

Part three of the "The Serenity Prayer Series: To accept the things I cannot change."

Matthew 26:36-46 and Philippians 2:5-11

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Sunday, March 12, 2017

Today we take a look at the second part in the Serenity Prayer Series. Last week Pastor Ivan led us through a closer examination of the first phrase of that prayer, "God grant me the serenity." Now, this morning we move on to the next phrase, "to accept the things I cannot change." Quickly we get to the heart of the matter as the Serenity Prayer leads us to let go of the things that we have no control over. Only when we accept that there are situations or events that we cannot change, will we be able to experience the Serenity granted by God.

Each year, almost as soon as school is out, our family begins our yearly journey up Old Fort toward the Great Smokey Mountains to spend a week at Annual Conference at Lake Junaluska. For the kids, this week marks the beginning of summer vacation with trips to the pool, putt-putt and least we forget to the ice cream shop as we meet up with many friends we have not seen since the year before. It is vacation + family reunion +spiritual retreat all rolled into one. We have been staying in the same 1920's bungalow for the past 13 years which is nestled on the edge of the lake just below the white lighted cross. Many of you have seen the cross too---it is a hallmark for Lake Junaluska. (picture). Most every year, as soon as suitcases, and bags and coolers have been unpacked...I can almost always count on the question..... "Mom, can we go to the cross?" It always strikes me---not that a young child could ever fully understand the implications and horrific act of the crucifixion that took place on the cross---but in childlike wonder and faith...says, "Mom, can we go to the cross."

As we heard in our gospel reading, Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane...facing an uncertain future as he would make his way to the cross. Jesus was deeply grieved...so much so that he threw himself on the ground as he prayed. He asked his closest friends, the disciples, to stay with him...to keep awake. His first prayer..."If it is possible, Father, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."

In all his humanity, Jesus was asking for this horrible fate to pass from him. Before him was unbelievable pain and suffering...he asked for this fate to be removed. How could one who was so faithful to God's truth and love, be

subjected to this kind of accusation and punishment? It was almost too much to bear.

When life throws us a curveball...when a situation/diagnosis/event that we never thought would happen to us does indeed happen....we pray earnestly for God to remove the situation from our lives. We fight as hard as we can against it..."Oh no, not me. I will not accept that. How can I be able to tolerate this....this goes against everything I know...I cannot stand by without doing anything...how can I accept this?"

Trevor Hudson, the author of the book, "Serenity Prayer," gives us great insight into what it means when we pray, "help me to accept the things I cannot change." He does not sugar coat this ---it is a difficult step that is called for in the second phrase of the Serenity Prayer. He says, "This kind of acceptance seldom comes easily. To do so, we often need all the grace and help and power that God can give. But when we are able to recognize and to accept what cannot be changed, the seed of peace planted in hearts will begin to grow."

Hudson suggests that there are three areas in our lives where acceptance applies:

1-Regrets-Regrets are found in many ways. Regrets of the past; regrets of wasted opportunities; regrets of things done or undone; regrets over decision we have made or not made; regrets over things that have been said or left unsaid. You get the point. Most all of us have regrets---and usually the older we are the more we seem to have. And, so regrets are not in and of themselves that bad. But, the trouble it seems, is when we continue to re-live our regrets; when we linger and worry over them, it prevents us from reaching the peace and serenity God desire for us. Regrets can lead us to overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame and remorse causing us to remain stuck in the past.

The second area of our lives where it is hard to accept what we cannot change is our Unchangeable Situations. Hudson names these as, "Circumstances that can be deeply painful, especially those that involve irreversible losses: the break-up of a close friendship; an unwanted divorce; the consequences of a severe stroke, the diagnosis of a terminal illness, the loss of a loved one through death. Such traumatic losses like these cannot be reversed." When we find ourselves thrown into the whirlwind of such events there is much sadness and

grief; perhaps anger and tears and frustration and so much deep pain that some days it just seems unbearable. Peace and Serenity are so far removed that they seem almost unattainable in the depths of such despair.

And then, Hudson gives us the last of the areas of our lives where it difficult to accept what we cannot change. Other people. We have a human desire to control and change other people (or as my mama would---straighten them out); or fix them up and tell them what do to. For example, if a person is sad, we want to fix them so they will be happy. But on a deeper level—it may become more difficult when “a loved one’s behavior becomes dangerously destructive and abusive.” Such as Hudson describes, “Suppose your spouse drinks too much, comes home drunk regularly, and often speaks abusively. Even in such an extreme case, the wisdom of the Serenity Prayer still applies. We cannot change the person. We can tell him or her that such behavior is not acceptable. We can refuse to protect him or her from the consequences of their actions. We can join an AA group to find support. But, we cannot change the person.”

In each of these three areas- where it is difficult to accept what we cannot change, Hudson offers us hope through the Serenity prayer. In praying the Serenity Prayer we can let go of past regrets praying that God’s strength will help accept those regrets and lead us through them... to new intentions; new obligations; new efforts---new life. When we find ourselves in the midst of an unchangeable circumstance, we can still grieve our loss but as we pray the Serenity Prayer---and, as time passes; God slowly and gradually can lead us to a place of acceptance and healing. And, when we so desperately want to change a loved one who is demonstrating destructive behavior, praying the Serenity Prayer may not bring about change in that person; but change can and does happen within the heart of the one praying the Serenity Prayer.

When I began to think and pray over what this phrase of the Serenity Prayer means, what first came to mind was that “accepting the things I cannot change” was passive. This could only happen as some magical wand that God waves over to make it all disappear. But, what I think Hudson, teaches us is that acceptance is not at all passive. It requires an action and a response to God’s grace. Acceptance is truly the transformation of our heart and mind that takes intentional time and work, particularly in prayer. To accept what we cannot change is to pray in spite of persons or circumstances; it is to choose to embrace the unchangeable realities of our lives---doesn’t mean we have to like them.---but

to choose to accept what we cannot change is to recognize that God will use those unchangeable realities to bring about good .

Because as Hudson reminds us, “The Serenity prayer helps us to look beyond own strength of our willpower toward the power that God alone can give us.” In turn, God’s strength and power to help us accept those regrets/situations and people that we cannot change in order to continue the path to peace.

Which brings us back to the Garden. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus looked beyond his own strength---not what I want but what you want. In verse 42, Jesus continued praying fervently and with great passion. But the second time he prayed, the prayer was slightly different....”Father if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” You hear the difference. The first prayer was “If it is possible, let this cup pass”..... and the second prayer was “If this cannot pass unless I drink it, thy will be done.” This was an acceptance of a fate that Jesus could not change. So, in prayer, Jesus finally and willingly accepted the path to the cross...so that in the end God will and purpose would be fulfilled.

Even Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, recalled the willing obedience Jesus modeled for all who would follow him and who would call themselves Christians. He invited them to have the same mind as Christ. Jesus was obedient to even death on a cross and so he calls us to pattern our life after Christ. We must take on the mind of Christ so that we will have the power and strength that only God gives. For it is only through God’s power that we are able to accept the things we cannot change so we might gain the serenity God desires for us.

It is difficult to let go of what we cannot change.... Jesus knows all too well, this struggle---he wrestled with this himself during that extraordinarily long night in prayer. He knows the difficult task that is required for each of us to accept, lay down, give up, let go that which keeps us from accepting that which we cannot change, control, correct, or pass up.

What heavy loads of regret are you carrying around that keep you from having the mind of Christ? What do you need to let go of and lay down on the way to the cross so that you can finally have the serenity God so desires for you? What do we need to leave behind in the garden so we can continue of the path to peace?

As continue our journey through Lent onto Easter, we must also go to the cross. We must leave at the cross those things we cannot change.

*Hudson, Trevor, "The Serenity Prayer"