

SERMON TITLE: "The Serenity Prayer: The Wisdom to Distinguish"
SERMON TEXT: Mark 11:7-11 and Matthew 26:36-42
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 28, 2021 (Palm Sunday) 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

Compared to last year, this year's Holy Week is especially celebratory because so many of us are getting our vaccinations, the threat of the COVID pandemic is lifting, and at least some of us are able to be back inside the sanctuary for worship. Praise God for this relief and joy!

But, just like every year, there is also a dimension of sadness and solemnity in Holy Week. In between Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his glorious resurrection on Easter morning, there were many difficult encounters, emotions, and experiences. When Jesus rode that donkey into the capital city, he had a lot on his mind and heart. Those concerns only increased as the week wore on—as he overturned the tables to cleanse the temple; as his teachings and miracles stirred up conflict with the authorities; as Jesus ate his Last Supper with his disciples; as he prayed in great anxiety in the Garden of Gethsemane; and as Jesus was betrayed, arrested, condemned, beaten, and crucified.

Throughout this season of Lent, we of First United Methodist Church have been working our way through the words and phrases of The Serenity Prayer. We have talked about who *God* is and what it means to pray, "*grant me.*" We've defined and described "*serenity,*" and we've thought about what it takes "*to accept the things I cannot change.*" Last Sunday, we worked on "*the courage to change the things I can.*" And finally, today—as we reflect on the acceptance and courage of Jesus' last week of life—let's see how he found, and how we might seek, "*the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.*"

1—HYMNS AND SCRIPTURE

In the Palm Sunday story we read from Mark 11, we heard the crowd shouting, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Right out of Psalm 118, those words and their actions of cutting, waving,

and laying down palm branches before Jesus and his donkey were the crowd's way of expressing sacred scripture. The Psalms were the Jewish people's hymns. They would know these holy words by heart from having sung them in their homes, in their synagogues, and at big religious festivals in Jerusalem.

For Jesus, the words of these sacred hymns were precious, insightful, and informative. These songs which came to have the status of scripture gave Jesus context for interpreting whatever else was happening around him. These holy words provided divine inspiration, guidance, and wisdom. These sacred texts offered comfort in suffering, hope in sorrow, and victory in defeat, so Jesus could accept the things he could not change *and* find courage to change the things he could. These melodious words would provide Jesus the ability to discern and sort out truth about what could be changed and what could not; these verses of scripture would help Jesus to find serenity by gaining the wisdom to distinguish the difference.

Fortunately, today, we followers of Jesus can do the same. We can distinguish the difference between acceptance and courage, between possibility and *impossibility*, by regularly singing the hymns of faith and reading God's Holy Scripture. When we sing "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine," we can rest peacefully in the acceptance that, whatever happens, even in this life we can have a "foretaste of glory divine." And biblical passages like Matthew 16:24, where Jesus told his disciples to "take up their cross and follow me," inspire us to embrace courage to change the things we can.

When we read the story of Jesus' agony while praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, we realize that even Jesus had to sort between when to accept with some degree of passivity and when to bolster his courage to make changes. Should he flee? Should he stay? Should he be silent? Should he speak up? Jesus looked to song and scripture for the wisdom to know the difference and distinguish the one from the other.

2—FAITH TRADITION

A second way that Jesus gained the peace and wisdom to distinguish between his options was by participating in his faith tradition. The events of Holy Week took place in Jerusalem, and Jesus and his fellow Jews were participating in the Passover Festival. This was an annual tradition. They came to Jerusalem every

year for this week of teaching and learning, of worshiping and praying, of sacrificing for sin and celebrating God's deliverance of their people from slavery in Egypt.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and the people waved palm branches, their minds were full of their Jewish history. They could remember the biblical story of King Solomon riding a mule into Jerusalem about a 1000 years earlier. His father David had spilled a lot of blood, but Solomon's reign was characterized by peace. As the festival crowd waved their palm branches, they and Jesus also recalled that, just 200 years prior, when the Greeks had defiled the Jewish temple by installing a statue of Zeus, the Jewish priest Maccabeus and his son brought peace to their people by gaining the courage to change that situation. They led a guerilla army, and they cleansed and restored their temple. Now, the *Romans* were the occupying force, and Jesus believed that they and their Jewish collaborators were defiling the temple again. Jesus courageously took action to clear out the money changers. He made space in the temple courtyard so people could listen to him teach and observe his miracles of healing. Would he do more? Should he do more?

There was a lot of tradition for Jesus to reflect upon. What kind of leader would he be? How would he bring peace to his people? Should he be passive or assertive? Should he accept what was happening or keep pressing for courageous changes? What was the right thing to do? The wisdom he needed came in part from reflecting on his faith tradition.

This is true for us, as well. When we are praying for God to grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference, we do well to lean on our faith tradition. What have wise ones like John Wesley or our Christian grandparents done in the past? It might take some reading and research, but it's well worth it to discover that we are not alone in our struggles to distinguish the wise course of action or inaction.

For example, this past week, I read an article about Jarena Lee. She was a Methodist woman born in the late 1700s. Jarena Lee felt God calling her to preach, but she accepted the rule of her time that women couldn't be preachers. But after eight years of suppressing her call to ministry, Jarena Lee finally couldn't

accept that anymore. In an 1817 worship service, God's courage welled up in her and caused her to stand up and begin preaching. Richard Allen, the bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, happened to be there in the congregation. When he saw how God was speaking through her, he granted Jarena Lee the right to preach.

Stories like this, from our faith tradition, help us to decide what is right for us. Does peace call us to accept quietly the way things are, or will serenity only come when we make a courageous change? The answer might vary in different times and places. Our faith tradition gives us wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

3—CONTEMPORARY REASON & EXPERIENCE

As Jesus struggled and prayed to find God's wisdom in that final week of his life, he also relied on contemporary reason and experience. Jesus' crucifixion certainly wasn't the first one the Romans had carried out. The Romans frequently crucified slaves, criminals, and other enemies along roadways as public warnings to anyone else who would get out of line. Jesus had probably seen many of his fellow Jews executed in this manner, and he was fully aware that this could be his fate.

That's why the gospels indicate several times that Jesus wasn't yet ready to go to Jerusalem. Even though he clearly told his disciples that he would die on a cross and that they also should be prepared to take up their crosses, Jesus had important teaching and healing work to do before his death. When to accept what seems inevitable and when to bolster courage to try to change the course of events, when to resist and when to give in, are often about timing. And, like Jesus, we have to pray and think and follow the wise guidance of contemporary reason and experience.

We know from the gospels, and maybe especially from the Gospel of John, that Jesus gave a lot of thought to how his disciples would manage after his death. Jesus was concerned about their emotional and spiritual health. Would they be ready to love and serve one another, according to his example? Would they be prepared to trust that God's Holy Spirit would guide them even after Jesus was gone? Just in case not,

Jesus prayed for them and packed his last days with instructions to them. Jesus gave them a memorable example of loving service as he bowed down to wash their feet. As Jesus broke the bread and passed the cup of the Passover meal, he reinterpreted that story of liberation from Egyptian slavery to include the sacrifice he was making for them with his body and his blood.

Jesus didn't know about psychology as a science the way we think of it today, but he could see that his family and followers were experiencing a lot of anxiety around his actions and plans. Jesus knew that they would be shocked, grieved, stressed, and deeply depressed by his pending crucifixion—not to mention their own guilt of betrayal and denial. Jesus knew that they would need a different way to think about what was going to happen—a way to turn a terrible and unjust tragedy into a forgiving and life-affirming event.

All that was on Jesus' mind and heart as he agonized in prayer to God: "If possible, let this cup pass from me. But not what I want, but what you want. If this cup cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." Just as Jesus had used hymns, scriptures, and insights from his faith tradition, Jesus also leaned on reason and experience from current-day events and relationships as he prayed to discern the wisdom of God. And that's what we need to do too. As we prayerfully reflect on our own lived experience along with informed contemporary reasoning, we will be able to distinguish the wisdom we need.

CONCLUSION

In the Old Testament, the books of Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes are known as Wisdom Literature. Over and over again, Proverbs speaks about the importance of seeking wisdom. Ecclesiastes has the famous passage in chapter three, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, a time to die, a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted . . . a time to keep silence, and a time to speak, a time for war, and a time for peace." Part of coming to that time of peace is knowing which time it is. Is it time to accept the things we cannot change or is it time to seek courage to change the things we can? The time of serenity comes when we gain the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.