

SERMON TITLE: "The Serenity Prayer: Serenity"
SERMON TEXT: Philippians 4:1-9
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 7, 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

A few days ago, I received an email from the Utah state Suicide Prevention and Crisis Services Administrator. The email was inviting faith leaders to participate in a webinar on suicide prevention. Now that so many people are able to get vaccinations, and the rates of infection and death have dropped, we're all feeling much more hopeful. But leaders recognize that many people have suffered tremendous losses due to death, sickness, unemployment, educational disruptions, social isolation, and other anxieties. And, with the variants on the rise, we know we're not out of the woods yet.

That's why, during this season of Lent, we're focusing our attention on The Serenity Prayer. We began two weeks ago by talking about the nature of *God*. Last Sunday, we discussed prayer and how we might ask God to *grant me*. Today, we move on to the word *serenity* itself. Using Philippians 4 as our text, let's think about what it means to find that peace of mind and soul we call "serenity."

1—PHILIPPIANS BACKGROUND

COVID-19 wasn't the problem when the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Philippi. No doubt they had numerous physical sicknesses and diseases that made their lives more difficult. In fact, in Philippians chapter two, Paul wrote about a man named Epaphroditus, who had been so sick that he had nearly died. But now the more-immediate problem for Paul was that he was imprisoned for preaching the gospel. He was dealing with his confinement remarkably well, but Paul's absence from the fledgling church at Philippi was causing some challenges. During his time away from them, two women named Euodia and Syntyche were apparently quarreling about something. In

Philippians 4:3, Paul indicated that these were good women who had struggled alongside him in the work of the gospel, but for some reason they weren't getting along. Differences of opinion and personality conflicts were damaging their relationship and their church. Their arguments were causing no small amount of dis-ease and stress.

So Paul wrote to the Philippians about some ways they could counteract that anxiety and find serenity for their spirits. Beginning in Philippians 4:2, Paul gave a list of ways that we too can improve the serenity in our lives.

2—WAYS TO IMPROVE SERENITY

The first way to improve serenity in our lives is to “be of the same mind in the Lord.” When Paul mentions this in chapter four, verse two, he's actually repeating something he had written about already. In Philippians 2:2, he wrote, “Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” In 2:5, he said, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” From there, Paul went on to describe how our Lord humbled himself, being born as a human and dying on the cross.

A large portion of our anxiety in life comes from jostling for position and grasping after power and privilege. There's nothing inherently wrong with wanting to improve our lot in life. Usually that's a good thing, and often necessary. But if our striving becomes a competition of opinions and values that causes distress to us and others, then we have to ask ourselves if it's worth it. If not, then we can improve our serenity by uniting ourselves in the humble mind of Christ.

Another way to improve our serenity in life is found in verse four. There Paul writes that we should “rejoice in the Lord always.” No matter how bad our circumstances might be, there are always reasons for joy. Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians from jail, and yet it is one of the most joy-filled books of the Bible. Paul rejoiced because of the support and encouragement of his friends in Christian faith. Paul found joy in opportunities to share the gospel with his jailers and the imperial guard. And Paul rejoiced that, even if he were to die in prison, he would be exalted with Christ in resurrection glory.

This “rejoicing in the Lord always” comes as we look for the silver lining in the dark clouds. When a recent news program asked its readers to name bright spots that had come during the pandemic, Cassandra from Michigan replied, “I love an empty calendar. It is so peaceful!” Jean from Washington replied, “I have a mild hearing loss . . . and have not enjoyed any meeting [in years] . . . because I have [had] to focus so intently on the speaker to understand what is being said. [But] with Zoom meetings, I can hear everybody! No straining or exhaustion involved!”¹ Serenity comes when we look for reasons to rejoice in the Lord always.

In verse five, Paul suggests another way to improve our serenity: “Let your gentleness be known to everyone.” On Friday morning, the front page of *The Salt Lake Tribune* had an article about a county council member who had to remove something he had posted on Facebook. His posting had caused a big stir, so he had to apologize and admit that he had gotten carried away with his words. We all know the experience of doing or saying something we later regret. Sleepless nights and troubled days come from harsh actions and hasty words. How much less we’d have to apologize, back track, and make excuses if we would think more carefully before we speak, write, and post. How much more peaceful our lives would be if we made gentleness a priority.

In verse six, Paul suggests that the way to serenity is to turn our worries into prayers. If we can turn over our troubles to God, then we can release them. Instead of stress and anxiety, we can then feel gratitude in our hearts to our benevolent Lord who carries our burdens for us. “The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will [then] guard [our] hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

In verse eight, Paul suggests that the way to serenity is to set our minds on things that are honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. If we spend all our time thinking about trouble, darkness, sin, anger, loss, pain, and suffering, then that’s what we’ll feel in our brains and our bodies. If we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed with thoughts of sickness, betrayal, inadequacy, and disappointment, then our life will be complicated by a lot of stress. But if we can get

ourselves out of that rut and think about lovely, pure, and commendable things—like snow-capped Wasatch Mountains on a blue-sky day, like yellow crocus poking up in the flower bed, like music performed with talent and much practice, like delicious food prepared with affection, like the promise and hope of a new baby—then our emotions and our bodies will respond in relief and serenity.

Does that mean we bury our heads in the sand of blissful ignorance? Does serenity require us to be apathetic to the troubles around us? No. We'll get to that more, as we progress through the words of this Serenity Prayer. But, today, I want you to experience what serenity feels like. Serenity is a good place, in which we find equilibrium for our souls. If we have been hurt by too much anxiety and stress, then we need to take those healing steps that will restore balance to our minds, bodies, and spirits by focusing on that which is true, honorable, and worthy of praise.

In his final advice in this passage, in verse nine, Paul wrote, "Keep on *doing* the things that you have learned and received and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you." Today, we can learn from Paul's written words because writing letters was one of the things he did. When he wasn't imprisoned, he also traveled, taught, and preached.

Serenity is a lot about mind and attitude. But it also comes through what we *do*—like what we did here at the church yesterday morning, when a number of members and friends gathered around some tables in the church parking lot. Filling gallon-sized Zip-lock bags with tuna fish, ravioli, macaroni and cheese, Ramen noodles, granola bars, oatmeal, fruit snacks, and crackers—we assembled 528 Pantry Packs to feed school kids on the weekends. That positive activity of helping others probably did as much good for our mental and spiritual health as those bags of food will help the hungry students who take them home. In this year of COVID restrictions, it's been a lot harder to do big volunteer projects, but most of us know people who need us to check on them, to offer some kind words, to give them a hand with some shopping or a repair, or to help them sign up for their vaccinations. As spring is coming, there will be lots of safe opportunities to help our neighbors with yard work that needs done.

Some our United Methodist Women are baking goodies for their fundraiser this week as a way to *do* something positive. Serenity increases when we *do* those positive things that bring blessings to us and to others.

CONCLUSION

Not everyone defines peace and serenity in the same ways. A few weeks ago, there was a large advertisement in the *Standard Examiner*. The ad took up half a page. In big letters at the top, it said, “You know the value of a peaceful home.” The ad showed pictures of neatly-organized pantry cupboards and indicated that we can “decrease stress . . . with custom pull-out shelves.”

It may be true that organizing our cupboards could help us find serenity. I like another idea I found in a lullaby that was just composed this year. I won’t sing it, but maybe in your mind you can hear these words to the tune of *Morning Has Broken*.

Love is a blanket. Each night I feel it.
I pull this blanket up to my chin.
Love brings me comfort. Love brings me quiet.
Love is a blanket I snuggle in.

I know God loves me. Jesus is with me.
God’s Holy Spirit calls through the deep.
I’m not alone here. God’s love is round me.
I am so safe here—I’ll go to sleep.

People here love me. People protect me.
Here I am safe from many a storm.
I can relax here. I know I’m loved here.
Love is my blanket, snugly and warm.²

The assurance of love that allows us to be at rest and get a good night’s sleep is a great image.
May God grant us such serenity.

¹Jill Hudson & Rachel Treisman, *The New Normal* email newsletter, 2/5/21.

²Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, “Love is a Blanket: A Bedtime Lullaby,” c. 2021. Used by special permission during the COVID pandemic.