

**Grace, Courage, Wisdom:
The Origins of the Serenity Prayer
December 6, 2009**

The last time I saw most of you, it was the Sunday before Thanksgiving, and I mentioned at the beginning of the service that day that I would be flying out to western Massachusetts the next morning for my annual Thanksgiving trip to visit my adopted mom, my mom-friend as I call her, Chris. Well, I went on that trip, and now (clearly) I'm back. The trip was good. I spent several days blissfully raking leaves in the cool New England air, accompanied by the sound only of breeze in the trees and an occasional winter bird song. I walked along country roads. I ate good food. I read. I met with friends in my favorite café. And, cozied up in front of a nice New England fire, with my Austin loyalty well intact, I cheered on the UT Long Horns as they played just that much magnificently better than the A&M Aggies to earn a decisive win on the Aggies'

home field. It *was* a good trip. Even if I did bring the New England temperatures back here with me.

But before I let go of that time away and weave myself back into today, I want to tell you just a bit about the trip's beginnings. You see, when Chris picked me up at the Hartford airport, and started driving me back up to her home in the hill town of Ashfield, Massachusetts, I told her how excited I was, because I was going to be preaching this Sunday on the origins of the Serenity Prayer, which, after reading a few pages into Elisabeth Sifton's book of the same name, I learned had taken place in the little town of Heath, Massachusetts, only a half hour or so north of Ashfield. I had this great plan of making a little pilgrimage to Heath, to see where the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr had spent his summers with his family, and to see where he had first recited the words which, in varied form, are now known across the world probably just

as well as, or even better than, the Lord's Prayer, the 23rd psalm, or the "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep" prayer.

The Serenity Prayer is so well known, as some of you may know from experience, and as was mentioned in the reading Lois shared earlier, because it was adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous, and subsequently by Al-Anon, Narcotics Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, and every other twelve step program there is, all across the globe.

As a person who has spent my share of hours in 12-step meetings, now, here I had this great opportunity, one not many others (at least in Texas) have had, to journey to the very town, the very church even, where Niebuhr first uttered the words:

God, give us the grace to accept with serenity
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.

I grinned eagerly at Chris as we drove, expecting her to say, “Great. I’ll go with you.” Instead, Chris responded, “Well, actually, there was an article in the *New York Times* about a year ago saying that someone was doubting that Niebuhr was really the original author.” What? Rats. Suddenly my holy trip to Heath seemed like it might have a few holes in its holiness. I spent the next few days continuing to read the book by Elisabeth Sifton, Niebuhr’s daughter, but also the *New York Times* article Chris had mentioned, as well the argument originally put forward by a Yale University librarian in the *Yale Alumni* magazine, which claimed that Niebuhr had most likely, if unconsciously, lifted the prayer from earlier sources. Additionally, I read Sifton’s rebuttal to the librarian’s thesis, and several letters to the editor from former students of

Niebuhr, speaking in his defense. This complication about the prayer's origins, along with the news that the car I usually use while in Massachusetts was broken down, threw my mission and subsequently my plans for this sermon out of whack. What would I do now? Well, there was one thing I could do for starters: Say the serenity prayer.

In so many ways that's what the serenity prayer is: a starting place. It is a prayer to begin a discernment process—what are the things I need to accept as out of my hands to change, and what do I need to courageously see that I am responsible for trying change? That discernment, in order to truly *be* discernment and not some hasty choice driven by impulse or bias or anxiety or fear, requires wisdom.

Specifically, this wisdom is *human* wisdom. While the prayer may begin as an address, perhaps even a supplication to God, or some Higher Power, to grant a person grace,

courage, and wisdom, it is ultimately our own, very *human* wisdom, not some external, divine wisdom, that will be required to distinguish between those things that cannot be changed and those that should be.

As Elisabeth Sifton remarks, this is a prayer whose “instructions are tremendously difficult and puzzling to follow”—not, I would argue, because they are complicated or convoluted, but rather because they are exceptionally simple. Simply, as human beings, we must hold ourselves accountable for understanding both our limits and our agency.

Now, in the world of addiction, you might see how the instructions of this prayer could easily appear, especially on first encounter, difficult and puzzling. For an addict, the common mode of operation is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results. Rather than accepting the thing that we cannot change—namely, that we’re addicts—

and rather than courageously changing the things we can—for instance, ceasing our addictive behavior through sobriety—we *deny* our addiction and we *cower* from the idea of *letting go* of our addiction. The act of reciting the serenity prayer at 12-step meetings, or anywhere, for that matter, is an act of the addict subverting the dominant paradigm in which he or she has been living. That is, we truly do begin to accept with serenity that we are addicts, and we finally do begin to have the courage to do something different from what we have always done, therefore *finally* getting different results.

But it takes spiritual discipline. It takes spiritual discernment. And spiritual discipline and discernment was the call Reinhold Niebuhr made throughout his life, particularly during the build up to and the events of the Second World War. As Sifton notes of her father, Niebuhr “wrestled daily with the problem of how to relate his innermost religious

commitments to the public life of the community.” As a Reform and Evangelical professor at the multi-denominational Union Theological Seminary in New York City, as an American of German descent, as the husband of a British woman with an Anglican Church background, as a colleague to theologians across faiths and across the country as well as across the Atlantic, for Niebuhr the public life of community meant something well beyond the life of a neighborhood, town, city, or even nation. It meant all of humanity. And with the horrors of World War II—not only the rise of totalitarian regimes but the complacency of governments and, equally importantly, of churches in relation those regimes, Niebuhr knew his innermost religious commitments included calling the allegedly religious to task for their shortcomings in the face of evil and injustice.

Recall Sifton's words reflecting how Niebuhr positioned himself neither quite on the left nor the right of the religious spectrum, but in some sense off the line between the two points, to critique both their ways: "All his life," states Sifton, "[Niebuhr] fought against conservatives because they usually disregarded the imperatives of social justice, but he was also skeptical of liberals," Sifton continues, "because they usually radiated implausible optimism about the likelihood of social betterment."

In its extremes, this is what Niebuhr saw coming into a dangerous collision course especially with the rise of Hitler to power in Germany, accompanied by appeasement policies in some countries, and isolationist ones in others. On either end, the individual and collective accountability that is at the root of the serenity prayer was largely absent.

I mention both individual *and* collective accountability here, because, as you may have noticed, while the 12-step version of the serenity prayer uses the first person singular—“God, grant *me* the serenity...”—Niebuhr’s version uses the first person plural—“God, grant *us* grace to accept with serenity...” The implication in Niebuhr’s version is that we live in an interdependent world, that we are all in this together. It is not just individual salvation we must concern ourselves with, but *universal* salvation.

Denial of collective accountability for confronting the terrors of fascism and for seeking universal salvation is reflected in the words of a Swiss colleague of Niebuhr’s, Denis de Rougemont, who stated that, “the real fifth column in our democracies is laziness of spirit.” Recalling a visit with Niebuhr in 1941, de Rougemont noted that Niebuhr “is leading a campaign for America’s intervention in the war.” He is,

quote, “trying to combat the inertia of the churches, which remain for the most part isolationist. The situation is not easy,” de Rougemont continues. “If the churches oppose intervention it is on grounds of conscientious objection, pacifism, anti-militarism, fear of the tyranny that all war risks fostering.” However, de Rougemont continues, “it’s also because in America nobody believes in evil anymore. ‘It’s too awful to be true,’ people say about what the refugees tell them. The result,” de Rougemont concludes, “is a collaboration with the grim supporters of Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, and their ‘regime of the future.’ He who doesn’t want to believe in the Devil works, fatally, for him.”

Now, my choice to quote Niebuhr’s colleague de Rougemont at some length here, with the language of evil, the devil, and laziness of spirit, may create in some minds a suspicious correlation between the events of World War II that

I'm speaking of and my earlier prayer for the 30,000 troops being sent to Afghanistan. Am I implicitly making a pro-war statement of my own? My short answer is no. But my own wrestling between *my* innermost religious commitments and the public life of community, with notions such as evil, isolationism, complacency, pacifism, fascism, militarism, and even, yes, the devil, would take, and perhaps some day will take, several hours or weeks or years to unpack.

What I do want to hold up before you this morning, in light of all war, all struggle, whether wars of nations or struggles of addiction, or even, more immediately, the struggle for finding and agreeing upon a home of our own, what I want to hold up is the reminder that in its very simplicity, the serenity prayer, or as Sifton would prefer to call it, the grace prayer, or the courage prayer, or the wisdom prayer, is difficult and puzzling in its instructions, because it demands that we

challenge our own assumptions, that we explore things from perspectives that are different from what we are used to, and that we exercise an ongoing, ever unfolding understanding of both our limits and our agency. Affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person; affirming and promoting justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; affirming and promoting a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; and respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part, as our principles call us to do, it is our religious imperative to seek the grace, courage, and wisdom that the serenity prayer invokes.

Now, speaking of the prayer, as it turns out, on my final morning in Massachusetts, quite serendipitously, a new *New York Times* article appeared, stating over a year since the debate, with new evidence surfacing, that the librarian had conceded to Sifton's argument that Reinhold Niebuhr, one of

this country's finest theologians of the twentieth century, was indeed the prayer's original author. My journey of working through the serenity prayer in light of how I would present my sermon was over. But, whether Niebuhr wrote first wrote the prayer in Heath, Massachusetts, or he unconsciously nabbed it from some other anonymous soul from some other time, perhaps the most important thing is that we heed the heading of a letter to the editor that was written amidst the debate. The heading simply reads, "Whoever wrote it, it works."

So may we work toward grace. So may we work toward courage. So may we work toward wisdom.

Amen.

#205 Amazing Grace