

“The Serenity Prayer” Preaching Series – Part 2: “To Accept the Things I cannot Change”

Romans 8:28, 31, 35-39

The Third Sunday of Easter – April 22, 2012

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

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“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love God; who are called according to God’s purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

I know there have been countless times when this verse has rung true in my life, and I’m sure that is true of your life, too. Let’s face it, bad things happen and they happen unpredictably and with varying levels of intensity. Some are mere inconveniences; some are life-shattering disasters. But there is an amazing promise in our text from Romans 8:28 that can meet every negative moment head-on, and given enough time, that promise will resolve every problem. In Jesus Christ, we have an unfailing, all-encompassing, God-given guarantee that in every single circumstance of life God is working for good and, sooner or later, it will turn out well for those who love God.

Do we believe this promise? Do we trust God to work in all things for our good? Or do we wonder if there are some situations in which God can’t or won’t work for our good? After all, there are challenging and sad situations which are irreversible. What good could come when serious mistakes have resulted in dead-end disasters? What can rise from the ashes of total financial ruin, or career destruction, or family dissolution especially when brought on by our own weakness or frailty?

My answer is: If we need help to trust the promise contained in Romans 8:28, we should pray *The Serenity Prayer*. Today is the second week of our Spring preaching series on “The Serenity Prayer.” Last Sunday we renewed our understanding of “serenity” as a gift, not an acquisition. Serenity is something we receive from God; it’s not an innate or inherent quality that some people do possess and others do not. Serenity is something each one of us may receive; it’s not a virtue that some are born with. Serenity is something God wants us to have. Personally, I find that a very attractive offer. As this serenity grows within us, we will grow in our acceptance of the things we cannot change in life. But to do this we will need to believe the

promise in our text from Romans chapter 8.

Romans 8:28 tells us not only that God works for our good, but that *in all things* God works for our good. The text is unambiguous; it means precisely what it says ...in “***all things***” God works for our good. Not in *some* things, not in a *few* things, not even in *many* things, not in *just good* things, not in *bad* things, or *sad* things, or *funny* things—but ***in all things***! There is no asterisk beside the words “all things.” There are no exceptions or exemptions. It’s neither hyperbole nor exaggeration. It is all-encompassing. “***In all things***” means “***in all things***.” That includes all kinds of ***unchangeable circumstances***:

- The unborn child who mysteriously dies in the womb days before delivery.
- The sixteen-year-old girl lying in intensive care after being hit by a drunk driver.
- The ruined vocal cords of a young man who wants nothing more than to sing.
- Every heartache, headache, tragedy and triumph.

God can work in each and every tragedy and crisis to bring good from it. And God promises to do so for those who love him. In addition to unchangeable situations, Trevor Hudson adds two other areas from our daily lives where we may need a spirit of acceptance that comes through God’s gift of serenity when we know God is working for our good. Those two areas are ***past regrets*** and ***other people***.

Remarkably, even our past regrets are included in the “***all things***” of this verse. Past regrets, due to our sin and failure, are included because “when we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” We affirm this whenever we sing the words of the song, *Something Beautiful*: “All I had to offer God was brokenness and sin, but God made something beautiful of my life.” Sometimes we want to exclude our sin and our failure, saying, “I know God can take the things that happen to me and work them out for good, but I did this to myself. I really messed up. I’ve ruined my home, my marriage, my life. I’ve failed my kids. I’ve betrayed God. I’ve lost my job. I’ve run up huge debt. This is my mess ...a mess of my own making ...God could not possibly want to bring good out of this let alone make something beautiful out of it.” Remember our text again: “***In all things*** God works for good.” God does want to bring good out of your mess and my mess

and help us to make peace with our past regrets.

I mentioned that Trevor Hudson writes about a third area that often involves things we simply have to accept. The area is *other people*. Here is the problem: we can waste our energy trying to change the people around us so they're more like us, so that their behaviors are less bothersome, their attitudes are less annoying, they make smarter choices, or they aren't so irresponsible. Reverend Hudson makes the following comment (it is almost "tongue-in-cheek" humor): "Those of us who profess to be following Jesus usually do this under the guise of wanting to be helpful and caring. Then, when those whom we are trying to change don't cooperate, we get uptight. If we are fortunate, the light begins to dawn for us that we really cannot change other people."

So where are we today as we face certain situations, past regrets, and other people that we cannot change? How do Romans 8:28 and *The Serenity Prayer* help to move us forward? "God, grant me the serenity to *accept* the things I cannot change." Today, as we move to the second phrase in *The Serenity Prayer*, we recognize that the key word here is the word, *accept*. God, grant me the serenity to *accept*. For so many of us, that's one of the hardest things to do — to "*accept* the things I cannot change." Let's be honest ...we really would like to have control of our lives, wouldn't we?

I mentioned worry last Sunday and reminded us that Jesus said, "Do not worry." Well, the fact is, whether we're big time worriers or not, we all worry about some things — we all want to have control. And we get frustrated when we don't have control. In fact, some times we get so frustrated over our lack of control that we make poor choices, such as hurting ourselves or others, or abusing ourselves by overeating or under-eating, or punishing our bodies with too much or too little exercise, or using alcohol or drugs or prescription medicines to deaden our feelings or try to create feelings. In an attempt to try to control our own lives and/or the lives of others around us, we may try to manipulate others or use threats, bargaining, abuse, and so on.

An author and blogger named Byron Katie writes and talks a lot about "Acceptance." For instance, she states: "Acceptance is learning to stay in one's own business in daily life and also learning to accept or 'love' whatever turns up, in daily life, either in other people's business or in God's business." "Acceptance is learning to stay in one's own business." That, I

believe, is not cheap advice but rather costly counsel. I would make a note of it, if I was you. Again, the author states that acceptance is learning to stay in one's own business.

Please hear what I am about to say as if you are hearing it for the first time: *There is nothing in our lives that brings us happiness that we have total control over.* Not our spouse or significant other, nor our children, nor health, nor financial security. Not how we spend our leisure time or even our relationship with God. Nothing! It's a scary thought: the things that bring us happiness, that are so important in life, can vanish in an instant and when they do, the very core of our being can be shaken. One phone call, one pink slip, one wrong turn, in the blink of an eye our world can be turned upside-down. It is in that moment we realize that the things most precious to us are the things over which we have no control. And, it is in that moment that we need the serenity to *accept* whatever the world throws at us, the things we cannot change, and to believe that in everything God works for our good.

One of the early church mothers, a woman named Julian of Norwich lived in the Middle Ages – in the late 1300's – in a world filled with war and plagues, poverty and disease. She was acutely aware that she lived in a world in which there were unchangeable situations. In the midst of the horrors that stormed around her, she constantly struggled to accept the things she could not change. These perplexities caused her to struggle to understand where God was in her world. She would ask questions like: "Why are there such things as disease and war, poverty and oppression? Where are you, God, in the midst of this mess?" As she struggled, she grew closer and closer in her relationship with God. That happens to a lot of us, doesn't it? Julian spent much time questioning God about what she saw, how she felt, and listening to God's answers.

Finally, Julian of Norwich came to a place of peace, a place of serenity, a place of understanding God's presence in the world. This is what she wrote: "*Ah, good Lord, how could all things be well, because of the great harm which has come through sin to your creatures?*" And so our good Lord answered all the questions and doubts which I could raise, saying most comfortingly: "*I make all things well, and I can make all things well, and I shall make all things well, and I will make all things well; and you will see for yourself that every kind of thing will be well.*" And Julian goes on to write, "*And in these words God wishes us to be enclosed in rest and peace.*"

The serenity that Julian experienced was a serenity that does not guarantee there will be no more problems in the world ...there will be no more wars and earthquakes ...no more tsunamis and nuclear disasters ...there will be no more children born to abusive parents ...there will be no more fires that wipe out an entire family ...there will be no more cases of cancer to take the life of a 2 or 3 year-old child.

The serenity God gives won't guarantee that our prayers will be answered in the way we want them to be answered. This serenity offers a promise that in the *midst* of the problems and pain, in the *midst* of the war and suffering, in the *midst* of the brokenness and sorrow, indeed, "***in all things***" God is working and all will be well. Romans 8:28 offers the promise that God will be in the *midst* of *all* pain and suffering, *all* brokenness and sorrow. If we accept this gift of serenity that God is offering each one of us, all will be well. God will provide a sense of peace, an inner calm, an inner clarity, and an awareness of God's presence that goes beyond our pain and suffering to a place of connectedness with God.

I want the gift of serenity! Don't you? We want that gift of serenity. We know we can't achieve serenity on our own. We know we can't acquire it through listening to meditation tapes or practicing yoga. Don't get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with those things for helping to maintain a sense of serenity in our lives. But the serenity that we're looking for ...the 'peace that passes all understanding' that the apostle talks about ...*that* serenity is a gift from God. It's a gift that gets into the fabric of our being, a seed that germinates and grows and bears fruit, a peace that permeates our soul. It's a peace that brings us calm and hope in the midst of whatever chaos the world throws at us. "God, grant us *that* serenity" to believe that in ***all things*** God is working for our good and we can sing, "It is well with my soul."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us now stand, as we are able, and read *The Serenity Prayer* together before our closing hymn/song.