

SERMON TITLE: "The Serenity Prayer: Grant Me"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 18:1-14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: February 28, 2021, at First UMC

*God, . . . grant me . . . the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
. . . the courage to change the things I can, . . .
and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Amen.*

INTRODUCTION

Our United Methodist Women's group met by Zoom on Tuesday afternoon. During the prayer time of the meeting, a number of the women asked us to pray for relatives and friends who are suffering from depression, loneliness, and anxiety. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and all the related stresses, real people that we care about have been going through hard times.

That's why I wanted to do this Lenten sermon series on The Serenity Prayer. I'm hoping that it gives us some peace and calm in the midst of the storm. Last Sunday, we began the series by talking about who and what God is. Today we move to the next words of The Serenity Prayer, which are "grant me." In other words, today's topic is prayer. How best can we lift up our petitions to God?

There are so many good passages about prayer in the Bible, it was hard to choose which one to preach on. But I think this text from Luke 18 gets at the heart of the idea. Let's dig into these verses and see what we can learn about prayer from this widow's persistent supplications. How might we have faith like this woman to plead, "Grant me"?

1—THE WIDOW'S PETITION

Let's begin by thinking about the widow's petition. What was her request? We see in verse three that she asked for justice against her opponent. In his parable, Jesus doesn't give us any of the gory details of the problem. This wasn't a "Judge Judy" episode in which all the trauma and drama were spelled out by both parties in the dispute. All we are told by Jesus is that this widow sought justice from a judge who was known to be unjust. She pestered and bothered and inconvenienced the unjust judge

until he couldn't take it anymore. She was wearing him down with her persistence. So he finally granted her the justice she wanted.

Then Jesus indicated that, if the unjust judge would finally do right by the woman because of her persistence, how much more would our good, kind, and loving God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? "Will God delay long in helping them?" Jesus asked rhetorically. No, of course not! God "will quickly grant justice to them."

2—THE HOPEFULNESS & DIFFICULTY OF PRAYER

This parable is both hopeful to us and difficult. It's **hopeful** because we appreciate Jesus' assurance that God will quickly grant our petitions. It's hopeful because it implies that, if we don't get the answer to our prayers at first, or even at second or third try, we will get what we need eventually—if we just keep on trusting and praying and believing. It's like that saying we've all heard before. "There are three different ways that God answers prayer: yes, no, and not yet." Sometimes we're getting the "not yet" reply, and we just need to be patient and hold on to faith. Sooner or later, we'll get what we need. We're also reminded of 2 Peter 3:8 that says, "With the Lord one day is like a thousand years." Our idea of "quickly" and God's might be different. But God really is providing an answer to us. Just keep the faith and persist in prayer.

In this "Black History Month" of February, we also remember Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, famous quotation that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." If we—like the widow in Jesus' parable—believe our cause is just and according to God's good will for human life, then there is no reason to give up hope that our prayers will be answered. If the cries of our hearts match the will of God for the world, then we should keep on asking God to grant you and to grant me what we need.

Of course, keeping that type of patient, persistent faith is often easier said than done, right? When we pray for something over and over and over again, and we don't get the answer we're looking for in short order, it's **difficult** to believe that God is listening and that God cares. Sometimes it's even

hard to keep believing that God exists. Our Friday Study group is reading a book that looks at issues of faith and doubt. One of the daily devotions told about a pastor who had given up his faith because of what he perceived as “10,000 unanswered prayers.”

If we don't give up *faith in God*, maybe we give up *faith in ourselves*. We wonder if we are worthy of God's listening ear. We wonder if we lack sufficient faith. We wonder if God is punishing us for our sins. When we don't get the answers we think we need, it can be difficult to keep on believing. If we do keep on praying, it's hard to do it with serenity and peace. Instead, we're frantically trying to figure out the secret formula to get God to do what we want to happen.

I won't deny that it's sometimes very hard to find that serenity that's supposed to come through prayer. Just like you, I've had plenty of experience with those “not yet” answers to my cries for help. But somehow we have to keep believing that the nature of God is good, kind, loving, and just, and that our strong God is calling us to align ourselves with those qualities through prayer and action. We have to keep believing that God is absolutely on the side of life and well-being—even if that healing we desire only comes when we pass from this mortal life into eternity with God. We can find our serenity now, as we anticipate the blessed peace of everlasting life.

3—THE WIDOW'S PETITION IN CONTEXT

Often when a scripture presents a challenge for our understanding, it helps to look at the context in which it's found. Besides the story of this widow's petition, Luke 18 also contains the story of the two men who went to the temple to pray. The law-abiding, but snobby, Pharisee apparently went to the temple seeking to prove the superiority of his righteousness, but God did not grant his desire. Instead, the sinful tax collector who begged for mercy is the one to whom God granted justification. It's obvious from this story that God prefers the prayers of those who are humble and willing to confess their failings and limitations.

Next, in verses 15-17, we find the story of people bringing little children to Jesus, so that he could touch them and bless them. Jesus' disciples tried to turn those people away, thinking that the needs of mothers and children weren't important enough to occupy Jesus' time and attention. But Jesus' told them differently. In fact, he said, only those who could trust God with the dependency and simple idealism of children would be able to enter into God's kingdom.

And, if we read even further in this chapter of Luke 18, to verses 18-30, we see that a certain ruler approached Jesus and asked him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus talked to the ruler about obedience to the commandments. The ruler indicated that he had been obeying all those laws since he was a youth. Then Jesus told him one more thing he should do. This ruler, a man with power and wealth, should sell all he owned and distribute the money to the poor. Once unencumbered by all his possessions, then the man should come and follow Jesus. "But when [the man] heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich" (v. 23). It's interesting to me that the ruler wanted Jesus to grant him eternal life, or at least he wanted Jesus to grant him the path to get to eternal life. But when Jesus told him what to do, the rich man resisted. It wasn't that Jesus didn't answer his prayer; it was that the ruler didn't like the very clear answer that Jesus granted him.

The rich man wasn't the only person troubled by Jesus' answer, either. Those in the crowd wondered, how then could anyone be saved? If a rich ruler with all his wealth and power can't gain access, who can? Jesus' response was that those who gave up their homes and their families in order to follow him would get back much more in this life and, in the age to come, eternal life.

It seems then that the answers to our prayers may well be possible, if we are willing to do what it takes: to humble ourselves and seek God's mercy for our sin, to depend on and trust God like a little child, and to recognize that the best answers to prayers may only come if we're willing to let go of our preconceived notions of what salvation looks like. Maybe, instead of wealth and power to be used for our own advantage, what we really need God to grant us is generosity and purpose, to care for others as

Jesus did. Maybe, instead of healing from illness in this life, what God will grant us is the assurance that somehow all will be well, no matter what happens. Maybe our prayer should be that God would grant us the ability to trust in the Lord with all our heart and lean not on our own understanding; in all our ways to acknowledge God, so that God will be able to direct our paths (Prov. 3:5-6).

CONCLUSION

One of our church members mentioned last Sunday that she had made a needlepoint of The Serenity Prayer. I asked her to bring it to the church and share it with us. Here it is. I know it looks backward to you right now. Maybe you saw it the right direction earlier in the service, and I'll show it to you that way again later. I think it's very pretty, and it was obviously created with a great deal of attention and care.

The lady who made this needlepoint said that this Serenity Prayer and the act of stitching it was a huge blessing at that time in her life. She was going through a lot of stress with her work as a teacher in an inner city school. Also, her own children were growing up and stretching out into independence. So she prayed a lot, and the act of creating this needlepoint prayer helped her to focus on God and ask for what she, her students, and her children needed. As she pushed the needle and thread back and forth through the fabric, she was able to petition and plead with God for the hopes and needs of her school and family.

That lady is certainly not alone in her concerns, anxiety, and stress about work and family, economics and political events, COVID-19 and other health concerns, and so much more. May all of us find the serenity we need, as we pray to God, "Grant me."