to his friends in Europe, including theologian Paul Tillich. Storm troopers attacked his university and Tillich lost his position as a professor and chairperson in philosophy. Niebuhr helped him come to New York and get a position at Union Seminary. When the Nazis began invading other nations, the United States of America remained neutral throughout the 1930s. Both Niebuhr and Tillich protested against this nation's neutrality. They were criticized by non-interventionists and pacifists for their activism. Niebuhr said he wished the pacifists hated Hitler as much as they hated him.

In 1931, John Haynes Holmes, a Unitarian minister in New York City, showed naïve optimism about Europe's fate. He said Europe was "slowly but surely approaching the longed-for goal of harmony and peace." Niebuhr's published reply was headlined: "Let liberal churches stop fooling themselves!"⁸

Niebuhr challenged the delusions and the prejudices of many U.S. academic and religious leaders. He attacked the anti-Semitism of his associates in Germany. He stopped speaking to his German relatives because of their anti-Semitic bigotry and their enthusiasm over the rise of Hitler.⁹

Ministers like Niebuhr were attacked by more conservative church leaders for being "political." In her book about him, his daughter said he was accustomed to their criticism. It was his opinion that the majority of churches in America and Europe were concerned only with self-preservation and protection of their status and privilege. He believed that most pastors indulged the prejudices of their parishioners, either out of cowardice or self-preservation. As his daughter notes, it is no less political for a church to accept the status quo of social inequalities. *That* is a political stance. Likewise, it is no less political for a preacher to let the wealthy, comfortable or powerful get by without questioning their privilege in light of their faith's espoused values.¹⁰

Niebuhr's daughter recalls that magazines have named him one of the "major leaders of postwar American Protestantism."

"If only!" she jokes, for he could not be a leader if the churches did not follow him. He was invited to preach in almost no congregations, and most ministers paid little attention to his message about social justice, peace and freedom.¹¹ He did speak in numerous college chapels, on a regular basis, and he took his turn in the summertime pulpit in the village of Heath.

After the war, Niebuhr worked in Germany to help re-establish the ruined institutions of democratic society, as well as to do relief work for survivors of the war. From Berlin, he wrote this to Ursula, his wife: "The inner city is a city of the dead. . . people walk about in a daze." From Stuttgart he wrote: "The children here are all hungry. They do not have enough to eat. . . . We must pray for these children and help them."¹²

In the coming decades, Niebuhr wrote about and worked for the African American civil rights movement, the labor movement, and anti-poverty programs. He joined campaigns against nuclear weapons and against U. S. military involvement in Vietnam.¹³

By the 1960s, Niebuhr's mailbox was stuffed with letters from people thanking him for the Serenity Prayer and asking questions about it. The prayer was embroidered on pillows and towels and engraved on plaques. His daughter writes that that a friend of hers working in Johannesburg, South Africa, back in the 1970s had often seen the Serenity Prayer framed on the walls "of many black South African homes."¹⁴ Given that the racist rule of Apartheid lasted until the middle of the 1990s, those who opposed it and suffered under it needed all the grace, courage and wisdom they could get.

Here is part of another one of Niebuhr's prayers from a Sunday service. I think his words remain relevant in these times. See what you think...

We pray to you this day mindful of the sorry confusion of our world. Look with mercy upon this generation of your children, so steeped in misery of their own contriving, so far strayed from your ways and so blinded by passions. We pray for the victims of tyranny, that they may resist oppression with courage and may preserve their integrity by a hope which defies the terror of the moment. We pray for wicked and cruel men, whose arrogance reveals to us what the sin of our own hearts is like when it has conceived and brought forth its final fruit. O God, who resists the proud and gives grace to the humble, bring down the mighty from their seats. We pray for ourselves who live in peace and quietness, that we may not regard our good fortune as proof of our virtue...."¹⁵ Amen.

(Actually, the prayer goes on, but I'm stopping it there.)

The Serenity Prayer, popular and comforting as it has become, is more than a source of personal comfort. As Elisabeth Sifton notes: "Its instructions are [hard] to follow."¹⁶ For example, to accept loss, death or unavoidable pain is not easy. And praying for the courage to change what should be changed [will raise] ethical questions." For example, she asks: "Do I act [only] for myself, or for my family, or . . . ?" What about our community and our nation? What about people in other nations? If it's

wrong that others endure injustice or misery, should it not be changed?"¹⁷ Shouldn't we try?

As many injured protestors, political prisoners, and martyrs for justice have demonstrated, it can be risky to try to change what should be changed. This is why it's good to pray for courage.

For Reinhold Niebuhr, to pray for acceptance and serenity is not to wish for escape from the demands of our common humanity. Indeed, he said: "Life has no meaning except in terms of responsibility."¹⁸ His famous prayer's popular title is the Serenity Prayer, but he called it a Humility Prayer.

Whatever we name it, this prayer is a gift for human beings in all kinds of struggle—emotional and spiritual, ethical, social and global. This prayer asks for grace. It asks for courage... to change the things that should be changed—not merely in our own lives, but in our life together as a whole human family. Let us remember that human need, human struggle, human courage, and human love bind all of us together. May it be so. Amen.

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Personal Reflection by Ginny Johnson

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

Relatively early in my career, I was a new manager. One of the people who reported to

me was Betty, the woman who ran the company's Employee Assistance program. In reality, she ran the program beautifully and I just ran inference—making sure she had a good budget and submitting stats to the boss at strategic times and stuff like that.

Mostly, she trained me. I had a lot to learn! I learned how to assist people in getting help for their addictions, to get out of abusive relationships, or get help for mental health issues. The person has to want to take the action. You're just there to help them get it accomplished. I used those skills later and continue to use them.

That's when I was introduced to the Serenity Prayer. Betty gave me a small poster with the prayer, which I immediately pinned to my cubicle wall. Regularly I would need to look at it and remind myself I couldn't control everything. I not only needed that at work, but at home, too.

I'm blessed in many ways. I had a wonderful childhood, not perfect but lovely. I'm not addicted to alcohol and I never smoked (which was partly luck). Those of you who know me will not be surprised. I'm a pleaser and a striver, which I came to realize were similar to addictions. Like addictions, they can sometime take over my life, made me miserable and kept me from taking action on my own goals and priorities.

I know where it comes from – at least in part. When we were growing up my folks didn't say we had to get all As or be the best baseball player. They said, "Do the best you can." Oh my—both my sister and I interpreted that literally. We expected ourselves to give 110% effort 100% of the time. That's impossible! and very tiring. As you might guess, one of the phrases that went through my head a lot was "I'm not good enough." Later we thought to ask my mom and she said, "oh no, we were

trying to take pressure off." But by then, most of the damage was done.

This shows up when I'm asked to be on a committee or take on a task. I want people to like me. I want to please them, so often I would say "yes". Then I would regret it because I didn't like the work or more likely, I was overwhelmed with so many commitments. I **learned** to say, "Thank you very much for the compliment, but I couldn't possibly do that." Does that sound rehearsed? It is. I even had it written on a piece of paper next to the phone to remind me. Sometimes I had to read it. My son and daughter would sometimes whisper and point, "Say it, Mom!"

Back to the Serenity Prayer. Seeing that prayer on my cubicle wall was the start of my "recovery". I even shortened it to "Serenity, Courage, Wisdom" --almost to a mantra. I could remind myself to remember I wasn't in fully charge of my environment.

I've made progress over the years, but like any other compulsions or addictions, it rears its ugly head periodically. I can tell, "I'm getting out of hand" when I go into my ultra-organizational mode or try to solve the problems of the world myself.

If I go back to "Serenity, Courage, Wisdom" and breathe, I can often slow down and really consider what I can affect and do just that.

Thank you, Betty. You gave me a gift of a lifetime.

¹ As quoted in Elizabeth Sifton's *The Serenity Prayer* (New York, 2003: W.W. Norton & Co.). These are the lines of the rest of the prayer:

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.

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Amen.

³ In 1957, this denomination merged with the Congregationalist Church, and the merger formed the United Church of Christ. It is the most liberal of the large Christian denominations in the United States; it's the denomination of the church next door to us, our

landlords. Richard, his brother, is well known for his book about social-class distinctions among the many religious denominations in the United States; I used it for my doctoral thesis (see chapter 3).

⁴ Sifton, 36.

⁵ "Reinhold Niebuhr," by Rowland A. Sherrill, *Great Thinkers of the Western World*, J. P. McGreal, ed., Harper Collins, 1992, 526.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 316.

¹² *Ibid.*, 300.

¹³ See "Reinhold Niebuhr Discusses the War in Vietnam," *The New Republic*, December 31, 1969 (originally published 1967). Accessed August 26, 2018. <https://newrepublic.com/article/72011/reinhold-niebuhr-discusses-the-war-vietnam>

¹⁴ Sifton, 341.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 203-4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 311.