

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Courage to Change"
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Fifth Sunday in Lent

There are days you think you can make a real difference in life, in other's lives, in the grand scheme of things. There are other days where it seems like no matter what you do or say, you have no influence over what happens to you, let alone those around you. For these shifts in our experience of how much or how little we control our lives, relationships and various projects, we often are directed to pray. And the prayer I am beginning to use more and more is what most people refer to as the Serenity prayer. This prayer was probably first used by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in 1934, possibly started circulating in the 1940s and became well known in the 1950s. At this time, the AA movement and specifically Bill Wilson was taken with it, and having removed the ending of it, which was "through Jesus Christ our Lord," all the 12 step groups today usually begin with this prayer.

The prayer went originally like this:

O God and Heavenly Father,
Grant to us the serenity of mind to accept that which cannot be
changed; courage to change that which can be changed, and wisdom
to know the one from the other, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

In 1953 William Spence added a section:

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.
Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He 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;
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life
And supremely happy with Him
Forever and ever in the next.

In this prayer, which is not a Bible prayer, there is an expression of Bible truth. That truth is summed up in some of the Scriptures we read today.

Where we do not believe we can see a way through the challenges and losses we face, God provides a way. Isaiah calls this “streams in the desert or wasteland.” Armies and wild animals cannot harm us. Whether those armies be our health issues, and whether those wild animals are the difficult and challenging people in our lives, God can lead us in a peaceful way. We will not be able to change how others act, react, and speak, but we will be able to change ourselves, as we trust in God.

As the Psalmist says, it seems like we sow our crops with tears and anxieties, but we will reap the harvest of joy, as we trust in the One who gave himself for us. The desert place, the wasteland is the place of realizing how little control we have over our lives, and particularly over those around us. Yet, the springs of water are the places where God meets and helps us through the greatest challenges of our lives. The hymn “Bringing in the sheaves” comes from Psalm 126 and speaks to the abundance of all we need, emotionally, spiritually, physically, socially, intellectually, the whole person coming into the wholeness of the presence of God.

For what we often experience in this life is brokenness, dashed hopes and difficult times. Yet, in the midst of all this we can hope and trust that God is not only sustaining us through the difficulties but that he is causing something in us to happen that is a foretaste of heaven.

That's why Paul in Philippians says he doesn't trust in his religious heritage, he trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ, who means more to him than all his accomplishments, all his lineage, his ancestral rights, his good name and education. In the end, he considers all these things like manure, rubbish,

poop, compared to what Jesus has done for him. It's his relationship with the Lord that trumps all his gifts, abilities and everything praiseworthy about him personally. This is how he can say he experiences the power of Jesus' resurrection in the midst of his personal suffering.

So the cross becomes a place of power and transformation, which acknowledges both the incredible reality of sinful, broken humanity torturing to death, the God who became human to save us. At the same time, the cross becomes a place of life, a seed planted in the ground which has the power to feed every person on earth with new life and new hope.

So we don't get stuck in the past (as Paul says, "forgetting what lies behind"), nor do we focus on a mysterious future, but rather trusting today that I can make choices today which lead to peace inside me and truth available for everyone. The extravagant pouring out of the perfume was a gift to honour a person who was doing what he came to do in an incognito state. People had some inkling this was a special person, but not the point person in all of history that he turned out to be. I always wondered how I would have responded to Jesus, had I met him in that time and place. What would you have said to him? Mary offered the perfume, what do we offer the Lord?

So as we go back to the Serenity prayer, we realize that there are many parts of life we cannot change that we might wish to. There are parts that we must try to change but often opt not to change. And as the prayer goes, we definitely need wisdom to know the difference between these two.

I suppose the spiritual path that we are on leads us back to the truth that we cannot make decisions for others. We cannot help those who do not want to be helped. We cannot correct those who will not be corrected. We will not influence those who feel they know better than we do. So what can we do? We can work on our own hearts, our own attitudes, our own choices. Here is where we see the miracle when we choose to receive the courage to change, no matter what stage of life we are in, we can change.

As we realize how much we need to hand over these things, these relationships, these situations to God, then we see God's hand at work. And most often we receive the privilege of God changing us, where we will open our eyes to what God is doing. In the end, we really only know what's going on inside us, and even then not all that well.

So we are led back to relationship with God, the core of why we come here, or at least what I hope we come here for. I know we also come because of the people here, and it is good to make friends and receive help from others. Where are we with God today? Have we given ourselves to God, i.e. given our beliefs, our perspective, our actions, our speech, our inability to change over to God, to see what change God might bring about.

I remember hearing a pastor talk about how he used to talk to God regarding the very successful ministry he had had with tens and hundreds of thousands of people coming to his churches. He said he heard God say, "I've seen your ministry and I am impressed." Now the pastor was feeling really good about himself and what he had done. Then God said, "Now would you like to see mine?"

I suppose this captures what the core of the Lenten season leads us back to in reflection. We are adrift in life without God. No matter how wonderful our lives are, we have so much more in God. No matter how difficult our lives are, we have so much more comfort in God. This is simply the case that life is too much and unmanageable without God. But also we need people: Partly we need them because a burden shared is split in two, and a joy shared is doubled, but also because our only sense of reality comes through others.

I'll continue my campaign for the expansion and promotion of small groups, just because I know I need them, and believe you do too. As we come into Palm Sunday next week and the possibility of taking in eight services in eight days, I trust you will make some time to take in some more of the Holy Week and Easter spirit, because we need the serenity, the courage and the wisdom that is offered through these times. Let us pray.