

“Serenity, Courage, Wisdom”

Rev. Ann Eichhorn

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Serenity

Steve Henderson

Readings

1 Corinthians 13: 4-8

Love is patient and kind;

love is not jealous or boastful, it is not arrogant or rude.

Love does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends.

The Serenity Prayer

Reinhold Niebuhr (1926)

God, grant me the serenity

to accept the things

I cannot change,

Courage to change the

things I can, and the

wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;

Enjoying one moment at a time;

Accepting hardship as the

pathway to peace.

Taking, as God did, this

sinful world as it is,

not as I would have it.

Trusting that God will make

all things right if I

surrender to God's Will;

That I may be reasonably happy

in this life, and supremely

happy with God forever in

the next.

Amen

At Stone Soup this week, we talked briefly about serenity (the state of being calm, peaceful and untroubled) and how difficult it is in these days of global turmoil, continual evidence of escalated hatred and violence, and with the important election approaching, to experience anything like serenity. We all agreed that one of the ways to counter the heightened anxieties and fears was to give ourselves permission each day to take a time out for calming ourselves, taking a few deep breaths. Several people shared their experiences of using the *waking time in the morning* to pause and give thanks for another new day, breathing in the beauty all around us. Others indicated their pleasure in *stepping outside before bedtime* to gaze at the ever-changing moon, the stars, breathing in the fog or clear air, again giving thanks for all our blessings that have been bestowed upon us, just living where we do.

Recently, a colleague read the whole Reinhold Niebuhr “Serenity Poem” to some of us who were in a meeting together. Niebuhr, a former student at Eden Seminary before Bill’s time there, who later graduated from and became a highly revered professor at Union Seminary in New York, is credited with the content of the poem, only the beginning of which was familiar to me. That part, often quoted at AA groups, is *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change and the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference*. I can relate to that advice, because even though I know I can’t change the behavior and actions of another person, I am in charge of how I *react* to that person. As a parent I learned when confronting and possibly condemning misbehavior in one of our kids, it was important at the same time to express the ongoing, unconditional love I have for the child. I found that if while scolding the child, I offered examples of behaviors that would have been more acceptable, the child could usually see how to change their own behavior. Don’t get me wrong. There are lots of things I personally cannot accept and also know I cannot do anything to change, but accepting that fact helps me not to obsess about the situation. The wisdom expressed in the poem raises the question for me and maybe for you, as to how much of our daily time we fret, worry, and lament about the things we cannot change. What ways are we finding to stay engaged with troubling current affairs and each other’s woes, without finding ourselves more depressed, discouraged, and outraged?

The lines of the poem regarding having the courage to change the things I can reminds us of the teachings of Jesus who was known for being in touch with the unjust politics, inhumane treatment, and widespread suffering of the people in his life. He shared both in action and words ways he endured through his faith in God, while encountering the hardships before him. He was a living example of compassion, love and empathy in the face of things he couldn’t change, while at the same time mustering the courage to try to change the things he could. The love that is described in I Corinthians this morning, often heard in wedding ceremonies, is embodied in the teachings of Jesus about the nature of love.

The next lines in the poem, identifying the need for courage to change the things we can, draws directly on our inner feelings and emotions to engage in something before us. We often have to work through our fears before making a choice to act on personal beliefs. We then do so despite danger or disapproval. Mustering courage can be a way we garner strength in the face of pain or grief, or get through the initial hesitations to do something that we haven’t done before or that confounds us. We all have the experience of having been especially courageous at some important times in our lives. What did we call on that enabled us to follow through with the choice we made to get beyond the fears that were before us? The need for courage can also apply to groups of people.

One example of courage and wisdom I want to share this morning involved the actions of one of our small UCC Marin partner churches, Mill Valley Community Church. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Redwoods retirement center in Mill Valley. As most of you know, Bill Eichhorn had just been called to be the new minister at that church the week before the church voted to form a non-profit corporation to build a retirement facility. In prior conversations with their search committee before he was hired, he learned that they were seriously thinking about this possible venture, and that they knew he had absolutely no experience whatsoever in finance, real estate, and construction. Calling Bill was what one might call a leap of courageous faith on both sides.

Mill Valley's not quite 100-person congregation's compelling vision for the Redwoods was to build low-moderate housing for seniors, particularly for those who had lived and served in Mill Valley for years, but who when faced with their own retirement were being priced out of town due to rising taxes and housing costs. An important element in the vision was that the Redwoods *would be a community endeavor with a Board of Directors consisting of both community members, as well as members of the church*. However, the San Francisco Housing and Urban Development (HUD) officials made it clear that all members of the Redwoods Board would initially have to come from the church until it was clear the project was able to attain and sustain viability.

The first steps the congregation took were based entirely on faith. Other congregations in Mill Valley were invited to join in the project, but all declined, but that didn't detour their vision. The first thing they had to do was to locate and secure a site. A member relator (Joe Stewart) found the property across the street from Tam High School on Camino Alto in Mill Valley. He and his wife Helen took out a mortgage on their own home to provide the cash to hold the property until the church could secure a government-backed loan – surely an act of risk and courage on their part. Once the loan was in hand and the property purchased, construction began with the expertise of some of the church members who contributed their special knowledge and skills as engineers, accountants, experts dealing with older adults, including also a couple of doctors, geriatric nurses, and nutritionists, all contributing to the emerging plans for this engaging enterprise.

On December 9, 1972, The Redwoods opened and welcomed nine people who became the first residents who tiptoed and moved in across 2" x 12" wood planks laid down in the parking lot because a winter storm had flooded it. A short dedication service was held with various dignitaries present who kept exclaiming, "We had no idea such a venture was even possible, what's more in the works, and here it is."

Last night at a celebratory anniversary gala at the Redwoods, Bill gave a short presentation on the many challenges and hurdles the project faced, right up to the week before opening, such as having to send one of the church members to the San Francisco docks with a large personal check to give to the shipping company so they would release the dining room furniture they were holding, while the funds were being processed through other means. The church faced and cleared those hurdles because they believed in a vision, and because they collectively trusted the people who either had or found someone who had the needed skills, along with sheer grit, and all these people together helped plant the seeds that eventually grew into the magnificent community the Redwoods is today. No one even suspected it would one day also be the largest employer in Mill Valley, providing full-time jobs, giving many students their first work experiences, and becoming a vital and active older

adult community. Another example of the spirit of the Redwoods is the presence, every Friday afternoon, at the corner of Camino Alto and Miller Avenue of residents inviting people to be peacemakers. This gathering still happens today, rain or shine.

The other parts of the Niebuhr poem point out the importance of wisdom: having the experience, principles and knowledge along with good judgement to choose sound actions. Relying on wisdom to help us enjoy each moment of every day, accepting hardships as pathways to peace. Again, we can pull from the wisdom teaching of Jesus, who shared his understandings related to a loving Creator, who gave us the gift of free will and the ability to live a life of compassion, empathy, justice, equality, and love toward self and others while helping to sustain a more mutually peaceful existence on this planet.

Some questions in closing are: What is calling to you that might need your assistance with changing, what could use your courage and energy (physically, financially) for speaking out or creating something new? Are you just the right one to put forth your imaginative ideas about possible ways to form some new collective ventures here at CCC that bring about community, comfort, enjoyment or aid to others?

The poem gave me the opportunity to reflect and do a little research on some of the things I knew about Reinhold Niebuhr – what was going on when he was alive – and to learn more about the wisdom we could draw on today. Along with his theological profession, Niebuhr was one of America’s leading intellectuals and ethicists who spoke often about the intersection of religion, politics, and public policy. One of the many books he wrote, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, certainly speaks to our world today. In his day he battled with religious conservatives over their naïve view of scripture and narrow definitions of being the “true religion” (sound familiar?). A quote from his book *Children of Light and Children of Darkness* that certainly stands out for us to consider now: *Man’s capacity for justice makes Democracy possible, but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.* Our votes for Democracy are really necessary this week.

My friends, these times call for us to participate in all three ventures, to find new ways to experience serenity, to work to calm the chaos, stop the hatred and violence, and to find the courage to speak out against the evils before us, as we work to change the things we can, and to apply wisdom to all we do as we continue to seek ways to be the loving people of God we are called to be.

Amen