

SERMON TITLE: "The Serenity Prayer: The Courage to Change the Things I Can"
SERMON TEXT: 1 Samuel 25:2-8, 14-20, and 32-35
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 21, 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

Have you been working on your income taxes? For the past 15 years or so, I took or mailed my tax information to the same CPA in Colorado. For most of those years, he did a fine job. But for the past few years, I had slightly decreasing confidence that he was doing things correctly. Then, last year, my dissatisfaction rose to a new high. I don't know if my CPA was suffering from a mental decline, if the onset of the COVID pandemic threw him off, or if he just didn't value my business anymore. But I decided then that I would have to do something different this year. I would have to make a change.

Of course, change is often scary, especially when it has to do with income taxes. I don't know if you realize this, but clergy taxes are uniquely complicated. Most tax preparers have no familiarity with the specific rules about clergy. And in Utah, where there aren't nearly as many professional ministers, the problem is even greater. So I have to admit that, over the past couple months, I was tempted to resort to the old CPA. But I consulted with some colleagues about the software they use, I did some other online research, and I worked up my courage to file my taxes myself. That change was a stretch for me, but I think it all turned out OK. In fact, I feel pretty good about gathering up the courage to make that change.

During this Lenten season, we've been working our way through the words and phrases of The Serenity Prayer. We began by talking about "God." Then we moved on to "grant me" and "serenity." Last Sunday, we talked about the peace that comes to us when we "accept the things [we] cannot change." Today, we've come to the line about courage. Let's dig into this Old Testament story from First Samuel 25 and see what we can learn about "the courage to change the things I can."

1—COURAGE NOT TO BE A FOOL

The first thing we learn from this story is that the bravery we're looking for is the courage not to be a fool. In First Samuel 25:2-3, we learn about a man named Nabal. Jewish people would laugh at this story because they would know that the Hebrew word "Nabal" means "fool." As the story indicates, Nabal was well-named. Verse three tells us that he "was surly and mean." In verse 17, his servant indicated that he was "ill-natured."

And, of course, those traits were evident in his refusal to help David and his soldiers when they asked for assistance. Instead of appreciating how David's men had previously helped guard Nabal's sheep and shepherds—instead of kindly returning that good deed—Nabal refused their request for food. He didn't even take time to consider the merits of their request. He immediately lumped David and his soldiers into the category of runaway slaves, who should be punished instead of helped. Instead of recognizing this opportunity to enhance a mutually-beneficial relationship, Nabal foolishly offended David and provoked David's wrath.

If Nabal had been poor or even of moderate means, it might have been understandable that he would protect and preserve his supplies for his own workers. But verse two tells us that Nabal was a very rich man. He had no need to be stingy. He had no need to ignore the plight of David's hungry soldiers. Nabal's refusal to be generous and kind was not an act of courage. It was an act of short-sighted foolishness that put him, his family, and their servants at risk of violent and deadly retaliation.

Sometimes it's tempting to think that decisions to protect our own interests are the courageous things to do. But, if we don't consider other people's needs, our courage may actually be more like foolishness. I think about how our rich United States is so far ahead of most other countries in regard to COVID vaccinations. Yes, I'm thrilled that I got my first vaccination, and I'm very eagerly looking forward to getting my second shot. And I hope with all my heart that all of you will get your vaccinations and that all Americans who can will do so as soon as possible. I'm so glad our country had the foresight to develop, manufacture, test, and build up a supply of effective vaccines so we can gain relief from this dread disease.

But I'm also glad that, this past week, the U.S. shared a large vaccine stockpile with Mexico and Canada. As we've seen in this past year, it's pretty hard to keep viruses from crossing international borders. And, if we ever want to be able to travel in the world again, it's important that we consider our global neighbors and not just ourselves. Hoarding selfishly is dangerous and foolish. If we want God to grant us serenity, then we need the courage not to be a fool.

2—COURAGE TO SEE INJUSTICE & DANGER

Fortunately, foolish Nabal had a servant who ran a report to Nabal's wife Abigail. He explained to Abigail what was going on. The servant had the courage to see injustice and danger. Instead of putting his head in the sand, instead of accepting the foolish attitudes of his mean master, and instead of assuming that he had no power to correct the course of events—this “young man” had the courage to see something and say something.

I sometimes notice folks who prefer to be uninformed. They think that it's better not to know what's happening in the community and world around them. They think they'll have more serenity if they avoid all that bad news. That's probably true to some degree. We all do have to be careful that we don't get obsessed with “doomscrolling”. Do you know that word? That term was coined this past year, as we found ourselves on high alert, on constant lookout for the next round of terrible pandemic news.

Serenity does require us to know when to shut off the anxious noise. Like we said last Sunday, we have to be able to accept the things that we cannot change. But, serenity also requires us to balance that acceptance with the courage to open our eyes and ears to what is actually happening. We have to allow ourselves to recognize the injustices and dangers that really are there, so we can respond appropriately.

To see what's going on requires courage. Think of the situation in Atlanta this week, where eight people were killed. Six of them were Asian American women. Some people wanted to deny immediately that there was any racist component to that. Have you noticed that, every time there is a killing of a person of color, there are some folks who just reflexively come up with another explanation? “He was

trespassing.” “He looked suspicious.” “She was in the wrong place at the wrong time” (even if it was her own bed). “He was resisting arrest.” “It was about a sex addict having a bad day.” I have to wonder why we’re so afraid to admit that racism is a huge problem in our country. Why are we so afraid to see it and name it? The short-term bliss of ignorance may come by denying what is right in front of our faces, but long-term, true serenity will only come through the courage to see injustice and danger.

3—COURAGE TO ACT APPROPRIATELY

The third point we see in this story is that God gives us serenity through the courage to act appropriately. Change certainly begins with not being foolish and by allowing ourselves to see the injustices that need to be changed. But, after we see what’s wrong, courage still has to take one more step to act appropriately to make that change happen.

That’s what Abigail did. Nabal was a foolish man, but, fortunately for his family and all his sheep-shearing servants, Nabal’s wife Abigail was wise and courageous. As soon as the young man brought her the report about David’s request for food, about Nabal’s rude and foolish denial, and about David’s order for his 400 soldiers to strap on their swords, Abigail jumped into action. She had probably put up with a lot of abuse from her mean and ill-natured husband over the years, but *this time*, at least, she didn’t accept her husband’s response and the pending consequences as something that could not be changed. She had the courage to act to change what she could to preserve her family, her home, and their many servants.

With this courage to act, Abigail hurried and gathered up bread, wine, raisins, figs, ready-to-cook sheep, and more. She loaded them on donkeys and set out to find David and his men. She didn’t tell Nabal what she was doing, so he wouldn’t be able to stop her. She and the servant found David and his men in the dark shadow of the mountain. Can you imagine how much courage that took on Abigail’s part? To meet up with a hungry and angry army?

As soon as she saw David, Abigail jumped from her donkey and bowed down to the ground before him. Verse 23 tells us that she fell at his feet and apologized. She apologized on behalf of her foolish

husband and asked that his guilt be upon her. She offered the food she had brought and asked David to forgive them. Abigail's quick and courageous actions pleased David, so he forgave her and then did not inflict vengeance against Nabal and his servants. Not because of Nabal's foolishness, but because of Abigail's courageous and appropriate action to change the course of events, David received the food she had brought and granted her people peace.

Serenity does sometimes require accepting the things we cannot change. But oftentimes, serenity only comes as we address the problems that we see with quick and appropriate action. We can't be afraid of change. Sometimes the risk of doing nothing or staying the same is just too great. Sometimes we have to recognize the error, the injustice, and the danger. We may have to apologize—even if it wasn't us who did the wrong thing. Sometimes we have to take action to repair and improve relationships, to bring about the change we want to see in the world. Sometimes we have to pray that God will grant us the courage to change the things we can.

CONCLUSION

There's a prayer in our hymnal that comes from South Africa, a country that certainly has had its share of injustice that needed courage and change. The prayer goes like this:

O Lord,
 open my eyes that I may see the needs of others;
 open my ears that I may hear their cries; . . .
 let me not be afraid to defend the weak because of the anger of the strong,
 nor afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of the rich.
 Show me where love and hope and faith are needed,
 and use me to bring them to those places.
 And so open my eyes and my ears
 that I may this coming day be able to do some work of peace for thee. Amen.*

Yes, God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, and the courage to change the things I can. Amen.

*Alan Paton, c. 1968, 1982 Seabury Press, Inc., UMH #456.