

Sermon for Sunday, August 30, 2020 - "Prayer for Serenity"

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

This Gospel reading and the reading from Romans today have me thinking about the wonderful serenity prayer that is used by the recovery community:

"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."

I love this prayer. I think we should all probably be praying it at least once a day right now. There's so much we can't change in this life, so much we can't change about this difficult time. Yet it's such a human tendency to want to be in control of situations, to try to fix everything, to seek to avoid suffering at all cost.

I think that's what's going on for Peter in our Gospel reading today. When Jesus says he's going to suffer and die, Peter freaks out saying, "God forbid, this must not happen, this cannot be." Peter just can't accept that Jesus' radical way of love is going to get him killed. Peter rages against the thought of it. Peter sounds a lot like us when we hear the news these days and throw up our hands in disgust and exasperation, saying, "Enough already, this has to stop, this can't be."

The thing is: Raging against derechos, hurricanes, rising case counts, being stuck at home, and all those difficult people doesn't really help. I know this well from lived experience. It doesn't help to resist things that just can't be changed, to strive to be in control of circumstances that are beyond our power, to try to force life to feel normal, or to grasp for what we're sure we must have in order to feel OK. These are all very human tendencies, very human ways to try to save and secure our own lives in the face of suffering. Yet, Jesus says when we try to save our lives, we lose them. We get stuck trying to protect and defend ourselves, attempting to take charge, striving after the unattainable. We find we lose out on actually living the full, abundant life that God intends for us to have.

Jesus calls us to lose our lives. The Greek word he uses here also means let go. Jesus calls us to let go of trying to secure our lives, to let go of grasping and clinging, trying to be in control and seeking to avoid suffering. Let go, Jesus says, and you will find life.

During the Good Shepherd Bible study on Thursday we heard so many examples of how this has been happening during the pandemic. One woman was so frustrated that she couldn't travel to an important conference and do a key internship. Yet when she let go of expecting things to be differ-

ent, she found she had so much more time and energy to accomplish other crucial tasks. One couple's daughter has been in some form of lockdown during most of the pandemic as part of her overseas job. The daughter is practicing acceptance of what she can't change and is thriving even in lockdown. This happens in big ways and small. One man shared that he and his wife give away huge numbers of tomatoes each year. He used to get so frustrated that people weren't using them, that they were going to waste. He's now practicing letting go of this thing he cannot change and is finding that giving the gift of tomatoes is much more life-giving for him.

Those who let go of their lives will find them.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, to let go of my tight grip on what I think I need and deserve, what I think should happen. And God, grant me the courage to change the things I can. There is so much beyond our control, but we do have agency in how we chose to respond to the challenging things in our world.

Our passage from Romans offers guidance about a courageous way of living that does bring change in this world. Reg read this passage for us earlier. Let's hear it again as it's such a powerful message for us today:

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.¹¹ Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."²⁰ No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

We can choose how we respond to challenging circumstances and difficult people. We can work for policies that contribute to racial equity in our schools, police forces and communities. We can change racist ideas and practices within ourselves and our institutions. We can work to address the climate change that is making hurricanes, inland storms and wildfires more severe. We can advocate for policies that are in line with God's care for immigrants and others who are poor and marginalized.

Of course, none of this is easy to do. And what we want to do, we often do not do. The Apostle Paul writes about this in another part of the book of Romans. Thankfully, we don't have to do these things on our own. Our Gospel reading for today makes it clear that we shouldn't try to do these things through our own striving or effort. Rather, we can do them most fully through following Jesus. Following Jesus means surrendering to God through prayer and worship, letting go of our need to be in control, and trusting Jesus who is humble and who gives fully of himself. Following Jesus is the way we can experience full, abundant, courageous lives - lives that bring helpful change and healing to this world.

Jesus let go of his life in order to be fully present with us, with you, in all the suffering of this life. Jesus surrendered control so that God's abundant life might prevail in and through him for you, for

us, for this whole hurting world. Following Jesus is how we can live the serenity prayer. It's how we can experience the life that really is life.

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.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.