

The Rev. Steve Best
St. Thomas Church
10.10.19; Pent. 22C
Job 19:23—27a; Thess.
2:1-5, 13-17; Lk. 20:27-38

The Search for Serenity

“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.” This beautiful prayer, the Serenity Prayer, is arguably one of the best known and most loved of prayers. It speaks to the universal need that to find serenity in times of chaos, uncertainty, conflict, and even war.

In 1943, during the height of WWII, when peace and serenity could not be found in our world, a pastor and professor of theology by the name of Reinhold Niebuhr delivered a sermon in a small village church in NW Massachusetts. In the audience there happened to be an Episcopal priest by the name of Howard Robbins, Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, who just happened to be visiting his family. With Niebuhr’s permission Robbins was able to convince governmental authorities to include this powerful prayer in “the Book of Prayers and Services for the Armed Forces” which was distributed widely to US Service Men and Women serving in WWII.

What Robbins likely heard that Sunday morning was the full, unedited version of the Serenity Prayer:

God, give me the serenity to accept
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.

Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,

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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.

Today we remember and honor those veterans, past, present, and future who have and will accept hardship as a pathway to peace. I haven't met a soldier yet that doesn't, at his or her core, want peace. While it is true that there are many reasons for serving in our military—from altruistic to economic to being drafted--what I hear most from the veterans that I have helped is that they are in search of peace. Because soldiers are the first to be in harm's way when they are sent on a dangerous mission, they are often torn between the desire to serve a country they love, and worries about personal safety, the protection of others on the battlefield and the welfare of their families and close friends they have left behind. This reality highlights the first part of the serenity prayer that asks for wisdom and courage.

For several years I served as a pastoral counselor and mental health chaplain that reported directly to the bishop suffragan of military, hospital and mental health chaplaincies of the Episcopal Church. One of the benefits of this relationship was that I was provided with a prayer list, each year, that connected me to all servicemen and women across the globe. And do you know what the persistent prayer from the military community happened to be? They requested prayers for protection and peace—not conquest or even victory—prayers for protection and peace. And very proudly, I might add, chaplains of all faiths, including the Episcopal faith, continue to serve on the front line along side combatants helping them find serenity in the midst of danger and “accept hardship as a pathway to peace.”

Another dimension of traveling through hardship to find peace is what our veterans and their families often experience when the return home from battle. As a pastoral counselor and priest, I have had the experience of assisting those who have lost their friends and parts of their souls and their bodies in combat. From the shores of Normandy to the Mekong Delta, to the deserts of the Middle East, I have heard the confessions of those who because of their unsettled consciences have

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been tormented by the violence they endured, witnessed or committed on behalf of our country.

Often their trauma is exacerbated by the lack of understanding and support they receive when they return home. They badly need their past service to be acknowledged—in all its complexity--so they can live a more whole and holy present and tomorrow. I believe this process also applies to the healing of our nation as well as we process the impact of each war on our national psyche.

While it is true that everyone's spiritual journey is different, we are all serving in some kind of conflict zone because of where our culture happens to be right now. Sometimes the conflict one is located within our families and intimate relationships; it can also be found in our workplaces, schools, churches and between generations. Intense conflict and even violence are present whenever there is something significant at stake.

This is the case in today's Gospel lesson. The context is that Jesus is in the center of a war zone between warring parties—large two large stakeholders competing to shape the future of their society. On the one hand are the Sadducees who are aligned with or members of the high priestly class. They tended to be wealthy and politically connected. They only accepted the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures (known as the Torah) and because a resurrection from the dead is not mentioned there, they completely rejected any idea of life after death. On the other hand, there are the Pharisees who arguably were more religious and focused on personal piety and following the letter of the law. They accepted both the Torah and all of the books of the prophets and, most relevant to our discussion, they believed in the possibility of life after death.

So here Jesus stands, in the middle of an intense turf battle. And actually, the culture war he finds himself mired in is far more complicated when you add the other parties that had power such as those who followed King Herod (known as the Herodians), and the zealots (who wanted a political revolution), and of course the Roman empire over-lords. It was a hot mess just like today's world! In a deceptive ploy to trip Jesus up and tip the balance of power in the direction of the Sadducees, Jesus enters the battle zone, and with the skill of a veteran soldier he redirects the gun fire away from himself and points them to what is most important in the end: hope in a new and eternal life with God that is not limited by the customs and practices of this world—even if it is something as important as the future of

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marriage in the afterlife. Knowing that “hardship is a way to peace” and ultimately serenity leads to heaven Jesus begins to prepare them to receive a new identity as “children of the resurrection.”

Jesus’ mission of bringing forth this new identity is still operating in this world and cannot be destroyed by conflict, war, or violence. One of the bright lights that illumine this hope—pointing us to the wisdom “to see the things that can be changed” is the story of Roman Catholic Archbishop John Baptist Odama a soldier of Christ working for peace.

In a powerful book called as “Child, Victim, Soldier” author Father Donald Dunson records an occasion at a Confirmation Mass in Uganda when the archbishop in the presence of many children (who had once been forced to serve as soldiers), parents, and high-ranking military personnel said, “Little Ones stand up...The condition that you are growing up is wrong...You walk in fear. I am sure when you grow up you will ask, “Why did this happen? Where were our elders to help us and protect us? Getting on his knees before the children, Archbishop Odama then said, “I apologize...Forgive me. I should have done more to build you a safer and more peaceful world.” Amen

Please join me in prayer:

“God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change; courage to change the things we can; and the wisdom to know the difference.”

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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 we would have it,

Trusting that You will make all things right,

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So that we may be reasonably happy in this life,

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