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Serenity

(Romans 12:1-2 NRSV) "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect."

It is one of the most well-known prayers every composed. I'll bet all of you have read it, heard it, maybe prayed it yourselves. Early on, it became one of the foundations for Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 Step programs, even for those who were not particularly religious. It is so well-known that it has even been parodied more than once, and imitation, as always, is the truest mark of influence. It was originally composed by a man named Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the greatest pastors and theologians of the 20th century. But in some ways, perhaps the most lasting contribution he ever made to the lives of individual Christians – and, in fact, people who would count themselves far from being Christian – was his writing of what became known as “The Serenity Prayer.” Here’s how Niebuhr originally wrote this prayer that has become so well-known and such a comfort and inspiration to so many: *"God, give us the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, the courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."* The prayer comes directly out of Niebuhr’s theological teachings in which he emphasizes that in what is yet an imperfect world, sometimes the only possible thing that one you can do is behave the best you can, knowing that your efforts will be imperfect, your knowledge always never enough, and your intentions never quite as

pure as you would like to pretend. So let us see, in the next few moments, how beautifully Niebuhr indeed captures the nature of Christian life in these few sentences.

Consider the first clause of this three-fold prayer: *"God, give us the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed..."* This is an incredibly powerful sentence and in a few words reminds us that we all fall short and stand in need of grace, both to accept with serenity such things but also to accept at all that there are things that in fact cannot be changed! American society, western society today, balks at the notion that there are things that cannot be changed. The consumer market for what are now called "lifestyle drugs" – from fat metabolizers, to exfoliants and potions and poultices to keep one's skin ever-young as an 18 year old's, to drugs of every sort and kind – testifies to the fact that Americans, particularly, are ones who are loathe to see that life has limits and that there are some things that cannot be changed. But despite that peculiarly American urge to deny the fact of finitude, we all nonetheless know that it is the case. If I ever wanted to leave ministry and become an air traffic controller, I can't – I'm too old; the FAA only hires people who are 30 or younger, who have twenty-something eyes and reflexes. I used to bound out of bed. Now I sometimes creak out of bed. But here is the good news, and this is what Niebuhr's prayer is getting at – if I can accept God's grace and indeed have the serenity to accept that life is limited I do not have to work so hard at overcoming life's limits and I do not have to be anxious that I haven't done everything, tried every latest lifestyle fad, and simply cannot and will never again be the person that I was at twenty. And an acceptance of that with serenity also allows us to focus on the good, good things that come with the acknowledgment of

life's limits. I may creak when I get out of bed, but I sure wouldn't want to ever have to re-live junior high school even if it meant I got to have a teenager's body and stamina again. I was too snotty and stupid when I was a teenager and didn't realize that some of the drama of the time just wasn't as dramatic as I thought it was at the time. That doesn't mean that it wasn't real or important, it simply means that with age, with limits, with serenity comes the ability to see a bigger picture and to have perspective. And with the acknowledgment of limits can also come the acceptance of the **gifts** of those limits: I think I am more at peace with life than I was 40years ago.

But one of the intriguing and discouraging things to see is that most of the time when Niebuhr's prayer gets used or re-printed, it has undergone a crucial, crucial change. Niebuhr originally wrote: "*God, give **us** the **grace** to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed....*" but most of the times these days the way this prayer is cited is this: "*God grant me the serenity to accept the things that cannot be changed.*" It's what's printed on your bulletin cover. In fact, I searched in van for a graphic which had Niebuhr's original wording. What's the difference in the two versions? Well, first, "grace" is gone. And "**us**" has dropped out, to be replaced by "**me**." "Grant **me** the serenity," *not* "Grant **us** the **grace**...." This too is an example of that peculiarly American temptation to see everything in individualistic terms. The rugged, self-made individual who needs nothing from anyone is one of the cultural images that has dogged American life since day one. But it's false. People cannot find that serenity, that acceptance of limits, that quelling of anxiety, without being a part of a community that helps them, supports them, sometimes prods them, and loves them for who they can be and despite what they sometimes are! Alcoholics Anonymous or any

12 Step program knows this. The very reason that those programs work is that there is strength and possibility in numbers, in community, that there just isn't when we try to be the rugged, self-made, "*I'll fix it myself, thank you,*" kind of individual. So if you pray this prayer, and I urge you to, pray it the way Niebuhr wrote it: *God, give **us** the **grace** to accept with **serenity** the things that cannot be changed...."*

Now what of the second clause? This is what Niebuhr originally said, "*God, give us ...the courage to change the things that should be changed.*" Most often, though, this clause gets subtly but crucially changed when it is re-written: "*God grant me the courage to change the things that **can** be changed.*" It was originally "should be changed"; now it's usually often stated "can be changed." "Can" versus "should." Why does that make a difference? Well, for Christians it's a crucial difference! For you and I should never, ever be satisfied simply with seeking to change what we "**can**" change. "Can" is just too flabby a word and it makes for too easy an out. **Can** the problems of homelessness or poverty or child-abuse be changed? At first blush, it looks mighty, mighty difficult, and we might be tempted to just to say "*Sorry, those aren't things we can change. Too bad.*"

But I think that God calls us to always focus on the "should." Because that way we are never tempted to let our *abilities* decide what is *right*. We are not tempted to exchange the right thing for the expedient thing. We are not tempted to allow our own myopias – and all of us have them – to keep us from seeing wrongs. I would invite you to think of those times in history when someone, some community, said "This **should** be changed" even though it appeared perhaps laughable that it **could** be changed.

Every single great advance in the human condition was made possible by someone who did not let “can” overcome “should”! The earliest Christians helped end the widespread practice of female infanticide in Roman Empire even though everybody said it couldn’t be changed. It was people who didn’t let “can” overcome “should” that made it possible for all kinds of hurtful discrimination to become illegal. Or I invite you to think about what needs changing in your life, or your family’s life, or in your relationships? Does it look too daunting? Maybe it does. But God invites you, through His grace, to focus on what *should* be, what would be right and good and best, and not just on what might appear **can** or **could** be. Do you hear the difference? Poet Robert Browning put it this way: “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?” In other words, Niebuhr’s prayer, as *originally* written, invites us to judge what is possible from heaven’s perspective, from God’s perspective, to see with God’s eyes what **should** be and never decide always and in advance that what should be can’t be. Will we always succeed? Of course not. But that is alright. We are called to be faithful, not necessarily successful.

But back to Niebuhr’s prayer: “*God, give us the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, the courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.*” What about, then, that final clause, “*God, give us ...the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other*”? Oh, that’s the hard one isn’t it! When the batteries in my television’s remote control are going bad, no matter how much harder I push the buttons, it isn’t going to change the batteries’ electrical state. No matter how many times I return to the refrigerator and

open the door no food will have magically materialized there since the last time I checked. No matter how hard I rail at certain of life's annoyances – like incomprehensible cell phone bills or having to throw my shampoo away at the airport because I forgot that it was in my carry-on – the next bill will not have suddenly been written in actual English and the TSA will not grant me an exemption from the rules. But too many times the world would tell me in these or much more important situations that the answer is getting mad, that answer is ever more and ever-angrier flailing. But it's not. Because that's the road that leads to feeling powerless, doesn't it? And what happens when we feel powerless? We issue ultimatums. *"My dear husband, if you don't take out that garbage that you've promised to take out since the world was young, I'm going to...."* *"Either you stop acting that way or else....."* Or the favorite of parents everywhere when a child is publicly misbehaving, *"I'm going to count to three and you'd better...."*

How well do ultimatums work in your life? Not very well, I suspect. And they are in their own ways a sign that we have failed to distinguish between what can be changed and what should be changed. The Apostle Paul was dealing with something similar when he wrote to the church at Rome prior to his coming to visit them. *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect."* For you see Rome was the imperial capital. It was the place where the world's power focused. But it lived in anxious times. The Empire wasn't as secure, wasn't as peaceful, wasn't as healthy as it once was. There were threats of invasion. There was increasing fear of folks who weren't like them, which was part of what led to the horror

of more and more persecutions, more and more hideous “games” between the lions and the Christians or the Jews or anyone that was feared, who was different, who was therefore perceived as a threat.

And Paul was saying, “Don’t let the example of the kind of thinking that is all around you be your kind of thinking. Focus on the things that should be changed and not on the things that *can’t* be changed.” How do you do this? By always keeping seeking to keep what is moral and what is right in mind, or as Paul puts it “*what is good and acceptable and perfect.*” Because, my friends, when all is said and done, the difference sometimes between the things that can’t be changed and the things that should be changed is sometimes **ourselves**. Our prayers can make **us** better people. Our prayers can make **us** more effective people. Our “**serenity**” in the face of the world’s challenges – and here serenity doesn’t mean acquiescence or resignation, but just their opposite: the peace that passes understanding even amidst struggle – will make us more able to be discerning and less likely to sink into cynicism. And our genuinely asking God to help us to seek what is “good and acceptable and perfect” instead of settling for the okay and the expedient and the it’ll – do can sometimes make what looked impossible to change now merely difficult to change. And that’s a huge step. It’s the step that folks like a Martin Luther King, or a Nelson Mandela, or a Jane Hull (who founded Hull House in Chicago to save thousands of children from terrible lives in the meat-packing tenements of the early 1900s), or a Shiro Sokabe took. And it’s the step we can take too. Maybe ours won’t be as dramatic a steps, or on such a large stage. But they will be steps that make us better Christians, better persons, and able to do more for God’s good world.

"God, give us the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other." May it be so in your life and mine. Amen.