

SIGNIFICANT PRAYER EVENT #6
Spring, 1934—The Serenity Prayer

Dear Ones,

There are times in our spiritual walk when our own words fail us and it is necessary to draw upon one of the great prayers of the faith to give us the words with which to address God. The Lord's Prayer is such a prayer, as is the 23rd Psalm. One of the best loved prayers outside of Scripture is the prayer of St. Francis which begins, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. . ." There is perhaps only one prayer written by an American that is in the same league as these great prayers of the faith.

AAHistory.com tells the story that before the United States entered World War II in 1942, that a New York Member of the fledgling organization of Alcoholic's Anonymous brought to a meeting an obituary from the Herald Tribune that read:

*God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change,
Courage to change the things we can,
And wisdom to know the difference.*

This prayer deeply moved the AA members in New York and arrangements were made to have the prayer printed on a business card, and the prayer eventually became a hallmark of Alcoholics Anonymous and the entire twelve-step movement for rehabilitation from addiction.

Authorship of the Serenity Prayer has been variously attributed. In one form or another, the ideas encapsulated in the prayer have been around since the time of the Greeks and Romans. But in the form that it has come to be widely used, there is no doubt that the prayer was authored by a famous American theologian, Karl Paul Reinhold Neibuhr.

Reinhold Neibuhr (1892-1971) is a rather colorful character in American religious history. His father, Gustav Neibuhr was a German Evangelical and Reformed pastor of liberal convictions, and two of Reinhold's brothers became well known theologians in their own right.

Immediately after graduating from seminary in 1915, Reinhold Neibuhr was sent as an intern to care for a very small congregation in Detroit. This "internship" was supposed to have lasted only a year or two but stretched out for nearly 13 as the church grew to have more than 500 members. The growth was due to three things: 1. the tremendous growth of Detroit as the automotive industry took off 2. Reinhold's success in reaching out to and getting involved with automobile manufacturing workers 3. the very public and controversial stands he took in opposition to Henry Ford and the Ford Motor Company.

Reinhold became known as a radical. He not only preached labor justice from his pulpit, he shared that pulpit with leaders from the United Autoworkers and wrote many published articles supporting better housing, insurance, retirement benefits, healthcare, etc. He said of his own formation as a theologian, "I cut my eyeteeth fighting Ford."

His political involvement reached out beyond Detroit. In the 1920's Neibuhr joined the Socialist Party and supported the "United Front" agenda of the Communist

Party of the USA. At the same time, however, he presided over the “Fellowship of Reconciliation,” a Christian pacifist group.

In 1928, and even though he did not have a formal academic doctor’s degree, Neibuhr was called to teach at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, a prestigious institution endowed by the Rockefellers, next to the famous Riverside Church and the Interchurch Center housing the National Council of Churches, at the heartbeat of mainline Protestantism in the United States.

At Union Neibuhr continued a spiritual pilgrimage that would bring him into relationship with most of the great theological and political minds of his day, and even as he grew and changed he became perhaps the most influential American Christian thinker since Jonathan Edwards.

In the face of the second World War, Neibuhr renounced Christian pacifism and the idealistic liberalism and socialism of his early ministry. He came to grips with the pervasive self-centeredness and sinful pride of humanity and decided that the American democratic system of checks and balances was the only way to order human society. He called his position “Christian Realism.” Although he was never a friend of big business capitalism, he also opposed totalitarianism, whether Communist or Fascist. For 25 years Neibuhr edited a hugely influential journal, *Christianity in Crisis*, that among other things helped influence US policy towards the containment of Communism, the Civil rights Movement, and Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty.”

With this monumental record of achievement, I find it ironic that Reinhold Neibuhr’s most influential work is not any one of his great books, articles, or lectures, nor even any of the many important conversations that he had with influential people. Instead, his most influential work was a simple prayer appended to a sermon on Practical Christianity delivered at the small church near his summer home in Heath, Massachusetts in 1934. One of the attendees at the service asked for the prayer and was given the handwritten notes, as Neibuhr said he had no further use for them.

Later, when interviewed regarding the history of the prayer, Neibuhr couldn’t even be absolutely positive that he himself had written these words. He said that yes, he did distinctly remember writing the prayer but then added, “Of course, it may have been spooking around for years, even centuries, but I don’t think so. I honestly do believe that I wrote it myself.” Because the prayer was frequently quoted from memory, it exists in several different versions, but this is the final version (as best I can determine it) as written by Reinhold Neibuhr

*God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.
Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,*

*Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.
Amen.*

It seems evident to me that this prayer is more the prayer of a realist than an idealist. It is perhaps also more the prayer of a mature person than an immature person. It is the prayer of someone who is able to set priorities in life, and who can find contentment even in the midst of disappointment. There are three aspects of the prayer that especially impress me: 1. although the prayer is called “the serenity prayer” it is actually the “serenity, courage, and wisdom” prayer because those are the three qualities requested. You have heard the tired joke “don’t ask God for patience because He may choose to give it to you?”—it seems to me that asking for serenity, courage and wisdom is similar. 2. The prayer acknowledges this by leading me to make a triple commitment in response to my triple request—living in the moment, looking at hardship and sin realistically, and trusting God’s will. 3. The result of my triple request and triple commitment is (to me, at least) a surprising result: *reasonable* happiness in this life and *supreme* happiness in the next.

This is not the prayer of a practitioner of the “health and wealth gospel”—*reasonable* happiness being an accommodation to the limitations and challenges of life rather than their miraculous dissolution. But it is also not the prayer of a Marxist Christian. In the 1930’s Reinhold Niebuhr was still attempting some sort of synthesis of Christianity and Marxism. You know Karl Marx’s famous quote about “religion being the opiate of the masses,” by which he meant that Christianity is able to pacify the working masses by promising them Heaven if they will only submit and behave themselves here on earth. It’s no wonder that this portion of the prayer has more frequently than not been omitted.

For me, however, the promise of *supreme* happiness forever is the beginning of the answer to the triple request for serenity, courage, and wisdom. If our happiness forever is already settled in Christ, then we are free to live life, enjoy the moment, and face hardships without having to attain a perfection of peace and happiness before we die. We are free to take risks, we are free to both accept and make changes in a flawed world, and we are free for our happiness here to be merely *reasonable*, because we don’t depend on this life for ultimate good. Marx didn’t have the whole picture. Heaven may be the carrot on the stick that keeps the poor peons submissively turning the mill wheel, but Heaven may also be the instrument for freeing those peons to courageously change the world.

