

SERMON TITLE: "The Serenity Prayer: To Accept"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 2:41-52
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 14, 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 national and state leaders have been noting this week that we have now come to the sad, but true, one-year anniversary of our COVID pandemic experience. Likewise, here at First United Methodist, we can acknowledge that, as of today, we have been without in-person worship services for an entire 52 weeks. While it has been the strangest year of our lives, with some very difficult sacrifices, we can celebrate that our ministry never shut down. For anyone who wants to check us out, we have an entire year of Facebook Live worship services in our archive. Of course, the better thing to celebrate is that lots of us are getting our vaccinations, and, as a result, the COVID threat seems to be waning. We rejoice that we can see the light at the end of this long tunnel.

Because of these improving conditions, I fully expect that we will return to in-person worship in the near future. On Wednesday, our ReLaunch Team will certainly discuss when and how we can invite people back into the sanctuary. I encourage you to watch your Thursday church email, and stay tuned to hear the results of that discussion. For sure, we're much closer to worshiping in the sanctuary again.

That's the good news. Of course, it will still be months before the younger adults, youth, and children in our families will be safe from sickness. Dr. Angela Dunn, the Utah State Epidemiologist, said on Thursday that 85-90% of our state's population is still at risk. And that risk, that need to stay vigilant and continue limiting our behaviors on behalf of those we love, keeps us all in a situation of some stress and anxiety. So, today, we progress in our series on The Serenity Prayer to the words, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change." How does our acceptance help us gain serenity? Or how does our quest for serenity teach us to accept?

1—ANXIETY IN THE BIBLE STORY

As we contemplate acceptance, let's begin with our scripture from Luke, chapter two. This well-known Bible story tells us that 12-year-old Jesus traveled with his parents and other relatives to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Apparently, everything went fine on the trip there and during the festival itself. But when it was time to return home, Jesus' parents, extended family, and friends didn't notice that Jesus wasn't with them. The traveling party had journeyed a full day before Mary and Joseph realized that their son was missing.

That evening, when they couldn't find Jesus, can you imagine how worried they became? Can you picture their anxiety and fear? Can you hear the harsh words Mary and Joseph might have had with each other and others whom they might have blamed for not paying enough attention to Jesus? Can you visualize how hard they might have been on themselves, wracked in guilt? With no electric lights or car lights to guide them, they surely had to wait until morning to walk back to Jerusalem to look for Jesus. Can you imagine what a restless and sleepless night they had?

After Mary and Joseph hurried back to Jerusalem, it still took them what must have seemed like an eternity to find their son. Finally, after three days, they discovered Jesus in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. Jesus was perfectly content and calm there, as he interacted in amazing ways with those leaders of the Jewish faith. To see that Jesus was alive and not dead, that he appeared unharmed and content, must have been a huge relief to his parents. But, at the same time, Mary couldn't help but exclaim to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety."

While revealing some truth about his relationship with God, Jesus' response might have also seemed snarky and disrespectful to his parents. Even if Jesus didn't intend it that way, he obviously had entered into that period of life when youth sometimes roll their eyes and wonder in dismay at their parents' inability to "get" what's going on. Like most parents of tweens and adolescents, Joseph and Mary didn't understand what was becoming of their little boy.

Any of us who have raised children can feel the anxiety, frustration, and even anger that Mary and Joseph experienced in this episode of their missing child. At some time or other, *our* children also went missing or had some kind of potential danger to health and well-being that scared us. Maybe our anxiety lasted only for a brief moment, maybe for three days, or maybe for months. Some of us, and I definitely include myself in this category, have had to live with this kind of parental anxiety for years.

Fortunately for Joseph and Mary, Jesus returned home and was obedient to them. Possibly this Jerusalem trip was the worst thing that happened during Jesus' adolescent years. But we parents also know that we don't stop worrying about our kids when they reach age 18 or 20. And that's how it was in Jesus' situation too. After he was a full-fledged adult, Jesus' family still had great concerns about him. In Mark 3:19-21, we learn that his family went out "to restrain" Jesus at one point, because people had been saying that Jesus was "out of his mind." Rightly or wrongly, his family was worried about Jesus' mental health. And, of course, for his family and disciples, there was lots more to worry about as Jesus moved closer and closer to his arrest and crucifixion. John 19:25-27 tells us that Jesus' mother and her sister were there at the foot of the cross as Jesus was cruelly executed.

Can you imagine all those years of worry that Mary endured? How do you suppose she managed? How did she cope? Did she find any serenity? Was she able to accept the things she couldn't change?

2—ACCEPTANCE IN THE BIBLE STORY

What Luke 2:51 tells us is that Mary "treasured all these things in her heart." I take that to mean, first of all, that Mary was somehow able to think things through. She was able to receive information and process it over time. Even if she didn't understand the angel Gabriel's message about the unique conception of her baby, even if she didn't perceive why the prophet Simeon told her that her child would cause her heart to be pierced, even if she didn't understand why 12-year-old Jesus stayed behind and was so amazing with the teachers in the temple, even if she couldn't comprehend why Jesus said and did things that seemed crazy to other people, and even if her own heart was pierced at the sight of Jesus'

death on the cross—she was still willing to go along and love and support her son, as he followed the purpose God had given to him. Mary may not have understood, but she could care, she could assist, and she could accept.

I have said “even if Mary didn’t understand” as if we know for sure that she didn’t. It’s possible, though, that, by pondering and treasuring these things in her heart, Mary did come, over time, to understand more of what was going on. Sometimes we accept hardship and suffering because we know or we believe that the outcome will be good. We accept our own sacrifice or the sacrifice of our loved ones because we trust that the end result will be worth it.

In Luke chapter one, before Jesus was born, Mary sang a song about how the Lord was going to reorder society so that the wealthy and powerful would be brought down, and the lowly and hungry would be lifted up. If that was her hope and goal, then maybe Mary was able to accept the fact that her smart son would gain the attention of leaders, cause a commotion with his behaviors, and ruffle feathers to the point of his death. Maybe Mary could accept the tragedy of her son’s crucifixion because she believed in God’s ultimate vindication.

Throughout the ages, parents have worried and prayed a lot for their children who enter into military service, law enforcement, firefighting, and other risky careers. But they usually accept what happens because they believe that the benefit is important to society. Other times, we accept risks to ourselves and our loved ones because we believe that what we and they are doing brings joy to life. I think of those skiers who died in the Millcreek Canyon avalanche in February. I’m sure the death of those healthy and vibrant young adults was really hard on their parents and siblings, co-workers, and friends. But maybe they have been able to accept their deaths, knowing that the skiers were enjoying a lovely day in the mountains with friends, doing something that was meaningful to them.

When we’re talking about accepting someone’s sacrifice, we have to be careful not to be too willing to accept what isn’t right or just. Like Mary and Joseph hurried back to Jerusalem to find their son, we should always do what we can to prevent needless pain and suffering. As we’ll talk about next

Sunday, we should pray to God for that courage. But when situations are beyond our control, when bad things happen and we have trouble making sense of it, when we feel like a victim of powers that are much greater than we are, then we have to find ways to accept the things we cannot change.

To do that, maybe we can take a tip from what Jesus said to his parents about being in his Father's house. Maybe we need to recognize that some things are not meant to be kept in our house. We should take them to God's house. They're God's problems and God's responsibility. Some things in life truly are above our pay grade, and we can gain a lot more serenity if we accept that our worries and concerns are God's business much more than ours.

CONCLUSION

In preparation for this sermon series on The Serenity Prayer, I attended the online Mission U course called "Finding Peace in an Anxious World." As we talked about our desire for serenity in the face of worry, the class leaders introduced us to something called Laughter Yoga. They encouraged us to do the Laughter Yoga along with them during the classes, and to do it on our own whenever we needed a little help with accepting the hardships of life. So I'm going to teach you how to do some Laughter Yoga. You can follow my example, and hopefully feel some of your stress go away.

Do this with me: "Ho, ho, ha, ha. Ho, ho, ho, ho, ha, ha, ha." (Repeat, clapping on each syllable.) Let's do it again. Come on, do it with me: "Ho, ho, ha, ha. Ho, ho, ho, ho, ha, ha, ha." (Repeat, clapping on each syllable.) Do you feel the relief and joy coming? Do you feel your anxiety leaving?

Here's another one: "You are strong! I am strong! God is strong! Yea!" (Repeat, clapping on each syllable with hands left, right, then upper center, followed by fists to open hands up high and waving).

When we add a little humor like that to our lives, we can break up our frowns and fears and lighten our mood. It can help us find, restore, and maintain our serenity. It can help us to accept the things we cannot change.