

The Courage to Change the Things I Can
Rev. Bill Neely
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Princeton
Sunday, November 12, 2017

A long time ago, the Buddha taught that once he was born a parrot. Before he was the Buddha, he was a parrot. She was colorful and chirpy and would fly around the forest visiting friends and making new ones. She was small but full of energy, and enjoyed her life quite a bit.

One day as she was returning home after visiting some friends far away, she was horrified to see that the forest was aflame. A huge fire was raging through the trees and bushes, and threatened to burn everything down. She froze in fear; unsure of what to do, until she did the only thing she could think to do. She flew to a nearby pond, submerged herself in the water, and flew back over the threatening flames, through the suffocating smoke and deadly heat, and shook her wings so that a few drops of water would fall on the flames.

It didn't seem to do anything. Nevertheless, then as now as always, she persisted. She flew back to the pond and submerged herself again, and repeated the act. She did that again and again, even though she seemed to be having no effect on the fire. She was desperate to put the fire out and so she did what she could do to try and make that happen, even though her efforts seemed to be fruitless.

There were Gods watching her; Gods of an indulgent realm who sat around at leisure eating figs and honey all day. They laughed at her anxiety and mocked the franticness with which she attacked the flames. They offered no help, were of no counsel, and only sought to ridicule her efforts. But one God was moved by her plight, and worried about her safety. This God morphed into a giant golden eagle and flew down to talk to the parrot. He told her to turn back; that her efforts would never wet the flames; that the fire was too strong and dangerous. He offered no help. His counsel was to quit and save herself.

After he spoke, as she was flying back to get more water, she told him, "I don't need some giant golden eagle to give me advice. I need help." And with that she submerged herself, preparing to take another trip. The Buddha teaches that her compassion moved the God; that through her compassion he could suddenly see all the animals threatened by the fire. He could feel the energy of their lives running through his veins and he realized that her action was right, even if it was fruitless. And even as a giant, mythic eagle, he too would be powerless to abate the flames, but nevertheless, a desire to do something welled up within him. "I will help," he declares, moved to great tears by the little parrot's compassionate action.

And his tears flowed. They flowed as rain upon the devouring flames. They showered down upon the fire extinguishing every spark. He flew all around, over the entire forest, his tears drenching every leaf, every bush, every inch of land, moistening the soil so that green shoots rose through the charred ashes right before their eyes. The family and friends of the little parrot were safe, and the little parrot could finally rest, as the forest became their home again.

In these ancient stories, and in new ones, whenever there's animal, they're meant to be understood as a person. We are the parrot, or the eagle, or the unnamed animals standing still in a burning forest, frozen in fear and not doing anything. More than likely, we're all of them, sometimes at the same time. And we're also the laughing, indulgent, aloof, Gods, or the one who is transformed, or more likely, we're all of them, too. Stories about gods and goddesses are best used as mirrors in which we can see who we are and who we'd like to be. Even the Buddha himself seemed to know that a parrot and a divine eagle would teach a lesson better than he could as Buddha.

And so he teaches a lesson about changing what could be changed, which is one's response to the world. Faced with a fire, the parrot could freeze; she could fly away; she could watch from a safe distance. We can all think of which of those choices we might make. But they would have left her unsatisfied. They would have gnawed at her conscience. She would watch her world and relationships burn away and know that she did nothing to stop it. And so she found within herself the courage to change the things she could change, and she took whatever small steps she could to save the world.

Her actions are an illustration of part of *The Serenity Prayer*, which we read as the Unison Affirmation this morning. The most common version of that prayer is printed there: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference." It was written by an immensely important American theologian by the name Reinhold Niebuhr in the early 1940s, and it was published in the 50's. Niebuhr, whose contributions to Protestant theology and American civil religion were enormous, complex, and are enduring, would become more popularly known, particularly after his death in 1971, for these four brief lines than for the other masterpieces he produced.

These days, if the name Niebuhr is ringing a bell and it's not because of this prayer or his scholarship, it may be because he's been in the news as the twitter alter ego of former FBI Director James Comey. Seriously. When I studied Niebuhr in seminary I never imagined that sentence coming out of my mouth but it has been reasonably reliably reported that the former FBI Director ran an anonymous twitter account masked as Reinhold Niebuhr. When I first read that story I thought that there's no way that can be true, but then I quickly thought, "You know what, in today's world, it could absolutely be true, and it'd be far from the most absurd thing I've heard in our government."

His far greater accomplishments lie in the field of theology though, and he spoke and preached often, and often included *The Serenity Prayer* in his words. His daughter, Elizabeth Sifton wrote a book about the prayer and its origins. In it she clarifies some of the lore and legends that have developed about the prayer over the years. We learn, for example, that while the popular version begins, "God, grant me the serenity ..." the version that she says her father prayed was, "God give me the grace to accept with serenity ..." The popular version leaves out grace. My own two cents is that it's never a good idea to leave out grace, but I'm sure someone had their reasons.

She also says that the line, "the courage to change what I can ..." was actually "the courage to change what should be changed ..." That's a more consequential change to the prayer, for it asserts a moral imperative. The popular version is pragmatic, acknowledging that there are some

things we can change and some things we cannot, and the prayer is really for the wisdom to know the difference between the two. Sifton is saying that her father prayed for courage to change what should be changed, not simply what one can change. There's a value statement inherent in Niebuhr's line that makes the prayer more active, for to change what should be changed, one must first know what is wrong, morally.

For Niebuhr, what was on wrong, and what was on his mind, was World War II. It was Nazis. It was fascism. It was western tolerance of the deadly anti-Semitism that would lead to the holocaust. It was a global Protestant church that largely looked away from Hitler's atrocities, and a Roman church that in some ways enabled him to act them out, particularly early in the war. It was mainstream US churches that were silent in the face of genocide, and liberal US congregations that didn't take seriously enough the problem of human evil, and conservative US congregations that were frankly kind of cozy with the hatred and anti-Semitism of Hitler.

The Serenity Prayer is rooted in a sense that the church has a moral imperative to act in this world in opposition to very real presence of evil; an evil that is not simply an absence of goodness and just something in need of a white light of love. For Niebuhr, that evil was real, was deadly, was very strong, and would need to be countered, at times, with force. This is why he was not a pacifist, and strongly critiqued pacifism. The service member; the veteran, whose sacrifices we honor this weekend, in Niebuhr's view, serve honorably and necessarily in an effort to prevent a larger evil from destroying more lives. He didn't favor war, of course, and he more than understood the corruption of governments and the wrong wars that had been fought in the world, and the wrong reasons that could lead to war and unnecessary death, but he also understood war and force as sometimes necessary to counter a greater evil. And he saw allegiance to pacifism as naïve in the face of what overwhelming evil can do in a very short time, and was doing at the exact time that Sifton says he wrote *The Serenity Prayer*.

That's a pretty long jump from how that prayer is popularly used today, which is mostly in 12-step groups. In those circles it is a prayer of both clarity and empowerment. There are some things that an individual can change, and some things that one can't, and the important piece of spiritual discernment is to know the difference between the two. What one can change, in the moment, is the response to an addictive substance or relationship or something that is harmful to them. I've heard this described as what can't be changed is what has happened, and what also can't be changed is also what might happen, but what can be changed is what I do in this moment. What can be changed is the behavior that I exhibit in these circumstances, with these possibilities before me. What I can change, is me; not the world, not what I've done, or what I might do, but what I choose to do in this moment, and then this one, and then this one.

The Serenity Prayer centers one in what always sounds to me like a mindful, Buddhist-like awareness that we have this moment, and only this one. We don't have past, which can fill us with regret. And we don't have the future, which can fill us with anxiety. We have this moment and these choices. And the prayer reminds us of the wisdom to know that in this moment, we can feel regret or anxiety or whatever difficult, instructive emotion comes about, and if we are aware of it, perhaps even share a word or two about it with someone, we can then create the option of letting it pass. Unnamed, those emotions, and the memories and anxieties from which they draw, can create the very urges that we're trying to get away from. And the prayer is a subtle,

empowering act that creates clarity about what one can control and what one can't, and what one should do with what they can control. It's a plea to God for peace, and the awareness that what one can change, no matter what, in this moment, is one's self.

And just because the change doesn't always happen doesn't mean it can't ever happen. Like all prayer, *The Serenity Prayer* isn't something you pray once and everything is solved. It'd be lovely if that were the case but that's not how prayer works. It's a practice that deepens slowly over time and repetition. It's a prayer that holds the possibility of being lived into every day, many times a day. And like all prayer, *The Serenity Prayer* is not for the perfect, but for the fallen, for the sinful, the confused and despairing and the ones not sure of where to turn. It's for all of us, at some point, at many points in our lives, when we find ourselves in the dark valley, unsure of where to go, with what seems like only danger before us.

It's a prayer for when we are surrounded by the fires and watching great destruction happen; that we will realize that while we can't change the overwhelming flames, we can change how we react to them. We can harness our courage, and do what we can do. We can sprinkle whatever water we can carry, and resist overwhelming forces of evil. An entire future free of that which causes us harm, or causes the world harm, is too much for us to handle. It's a totality of change that we can't create. But the change that we can make right now, or should make right now, can be to make things better, regardless of all of the unknowns of the future.

Words from the Jewish tradition ring true: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it." We are not obligated to do everything; to change what cannot be changed. But we are obligated to bring the change that we can to wounded parts of ourselves and this world, moment by moment, life by life.

We are obligated, when the fires rage within ourselves and our shared world, to carry water to the flames. To do that again and again. Day by day. And to look for others who will help. And to save what can be saved, in this moment, and this one, and this one. One day at a time. One life at a time. One world at a time.

May it be so, and Amen.