

November 8, 2020

“The Wisdom of Acceptance”
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake

Scripture Readings:

Psalm 78:1-7

*Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.
We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of God,
we will tell of God's might,
and the wonders that God has done.
God established a decree in Jacob,
and appointed a law in Israel,
which God commanded our ancestors
to teach to their children;
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn that they might rise up
and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget God's works,
but keep God's commandments;*

Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-16

*Wisdom is radiant and unfading,
and she is easily discerned by those who love her,
and is found by those who seek her.
She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her.
One who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty,
for she will be found sitting at the gate.
To fix one's thought on her is perfect understanding,
and one who is vigilant on her account
will soon be free from care,
because she goes about seeking those worthy of her,
and she graciously appears to them in their paths,
and meets them in every thought.*

Sermon “The Wisdom of Acceptance”

One day during the mid-seventies my Mom came home from a garage sale in our neighborhood, she had a brown paper sack full of treasures she had found. She pulled out a little plaque with the serenity prayer on it she had bought for a dime and gave it to me.

She said that this prayer had brought her through tough times and she wanted me to know it. She had been through tough times indeed, losing her Dad when I think she was sixteen and just a few years later having my biological father leave her, pregnant with me and two toddlers. I loved the prayers simplicity and had no idea how it would go on to shape my life through hard times.

She gave me a piece of her faith that day, like the Psalmist said “We will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of God... and tell them to our children, so that they should set their hope in God. I have carried that plaque with me through about 30 moves, for almost forty years and through several different revisions of myself and my theology. This prayer held for me through it all.

In 1991 when I finally crawled into my first twelve step meeting, finally accepting that I needed help with addiction I had been so hurt by organized religion and wanted to bolt when I realized that God was mentioned in those twelve steps.

But knowing I was at a crossroads and had to stay or die, I stayed til the end, then they all joined hands, and then I heard it “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change”. I was flooded with peace, this I could understand because my Mom had given me the gift of her faith so many years before. When I would feel myself being drawn back into addiction I would say the prayer, when I was angry, resentful, hurt or anxious, I would say the prayer and feel the calm.

Many years later as I went through the possible Seminaries that I could attend I was stuck between a final two and then I read that Reinhold Niebuhr, the author of the prayer had attended Eden Seminary in St. Louis. I remember the moment clearly, the goosebumps that told me this was where I should go and my life changed forever from that decision.

I found the perfect theological fit and I also found the love of my life there. All because of a moment where my Mom decided to spend a dime at a garage sale and pass on a piece of her faith to her daughter.

There is much more to this prayer though than it’s own sentimental connection for me. Niebuhr actually wrote it in response to what was happening in Germany. Niebuhr was born into a 1st Generation German American Family and his father was a German Evangelical pastor he shared the same ecclesiastical roots as our church.

It came from a sermon that Reinhold wrote in the thirties. He was horrified by the rise of Hitler in Germany and felt powerless, an ocean away from his family's homeland to do anything about

it. He worried especially for his two close friends in Germany, both who had become enemies of Hitlers for speaking out against him and the anti-semitism that he was fomenting.

With Niebuhr these men were three of the greatest theological and intellectual minds of the twentieth century. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Paul Tillich. Paul Tillich was fired from his teaching post in Germany when Hitler came to power and Niebuhr immediately offered him a home at Union Seminary in New York. Tillich quickly accepted and moved his whole family here to protect them.

Bonhoeffer though, moved here and then returned because he felt God was calling him to join the resistance against Hitler. He joined the underground that helped rescue Jews. Once the war started and after years of watching his country suffer, his conscious supposedly led him to be a part of a failed assassination attempt against Hitler which led to his arrest and his hanging shortly before the end of the war.

But backing up to the thirties, these words were a way for Niebuhr to organize his theology around what he could do in the rise of Hitler as well as trying to understand where God was in the events as they escalated.

When I read this I realized that those events were much bigger than all the things the prayer had brought me through. Bad break ups, trouble at work, flat tires, medical issues, parenting teenagers, on and on.

But this week this prayer did not fail me as I watched the results come in from the election. It was so obvious to us all, results aside, our country could not be more divided at a time that coming together to fight this pandemic is so important.

Using this prayer though we can break it down and find our response.

God, Give me the serenity, the calmness for clear thinking, thinking that includes spiritual principles, thinking that includes God in my decisions.

To accept the things I cannot change... I can not change that we are a divided nation, or that we are in a pandemic, or people's behaviors, or the president, or the news, or whether everybody in Wal-Mart is wearing their mask right, on and on.

I can't control other people's behavior and when I try I will damage my relationship with them, destroying any chance I may have to be an instrument of change through channeling the sculpting influence of God's love in their life.

And then the courage, the courage to change the things I can. What I can change is my behavior, my reaction to people, my treatment of people, the courage to love my enemies, to speak out when necessary but to listen to those I disagree with, the courage to get up in the morning and put on the love of God and wear it wherever I go. I can change how

I care for myself, to seek to be more loving to myself. To talk to myself like I would talk to someone I love.

And then the Wisdom to know the difference. In the scripture of Solomon this morning we learn that Wisdom is easily discerned by those who love her, and found if we seek and desire her. For me it takes me being connected to God, trusting the Holy Spirit to guide me to know the difference between what is truly wisdom and what is my own fear or ego taking over.

I urge you in the weeks to come, that we use this prayer to help us heal the divide with our neighbors. We have so much more in common than our politics, so much more than the news would lead us to believe.

Show the young people around you what it looks like to worship God with your lives, to react in love, to seek understanding of each other and wisdom from each other.

Teach them what your faith looks like when you live and move and have your being in it. You never know how your actions, even simple ones might influence them. Their lives could turn toward God on a dime, you never know. AMEN

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