

Prayer Practices - Serenity Prayer

*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.*

For thousands of people who are part of Twelve Step Programs, the Serenity Prayer is a daily prayer practice for strength. Given the world we inhabit, this prayer is particularly powerful and poignant. When there is so much swirling and stirring around us and within us, it is difficult to sort through all our experiences and emotions. When we are trying to decide how to stay safe amid a pandemic; how do we help dismantle discrimination ~ especially when based on race and sexual orientation; how do we try to live faithfully in such a time as this? We can find ourselves pulled to one extreme or another ~ we can be pulled to the extreme of racing to every opportunity to talk about race hoping that one more conversation will cause scales to fall from the eyes of those who hold onto hate and bigotry. Or we can go to the other extreme of thinking that nothing we do will make a difference so why not just sit here and binge watch another season of a show on Netflix?

Trying to sort through what is in our power to make a difference and what is held in the possibility and promise of God's future is not easy. Where do we need to act so we do not stay silent on the sidelines and where are our insights insufficient and could even cause more pain and suffering? Such questions will not be resolved easily. In fact, part of the rhythm of returning to this prayer daily is because our lives change constantly. What we could not change yesterday can shift toward a place where our presence could make a difference. Where a word to a person yesterday might have been met with a cold shoulder, today might strangely warm that person's heart. Likewise, yesterday's window may close. Too often, we cling to our agendas. Our mantra is, "Might makes right!" We end up forcing our opinion onto others; running over people we have categorized and classified as less than; then justified all this by attributing our work to doing God's will.

This prayer shines a sacred spotlight on the question, am I being willful or willing? Am I living the Jesus Prayer that God's will be done, or do I suspect that God is clearly in my corner, so I am free to do as I want? Perhaps, we can all learn a lesson from our Twelve Step brothers and sisters, that we are not as in control and in charge as we'd like. We are all addicted to something. Whether that is alcohol, drugs, sex, shopping, the lure of respectability, power, wealth, political positioning, or our own self-importance. I love the quote from Anne Lamont, "Of course, we think our opinion is right. Otherwise, we would get *another* opinion!" Lamont has a beautiful title to a book on prayer, "Help, Thanks, Wow." It is a great structure, where we begin by asking God to interrupt and intervene in places where we are powerless and feel at the end of our rope. Where are you this morning clinging to a tiny thread and crying out, "Help"? It might not be that God swoops in like a superhero to save the day, God may warm the heart of a friend to call you on the phone and listen. Help comes in a variety of forms. Secondly, we give thanks for those moments that nurture and nourish us. We name and notice the traces of God's grace. Finally, we see deeper the amazing persistent presence of the holy leading us to say, "Wow". Often, "wow" is followed by stillness, silence as we sit/soak in the sacred.

Today, I invite you to take a moment to pray aloud the Serenity Prayer. Say the words slowly, savoring each one, letting every syllable settle into your soul. Don't just rush on to the next activity after you finish this prayer practice. Sit for a few moments asking, how do you feel? Do you feel more peaceful or frustrated or blah? This prayer is not some hocus pocus, magical formula that will turn our world into pony rides and chocolate rivers where there is no more Coronavirus and we all join hands to sing, "Kumbaya". But over time, returning and repeating these words can open space for the Holy to move in our midst, opening our hearts, and stir our lives in amazing ways.

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What has changed in your life over the last six months? Go ahead make a list, I will wait. My list would look like this:

Leading an Easter Service with the smallest attendance ever (whooping 8 people in the sanctuary. And thankfully only 6 lilies!)

Learning I had been washing my hands all wrong – who knew twenty seconds was so long?

Beginning to be more honest and heartfelt about how deep racism is the face of George Floyd's murder and now Jacob Blake added to a list that is too long of violence against African-Americans.

Graduation for my nephew postponed and I was unable to attend.

Weddings I was to officiate postponed until next year.

Summer vacations needing to be postponed and re-imagined.

Summer camps postponed for my kids.

My kids confined to the house and a general malaise that settles into our bodies and minds and hearts.

Discovering that masks are the new fashion statement.

Ministry completely changed to on-line and phone calls.

Learning years of technology in the span of a few months.

Realizing that so much of what I thought was going to be temporary will now more than likely become part of the new normal.

Starting to post these morning meditations and beginning a Thursday Prayer Service, both of which feed my soul.

I could go on, but you are starting to see that we are amid shift sands and constant change. It is natural to what to go back to "normal". As one meme on Facebook put it, "I want my 2019 problems back!" Yet, there is no rewind button on life. In the face of these waves crashing down

on us, we can feel overwhelmed. I certainly feel that this morning reading about Jacob Blake and what is happening in Wisconsin where I once lived. We are not as in control or in charge as we like to think. Richard Rohr often talks about an important theme and thread of life being moments when we move from “order” to “disorder” to “reorder”. We are clearly in the “disorder” part of that cycle. Things are being upended and there is no resolution in sight. Often, we want to race and run back to where we were comfortable. But it is only when we lean in and listen to the wisdom of this stage of “Disorder” that we can grow. Rohr writes, “We all come to wisdom at the major price of both our innocence and our control. Few of us go there willingly; it must normally be thrust upon us. However, we must be wary of staying in Disorder for too long [less we become too disillusioned or cynical or depressed].

I believe we are in the messy middle trying to sort through the question, “what can we change and what is beyond our control right now?” Constantly coming back to that question prayerfully, asking for God’s guidance and grace and strength can be what helps us navigate through the coming days. I pray that throughout the day you will keep adding to the list of things that have changed in your life. I encourage you to look not only for the negative, but also for things that have come about which might never had without the pandemic. For example, I would not have started a Thursday Prayer Service here on Facebook...it wasn’t in my pre-Covid 19 plans. I would probably have not learned Zoom. And I don’t know if I would have had some of the conversations I have been blessed by each week. The good, the bad, and the ugly are always there in our lives. The disorder, Genesis 1 tells us, continues to churn and swirl within all creation. Out of that chaos, our still creating God, calls out and continues to fashion/form/love us all into being.

Prayer: God grant me a grounded-ness and gracefulness to truly trust in You even when things don’t go according to my plan.

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The second sentence of the Serenity Prayer invites us to reflect and realize that we are not completely powerless. We are not puppets or pawns. We are co-creators crafted in God’s beautiful image. There are actions you and I could take to make a difference for ourselves and others and this world God so love. Some of these actions will ask very little of us. Others will demand more energy than we believe we have. Some changes will ask us to give up power or privilege or possessions. Some changes will ask us to let go of cherished ideas. I am reminded of the Apostle Paul’s transformation, how scales of hatred and his way or the highway of seeing the world, had to fall from his eyes. He needed the courage to forgive himself and ask for forgiveness from those he hurt.

I find it fascinating that the prayer invites us to find both “serenity” or “peace” or an “oasis of wholeness” in the face of obstacles we might not be able to overcome on the one hand. Then, immediately invites us to have the courage, conviction, confidence, and chutzpah to change what we can on the other hand. In some ways those two sentences contradict each other. But in other ways they name and notice the shorelines we are trying to steer the boat of our life between. We are constantly navigating the rivers of life where one shore is beyond our control and the other shore is a place we can do something about. Here is the thing: even if you keep going down the same path, the same river, the shorelines change! What once was on one side shifts to the other. The vessel of your life needs to keep vigilant watch, we are called to be prayerfully open to what experiences, encounters, relationships, opportunities and obstacles are moving because of the flow of life.

When I hold the word, “courage” in my hands, I am reminded of what Brene Brown says about this world. Brene has written extensively about these issues. A quick Google search of her name will yield TED talks, videos, books, podcast, and countless interviews/articles. Dr. Brown has studied vulnerability, but she writes about the courage to live whole-heartedly. She writes, “Courage is a heart word. The root of the word courage is cor—the Latin word for “heart.” Courage originally meant “To speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart.” Today that means:

- Talking about how we feel
- Asking for what we need
- Being ourselves
- Being kind to others who are trying to be themselves
- Learning how to be brave and afraid at the exact same time

That last emphasis point is so powerful for today. We need to be brave and afraid at the same time. We need to find courage and serenity to be co-conspirators in creating life right now. We need to be honest about the woundedness within and around us while still holding onto the truth that God is not finished with us yet.

What might courage look like for you today? How do you embody and embrace this invitation to courageously change what you are able to alongside the honest fears we all have? What might it look like for courage and serenity to co-exist in your heart right now? May the answers to these questions be found as you live into this day God has made.

Prayer: God, grant me openness, willingness, strength, creativity, a lovingkindness, and hopefulness to change what I can with my whole heart and life. Amen.

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The third, and final sentence, is one that I find most meaningful. In trying to discern and decide where to roll up my sleeves and where my presence might not be helpful, I need more than just my

own mind. I need more than a Google search. I need more than another book to read. I need God's insight. I need God's wisdom. The Apostle Paul says this most poignantly in 1 Corinthians, "We see in a mirror dimly". (13:12). Our understanding is always cluttered and clouded. We are often baffled and bewildered. We constantly need to come back to the question, where can I make a difference today? Where can my words, actions, and presence share God's love?

What I love about those two questions is to ask each...then be quiet! They are not meant to be rhetorical or asking God to confirm what we already think. We need space for wisdom to intervene and interrupt our ways with God's way. While neon signs, sudden revelations, and angels appearing do happen to help us discern, often the work of Spirit is at a slower pace than most of us live life. The Spirit moves at a savory pace. Think of a tree growing. It doesn't tower over our heads immediately or instantly, but rather slowly (almost invisible to our eyes) the growth happens both above and beneath the soil. Same is true for the tree of our life. We grow in our rootedness in God, our soul reaching into the soil of the sacred where we are. We grow in the risk of reach out toward others. Sometimes the storms come and twigs snap, limbs come crashing down, and whole trees are uprooted. This is true for you and me. The storms of a pandemic, persistent and pervasive racism, discrimination, polarization, and the ways we "other" people are snapping relationships, causing us to physically/emotionally/spiritually feel uprooted, and parts of our life are crashing down never to be re-attached. Today, we can add places in our country where the earth is groaning from wildfires in California to trying to clean up the devastation of the storm across Iowa and Illinois to hurricane Laura impacting Louisiana and parts of Texas. Our hearts are heavy.

The promise of faith is not that this can all be made magically better through prayer or singing or if we just do/say/believe the right things. The promise of faith is a fuel to face what is happening. Like trees whose roots beneath the soil communicate and share, so too we need to find a connection to one another, especially amid the storms of today.

In fact, part of the power of the Twelve Step programs is for people to realize that we are not meant to attempt life alone. We can find the wisdom to know what we can and where there are limits through deepening relationships. We deepen relationships within ourselves and others. We need spiritual friends, community connections, conversations, safe spaces where we can be vulnerable, and wholehearted if we are to encounter wisdom. Wisdom is not just knowledge or facts, wisdom is woven into experiences and encounters. Wisdom comes from making mistakes! Wisdom is dynamic and evolving and expanding. What was wisdom five years, five months, or five days ago might be subtle shifting and re-ordering in response to the world today. We need each other in learning to discover what is ours to do today and what we let rest in God's hands for another time.

Prayer: God whose wisdom, Sophia, is part of life. God whose wisdom, Sophia, lives in all creation. God whose wisdom, Sophia, calls and cries out through us and around us. Unclog our ears to hear You, O God, this day. Amen.

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It is my prayer that living with these words this week has opened you to new insights and ways of being in such a time as this. It is my prayer that you have found your voice in defining and describing changes that are happening within you and around you. It is my prayer that you have found moments of peace amid the swirling and shifting sands of these days. It is my prayer that you have found the conviction to join in the symphony of God's conducting and creating, knowing that you have a part to play in God's masterpiece. It is my prayer that you will keep searching and seeking God's grace and love to guide you. The journey is not finished. There is more to explore out there. Every day is a new creation with both obstacles and opportunities. Each and every day, we ground ourselves in the realization that there is work each of us is called to do and something will need to be left undone/unfinished/incomplete. It is my prayer that you will seek out spiritual friends for this journey, don't go it alone. The road can be rocky and rough, you may need someone to help you when you stumble. We all need someone to talk thing through and not relying only on yourself. Carrie Newcomer sings about how we may not be able to change the whole world, but we can make a difference to those who are within three feet of us (or now six feet of safe social distance). Who is that person you can reach out to today? Who is that person whose presence helps you? Where are you still baffled and bewildered? Where is clarity coming to the mirror in which we see dimly? Where might we be open to the One whose still singing voice is calling and commissioning us to be God's people in these days?

So may you, my friends, live this Serenity Prayer this day and for countless days to come. And may grace, peace, and love be with you now more than ever. Amen.

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