

DEALING WITH LIFE'S REPORT CARDS
PHILIPPIANS 4:10-13 (NRSV)
HEBREWS 11:1-16; 32-40; 12:1-2 (KJV)
A Sermon by Dean K. Thompson
Caldwell Chapel
Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary
March 6, 2009

Lent is a season of prayer. Prayer is at the heart of the Church's life. And today is World Day of Prayer. Thus, the heart of our morning sermon is a prayer. It is the so-called Serenity Prayer.

**O God, give us
Serenity to accept what cannot be changed,
Courage to change what should be changed,
And wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Amen.**

For me and my life, that prayer is incontestably one of the most healing prayers ever lifted by human lips. During more than three decades of pastoral ministry, I used that prayer in my work with high school students, with college students, with couples planning to get married, with couples whose relationships were going through rough water, with parents and their adult children who were teetering on the brink of estrangement, and with discouraged adults and old people who were trying to mend in their broken places. That was Ernest Hemingway's hope for all of us in *A Farewell to Arms*. "The world breaks everyone," he wrote, "and afterward many are strong at the broken places."¹

Our sermon prayer was written in 1934 by the pre-eminent American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Howard Chandler Robbins published it in a pamphlet. Then, during World War II, the U.S.O. distributed millions of copies to service personnel. Then, Alcoholics Anonymous immortalized it by adopting it as their "Serenity Prayer." Today, the prayer still circulates throughout the world among liberals, conservatives, ecumenists, evangelicals and fundamentalists.

Why? Why does the “Serenity Prayer” possess a life of its own? Why does it bridge so many divides? Because it is a rather prophetic prayer; prophetic because it is the prayer of a seer, the prayer of one who sees clearly into the complexity, enigma, pain, ambiguity and puzzle called human life.

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The “Serenity Prayer”: There are many things in this life which you can change if you receive and muster the courage and strength. Yet there are also many other things which, no matter how hard you may try to change them, and no matter how hard you may hope to change them, you can’t; you just have to learn to live with them and to make your peace with them. You won’t be able to clean them up. You won’t be able to do it.

Maybe no one knows these lessons better than the sober, recovering alcoholic. So many alcoholics I have known have received a curious power enabling them to speak these following words. “By the grace of God, I can quit drinking. I can change that. But I can’t change the fact that I’m an alcoholic; and I can’t change the fact that if I take one drink, I’ll descend into a kind of living hell.” And in being able to make that confession, thousands of alcoholics are visited by serenity itself, by a blessed brand of grace and peace, by a peace that passes all understanding.

When we’re honest, we surely know that every marriage, every holy union has danger areas, or what I like to call “red flags.” So, when I meet with couples who are planning to unite and make life covenants, I help them to identify some of the real and potential “red flags” in their relationship – some of the real and potential danger areas. And, as I work with them, I always ask them this loaded and somewhat unfair question. “If

you could change two things about your future spouse, what would you change?”

Now, on the one hand, that’s actually a very fair question. I mean, there are several aspects in our lives that we can change for the better. For example, many younger men today are, by and large, much better nurturers than many of their fathers and grandfathers were. Indeed, I’m a better nurturer today than I was 30 years ago. I’ve changed. Indeed, change has changed me.

This reminds me of a speech Marlo Thomas once made about her husband, Phil Donahue. Marlo Thomas confessed to a large audience, “I have seen Phil change and grow across the years into an extraordinarily sensitive and nurturing man. Phil has changed and grown into one of the most sensitive and nurturing men I have ever met. Indeed, Phil has become such a sensitive and nurturing man, I would give him at least a C+.”

Those of you who have made life covenants, work with me on this. Think about yourself. Think about your own spouse or partner. Think about your covenants and contracts. Many of the covenants and contracts which you had when you were first united have changed for the better across the years. They’ve grown; they’ve deepened; they’ve expanded; they’ve become richer covenants. But on the other hand, many of our eccentricities, warts and foibles have remained. I mean, they’ve even grown; they’ve accentuated; and we’ve had to learn to live with them and to try to keep them on the back burner, because we haven’t been able to change.

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This prayer also speaks profoundly to parents and their children. Sometimes, when I pray this “Serenity Prayer,” I think about Norman Thayer and his daughter Chelsea, played by Henry and Jane Fonda in the film classic *On Golden Pond*. As you remember, Chelsea finds it almost unbearable that her father has not changed into something other than the controlling, crotchety, condescending old grouch he has always been. And Norman finds it almost unbearable that daughter Chelsea has not changed into the all American boy he has longed for all his adult life. Yet, miraculously, and by the grace of God, they receive a power which enables them to accept and forgive one another – warts and all. They receive serenity; they receive a blessed kind of peace; they receive a peace that passes all understanding; and they learn how to mend in their broken places.

There is a wonderful film which now is on Broadway. I have used this film with church youths and adults in film and discussion groups across the past several years. It’s not a well known film, but it’s one of my all-time favorites for church talk-backs; and I recommend it to every parent and every adult mentor, and every youth. It’s called *Billy Elliott*. Billy Elliott is a 10-year-old who lives in a rough and tumble mining community in England. All the boys in Billy’s neighborhood receive an allowance from their parents to attend boxing class after school; and all the girls go to ballet class. Well Billy is a very bad boxer, and Billy doesn’t exactly enjoy having the hell pummeled out of him in boxing class, so, you guessed it, Billy sneaks into the ballet class with the girls; and there he discovers that his feet are like wings.

But when his father and older brother discover that Billy yearns to be a ballet dancer rather than a macho-man, they are both humiliated and furious. Brutally, they try to change Billy Elliott, but to no avail. Rather, it is they who change. While Billy has changed from boxing to ballet, they change from stubborn blokes (I’m putting it mildly!) to semi-sensitive men. Graciously, lovingly, sensitively, they support Billy, as he applies to and finally attends a prestigious dance company in London. “When I dance,” Billy confesses, “my entire body is filled with electricity.” And, when Billy

debuts as the star in the London Ballet Company's performance of *Swan Lake*, his changed father and brother are in the audience to watch him soar and to celebrate the utter electricity of ballet!

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We recall that in the 11th chapter of the book of Hebrews, the author gives a long, glowing report of the accomplishments of the many saints of the Bible. Then, the author observes that all these people, "having obtained a good report," did not quite receive the full promise they had sought while here on earth. Rather, they died in faith – but their lives here on earth were finally incomplete.

In other words, while their report card of life contained some very good grades, it also contained some very serious incompletes. For a parable of all our lives is this. While there is much that we begin to build in life that we are able to finish, there is also much that we are not able to finish.

Yes, when I ponder the civilizations of humankind, I behold a glorious world. Yes, I see the glory of modern science, medicine, communication, technology, art, comfort, culture, and convenience. Yes, as groups and as individuals, we in modern civilizations thrive on beginning things and completing things, beginning things and completing things. I mean, the projects which we and our colleagues begin and complete are often very impressive, even astounding.

Yet there is one project which we will never be able to complete. It is our own lives. Someone else will have to complete us! The Holy One who created us and welcomed us at the beginning of our lives will receive us and complete us at the end of our lives. That is why Christians have

funerals at the time of death. At Christian funerals, worshipers stand in awe before the Holy One who thought of us before we were born and who redeems us when we die, the Holy One who completes and fulfills what we cannot complete and fulfill. That is what we mean when we confess these words in worship throughout our lives: I believe in the resurrection of the person and the life everlasting.

For a parable of life is this. There is much that we begin to build that we are not able to finish. God alone will provide the finish. God alone will be the completer. And because this is true, pain, brokenness and death will not remain sovereign. They will not have the last say. One day, God in Jesus Christ will clean up the final brokenness of our lives. One day, God in Jesus Christ will clean up the final brokenness of history. One day, God in Jesus Christ will meet history's weariness and anxiousness with heavenly renewal, its sins with redemption, its wounds with healing, its broken places with mending, its frustrations with victory, its bitterness with tenderness, its death with life everlasting.

What about your own report cards? What are the wonderful changes and metamorphoses that you personally have been blessed to enjoy and rejoice in? And what are your own lingering burdens and incompletes?

In faith, hope and love, I urge you to name them and accept them. Embrace the victories. Bear the burdens. And, in doing so, please know that Jesus Christ accepts and bears them with you. Do so, knowing that Jesus has given you the courage to change what ought to be changed; and do so, knowing that Jesus also wants to give you serenity and peace with all of life's incompletes.

Surely, this is what the apostle Paul means when he declares: "I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to have little and I know how to have plenty."

This is our life. This is your life. This is our report card. In faith, hope and love, we rejoice in the changes we accomplish, and we bear the

things we can't change. And as we accept this report card, we too become a part of the great cloud of pilgrim witnesses testified to in the book of Hebrews.

And we too can lay aside every weight which clings so closely. And we too can run with perseverance the race that belongs to us, looking to Jesus who is the author and finisher of our faith.

And we too will mend in our broken places.

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¹ It was Ernest Hemingway who said, in *A Farewell to Arms*: "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places." Quoted from John H. Leith, "Vocation to Learning and Piety," *Presbyterian Outlook*, April 15, 1985, 8.