

"COURAGE - SERENITY - WISDOM"

INTRODUCTION

Reinhold Niebuhr, the great theologian and teacher, used to spend his Summers in Massachusetts. He was often invited to conduct the Sunday Service in the little church near his Summer home. One July Sunday back in 1934, he concluded his sermon with a short prayer he had written. It went something like this:

"O God, give us the courage to change what can be changed; the serenity to accept what cannot be changed; and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other".

After the service was over, a neighbor went up to Dr. Niebuhr and asked him for a copy of the prayer. He took a crumbled piece of paper that he had tucked into his Bible and said, "Take it; it's yours. I shall have no further use for it".

DEVELOPMENT

The neighbor who asked for the prayer later used it on a Christmas card. The founder of Alcoholics Anonymous saw it and adopted it as the guiding prayer for that organization. The USO picked it up and reprinted millions of copies for people in World War II. And by placque and greeting card, by scribbled note and spoken word this prayer has covered many miles and helped many people.

On Tuesday evenings over at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church a group called Neurotics Anonymous meets. Here the emphasis is on pouring out emotions for 90 minutes in a circle of people who understand. The motto of this group:

"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".

Psychiatrists are looked upon with disdain. The comfort comes, say the members, from the knowledge that you're not alone, that someone else can be as crazy or confused, and that you can get some serenity from sheer talk with like-minded friends.

SUMMARY OF THE FAITH

To me, one of the reasons why this prayer is so appealing is that it is a clear summary of what the Christian faith is all about. It reflects the insight that every person lives with both freedom and necessity - the freedom to share in some aspects of the creation of his own life and society, and the necessity to accept and to adjust to some aspects of his life and world which do not bend to his will.

This, as I understand it, is the Biblical perspective of man. Man is not God, with complete power to do as he will; neither is he an idle, helpless spectator; rather he is in the middle in the whole creative process - creature and yet creative. There are some things he can change and some things he cannot change. We see this truth coming clear in the life of Jesus. In a very unusual way, he was able to change things and people, but there were also for Him certain immovable circumstances in his life which called for the grace of acceptance. Let's think about each of these petitions in this prayer.

COURAGE TO CHANGE

First, "the courage to change what can be changed". How much richer in achievement and influence is a person's life when he has the will and the courage to press on, to meet life head on, and how much poorer life becomes when a person gives up and stops trying.

Biography is full of illustrations of people, who instead of rolling over and giving up when they were knocked down by difficult circumstances found the courage to go on, to change, to build. Remember Glenn Cunningham - crippled in boyhood in a school house fire and told by his doctors that he would never walk again, determining to use his legs again and going on, in the memory of some of us, to run what was then the fastest mile on record.

Or Franklin Roosevelt, insisting that he would not be a helpless, useless cripple. In our time, Senator Harold Hughes, convinced that he did not have to spend his days in slavery to alcoholism. And today, hundreds of people in our own city quietly and courageously setting out to rebuild a business after so much that they had been wiped out in the looting of Wednesday night and Thursday morning...."the courage to change what can be changed"....this is a needed prayer for all of us at some time or other in life, when we come up against health problems, or family problems, or vocational problems.

I can remember some lines that hung on the wall of my father's study:

"One ship sails East; another West;
With the self-same winds that blow;
'Tis the set of the sails - and not the gales -
That determine the way a ship shall go".

Mind you, we may not have much to say about the gust of the gales, but we do have something to say about the set of the sails.

And, of course, in wider ways than in our individual lives, the courage to work for change is important. We have all seen in church, or community, or in the wider world, the lifting influence of one person with faith and vision and tenacity. From Moses to Martin Luther King, the scope of society has been changed by individuals who declined to settle for some status-quo of injustice and oppression. So often we ask, "but what can one person do?" and shrug our shoulders and give up trying. And therein by abdication and apathy, we can be licked, which is what Edmund Burke had in mind when he wrote that memorable line, "All it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing".

In contrasting spirit, those lines of Bonaro Overstreet, entitled, "Stubborn Ounces" come to mind, and they're addressed, as she put it, "to one who doubts the worth of doing anything if you can't do everything". Let me read them to you:

"You say the little efforts that I make
will do no good; they never will prevail to tip
the hovering scale where Justice hangs in balance.
I don't think
I ever thought they would.
But I am prejudiced beyond debate
In favor of my right to choose which side
shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight".

~~That's a fine phrase - "the stubborn ounces of my weight".~~ We owe a great deal to so many who have gone before us and who surround us now for the way in which they used the "stubborn ounces of their weight". "Give us the courage, O God, to change what can be changed."

SERENITY TO ACCEPT

But there's more to this prayer, because there's more to life. Grant us, too, O Lord, "The serenity to accept what cannot be changed". There are a lot of us who have more trouble with the second part than the first part, for we find it difficult to accept - emotionally and intellectually - the fact that all things will not shape up in accordance with our highest hopes and hardest efforts.

A person comes to realize that he's not going to occupy the top rung in his class, team, business, or society - or that if he does, there is no tenure at the top!

A person faces the fact of mobility and change of residence in our mobile society. A person comes to face the fact that his children grow up and move out as individuals in their own right, not always according to parental specifications. One person faces the fact of never marrying, and another the fact of a marriage sundered by divorce or by death.

Remember that line from a popular song of some time back that went something like this, "So keep on wishing, for wishing will make it so". It may have been beautiful music, but it was a false message for there are some things that no amount of wishing or working is going to change. Some of the unshifting realities of life are God-given conditions of our existence; some of them are boxes that we individually or collectively have worked ourselves in to; some of them are accidents and mysteries that we cannot explain. But whatever the nature of some unbending facts of life, we need to acknowledge that some things are not going to give or change in response to our wills.

John Claypool is an outstanding minister of the Southern Baptist Church who lives in Fort Worth, Texas. About five years ago, the Claypools lost their young ten year old daughter as a leukemia victim. Some lines written by Dr. Claypool recently caught my attention and I clipped them and share them with you.

"If I have learned any lesson at all in these last two years, it has been the agony that is involved in adapting the unalterable. I used to think....somewhat naively...that if a reality was out before me and I knew that it could not be otherwise, that I could bring myself to adjust to it. However, doing this before the fact of my daughter's death has been the hardest single struggle of my existence. The temptation to prolong the battle through bitterness or escape has been very great and at times I have found it almost unbearable to accept the fact that she is gone and life must now be lived without her. Yet this is the way it is and all the willful arrogance in the world cannot change that fact."

I couldn't help but think as I read those lines of how many versions of that situation and that response have been found here in this congregation. There come those times to all of us, when our great need is not sheer will power and determination, but the grace of acceptance, the quiet grace of "adapting the unalterable". And the hopeful, encouraging thing is, that here and there about us, like stars shining in the dark sky, are people in whom that part of the Niebuhr prayer is answered, "O God, grant us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed."

WISDOM TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE

And then, finally, the third part of the prayer, "the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other". And this is such a vital part of this little prayer, and remember, too - it's a prayer. It's not a neatly packaged item available to us on the shelf of some nearby drug store. It is a gift!

It is a vision of what comes clearer to us in the practice of prayer, which to me is not just what happens when one consciously prays in solitude or in the sanctuary - but in all the process of listening and responding to that love and that power that surround our being, that rests at the heart of all life.

One day a friend was talking about the art of swimming near his summer home on the Maine coast. It was near a little inlet that bordered the ocean. At the mouth of this inlet, great turbulence would occur whenever the tide was coming in or going out, and there had been some tragedies because of it. But the natives and the oldtimers in the vicinity knew the secret of coping with it. The point was to let the tide carry a swimmer through the turbulence either in or out of the bay and then he could swim across the current to the shore. Said this friend,

"The trick is knowing when to float, and when to swim, and this knowledge comes from the water itself".

CONCLUSION

"Knowing when to float and when to swim". The same thing holds true for life. There is that time for "the courage to change" - that time when the Christian sings and prays affirmatively, "March on, O soul with strength". And there is also that time when he sings and prays, "Be still my soul, the Lord is on thy side" - the time for serenity, the grace of acceptance. And the wisdom to know which and when - such wisdom is ultimately a gift from God, but I also think a person can develop that sensitivity for this distinction as he lives, as he goes through rough waters, and grows in his feeling for and cooperating with that Divine Love that will not let us down or let us go.

"The trick is knowing when to float, and when to swim, and this knowledge comes from the water itself".

SUMMARY

Now - just about all that we need is summed up in those three petitions of this prayer, and in the framework of our lives, and time I would ask you individually to make that prayer your own as we now prepare to depart and return to those places and demands that life has put upon each of us. Let us bow our heads and unite our hearts in prayer:

"O God, grant us the courage to change what can be changed. The serenity to accept what cannot be changed and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen"