

“The Serenity Prayer” Preaching Series – Part 1: “God, grant me the Serenity”

John 20:19-31; 14:27

The Second Sunday of Easter – April 15, 2012

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden

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I am beginning an eight-part sermon series using Trevor Hudson’s book entitled *The Serenity Prayer*. Like Trevor, I have always been fascinated by this prayer, maybe because I yearn for serenity. Serenity means simply “peace.” And, who doesn’t want it? When I think of peace in this sense, I think of that tough inner security that nothing can fully take away. Surely, no one has a peace that cannot be touched at all by the circumstances of life, but all who profess to be followers of Jesus have access to a power that nothing can fully take away. Serenity ... there’s no doubt about it ...we all yearn for it.

Where did the Serenity Prayer come from? We don’t know for sure. Some say that it goes back as far as the year 500 AD, or maybe earlier. What we do know is that in 1934, Reinhold Niebuhr used a form of it in a chapel service at Union Theological Seminary.

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.

We also know that around 1941 Alcoholics Anonymous started picking it up as the prayer that best expressed what they were doing and going through. At first, every communication, every meeting, was saturated with this prayer. It can still be found in some of the literature of AA and used at some of their meetings.

The prayer begins, “God, grant me the serenity” There’s something crucial, right here at the beginning. The serenity that this prayer talks about is *not* something we can acquire by ourselves. We can’t *manufacture* serenity; we can’t *buy* it; we can’t *achieve* it. According to the prayer, serenity is something *God* “grants,” something God *gives away*, as a gift. I’ll return to this “gift” idea in a moment. Let’s move on to the next word: “Serenity.” It’s a lovely word, a charming, inviting word. It brings to mind images of stillness and calm and tranquility. We’re naturally drawn to “serenity.”

The *Bible*’s word for “serenity” is “peace” — in Hebrew, it is “Shalom.” The biblical meaning of “peace” is not simply the absence of war or conflict; peace is a state of wholeness

and completeness, fullness of life. “Shalom” is a foretaste of heaven, experienced here on earth. Jesus often spoke about peace; after all, he was known as the Prince of Peace. The risen Lord greeted his disciples each time he appeared to them with this word “Shalom!” Earlier on in the service, we read the most significant statement Jesus ever made about peace in John’s gospel chapter 14. Jesus is saying good-bye to his friends on the night of the Last Supper. And he says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14:27)

Jesus is making a clear distinction here between two kinds of peace. There’s the kind of peace that the world gives; and there’s the peace that Jesus gives. What’s the difference between the two? I think the world’s peace gives is what we feel when we’ve got all the bases covered, we’ve accounted for every eventuality, we’ve prepared for every calamity. The world’s peace comes when we finally get enough money, or power, or position, or gain enough approval from other people ...when we’re finally secure in our job and our health and our relationships. Don’t get me wrong ...there is absolutely nothing wrong with desiring these securities in life ...indeed, much of what we know as the world’s peace is very comforting and good for us. The main problem with the world’s peace is that it is a very fragile thing.

We do well not to rely solely on the world’s peace. There’s no such thing as absolute *financial* security; there’s no *relationship* in our lives that can’t be lost in a heartbeat. There’s *no* form of the world’s peace or security that can’t be smashed in an instant. While there is nothing inherently wrong with the world’s peace, we are cautioned by Jesus not to lay up for ourselves and rely on earthly treasures.

Jesus tells the story of a man who thought he’d found absolute peace in the world. He was a rich farmer, who stored up all his crops in huge barns and thought, “Now I have plenty of good things laid up for many years.” The rich farmer is the very picture of worldly peace, but it turns out that the man is a fool. That very night he dies. The point of the story is not that he was wrong to amass wealth ...there is nothing wrong with being rich ...the point of the story is that he relied on his worldly wealth to give him a sense of peace. In the end, the security the world gives is mostly an illusion, a form of denial — sheer foolishness. Even if we are throwing all our energy into trying to gain the world’s peace and security, we know, deep down, that it can all be taken away in an instant. And that’s why, in spite of all our striving, we still

don't know real peace.

Trevor Hudson begins chapter one of his book by sharing the following pastoral experience: *I was sitting with a thirty-something management consultant, celebrating his recent promotion. After sharing his good fortune and telling about the sense of elation and satisfaction that he experiences, he suddenly sighed deeply. Then with a wry smile, he said rather wistfully, 'But there is still something missing in my life.'*

I agree with Trevor that this simple phrase pops up in pastoral conversations with striking regularity: "There is something missing in my life." He names and describes this human condition as follows: "They remind me of that God-shaped vacuum inside all of us. A great void that only God can fill. Nothing else can. When we try to fill this empty space in our hearts with something other than God, our lives remain hollow. More than this – we experience an inner discontent that robs us of peace and serenity. Even though our lives may appear to be working well on the outside, on the inside we feel that something is missing."

When Jesus speaks about peace in John 14:27 he is pointing us *away* from *the world's* peace, and toward *spiritual* peace ...toward *shalom* ...toward serenity ...toward Jesus' peace. Jesus wants us to see the critical difference between the two: *the world's* peace depends on the circumstances *around* us; *spiritual* peace, Jesus' peace, is something that's *inside* us. Jesus' peace is an *inner* calmness and serenity that doesn't rely in the least on whether our barns are full or that things are going well for us. Serenity is not to be confused with security. Jesus' peace has nothing to do with prosperity. It may be nice to have money and not to worry about having enough income to care for our family, but the size of our savings account or retirement plan is not proportionate to the serenity we experience in life.

Someone has said: "Peace is not the *absence* of trouble, but the *presence* of God." Peace is something we find only when we give up trying to manufacture security for ourselves, and start to put our trust in God instead. "Peace is not the absence of trouble, but the presence of God." I like that!

There are cynics who claim that the serenity I'm talking about is really just *denial*. I reject that argument. My point is that real peace doesn't pretend that sickness and tragedy and death don't exist; Jesus himself said, "In this world you *will* have trouble." But Jesus insisted that you could *still* have *peace*, even in the *midst* of trouble. "In this world you will have

trouble,” he said, “but take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33) The peace we have in Christ doesn’t *deny* the troubles of the world, but it transcends, it eclipses, the troubles of the world. The peace we have in Christ doesn’t *deny* the storms raging around us, but it assures us that, *whatever* the storms may do, God is cradling us in the palm of God’s hand.

“God, grant me the serenity” The real key to the Serenity Prayer is right there in the first three words: “God, grant me” Like any good prayer, it’s a plea for help; it’s an admission that we depend for everything on a power higher than ourselves. It is acknowledging there is this emptiness we have been speaking of inside of each one of us. Trevor Hudson asks us to consider this: “This emptiness within our lives,” he writes, “is one of God’s most special gifts. A gift which reminds us that we all . . . have an inborn desire for God. This desire is at the heart of our deepest longings. It can only be satisfied when we seek after God and have a personal relationship with God. Only then do we begin to experience true peace and serenity of heart and mind.”

When we say the opening words of this prayer, “God, grant me the serenity,” we are acknowledging that the serenity we’re seeking is only available through our faith relationship with God. In this world we *will* have trouble, Jesus said. But we can have *serenity* in the midst of trouble, if our heart is grounded in the love and the power of God. When we turn to God with open hands, and ask for serenity, the gift of peace will be given to us.

Reverend Hudson tells us at the end of chapter one that when we pray the Serenity Prayer, the gift of serenity comes as a seed, planted in our hearts. It still needs to be nurtured. At the very least, this will require us to face the different sources of unpeace in and around our lives, changing the way we think and live, and working for peace in the practical realities of our daily living. “There is no lasting peace without effort,” he writes. “But when we do what we need to do, like a seed hidden in the soil, the gift of peace begins to silently germinate, and then bursts into flower in our lives and finally begins to bear fruit.”

As we leave this place this morning, may we worry less, and spend more time nurturing our relationship with God — through prayer, through worship, through quiet time in God’s word. As the apostle said in Philippians chapter 4, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving make your requests known to God.”

And if you do, “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (vv. 6-7)

Let’s stand, as we are able, and pray the full Serenity Prayer together:

God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference —
living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time,
accepting hardships as the pathway to peace,
taking, as [Jesus] did, this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it,
trusting that he will make all things right
if I surrender to his will —
that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with him forever. Amen.