

## **“For Heaven’s Sake, Have Humility”**

Moving Inward through the *Prayer of Relinquishment*

Part 3 of the Sermon Series *Perspectives on Prayer*

Job 31:5-8; Phil. 2:1-13

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I first learned about the Prayer of Relinquishment when I was in the tenth grade. It was in a small classroom adjacent to the main fellowship hall of the considerable-sized, gothic-stone structure of the Presbyterian Church in my hometown. I was not a member of that congregation or of any other. And while I knew a little tiny bit of something beyond red-nosed reindeer and jelly-bean dispensing bunnies, I wouldn't say I was a Christian. So, my being in that room wasn't for a Sunday School class or a youth group meeting.

It was, for me and for other teens who had somehow found their way there, an emergency room of sorts. It was space for our maturing yet already mangled young hearts to find healing and hope. It was there I first received the much needed shot in the arm – in the heart, really – that was my first real inoculation against developing a lifetime of resentment, hopelessness and self-destruction. The shot, I now recognize, was the Prayer of Relinquishment. Back then I came to call it and to memorize it, however, as the Serenity Prayer.

You may well know this prayer whether or not you've ever been part of a twelve-step group such as the Ala-teen meetings I attended back then at Central Presbyterian Church of Summit. The family disease of alcoholism had been making me quite spiritually sick at home, and this prayer proved to be good medicine. And so I learned to pray, to chant, really, every chance I could, saying, “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.”

The things I could not change. So, so many things I *could not change*. I did not possess any sort of amazing super-glue to put my broken family pieces back together or to mend my increasingly shattered and shamed sense of self. But once taught the Serenity Prayer, I discovered a way to relinquish – that is, to “surrender” – the sad, enraging realities there were way beyond my control and to confidently give them to a good and loving Higher Power. It would take several years before I'd come to call this

higher power “God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” but those Ala-teen meetings in the Presbyterian Church certainly set the table for a later banquet of spiritual growth.

I should be clear about something -- uttering this prayer was not a fatalistic surrender of my life. It was not a naive giving over to some metaphysical magician who I expected to make any and all heartaches disappear. By asking God to help me accept the things I cannot change, the Serenity Prayer was instead a way of growing into a living, practical partnership with God. Because it teaches about discernment and release, especially in the midst of life’s storms, it helps all who prayer it to be “buoyed up by a confident trust in the character of God.” (Foster, Prayer, p.52) It empowers people to recognize when it’s best to let go of – to relinquish – particular thoughts and circumstances so that they can better trust God to be their God just as the record of the Scriptures reveals.

I believe we need to do this whether the circumstances of our lives are traumatic or not. I no longer have the trauma of my childhood and teen years front and center in my life today, but my present day sense of security and serenity doesn’t mean I should grow lax in my striving to ever more fully trust in God. There’s no arriving at a point of perfect spiritual maturity, but there are always going to be plenty of arrivals into points of spiritual struggle. Life is one big exam about knowing when and how to pray for relinquishment, when and how to let go and let God.

Spiritual director and author Richard Foster calls our attention to the perfect model for this struggle-centered perspective on prayer -- Jesus’ praying in the grief-soaked Garden of Gesthemane just before his betrayal and arrest. In that place, in that sacred but scary time, our Lord prayed for his impending trial and torment (symbolized as a cup of poison) to be avoided.

“Did you notice,” Foster asks us, “that Jesus repeatedly asked for the cup to pass? Make no mistake about it: he could have avoided the cross if he had so chosen. He had a free will and a genuine choice, and he freely chose to submit his will to the will of the Father. It was no simple choice or quick fix. Jesus’ prayer struggle – replete with bloody sweat – lasted long into the night. Relinquishment is no easy task.” (Foster, pp. 50-51)

When we pray to give ourselves fully to God by relinquishing our need for *total* control over our feelings, certain decisions, dramatic situations, and the like, we open ourselves to experiencing genuine humility. This is not at all the same as experiencing “humiliation,” which is what happens when we are forced to feel ashamed. I don’t

believe this ever the way to becoming a more helpful, hopeful and spiritually healthy person. It was humiliation I experienced at home while growing up, but it was humility I experienced ... and gladly so ... in those Ala-teen meetings.

Humility is above all what we learn about in the second chapter of Philippians. There we are taught that it is about striving to have the same mind as was in Christ Jesus, who “emptied himself” to be greatly obedient to God’s good will and way. When you empty yourself, you are ready to be filled.

We hear this emptying, this relinquishment, this humility in Job’s voice as he cries out, “If I have walked with falsehood, and my foot has hurried to deceit ... if my step has turned aside from the way, and my heart has followed my eyes ... then let me sow and another eat.” He doesn’t declare a desire to feel ashamed, he instead wants to give up his waywardness in order for God to create something good out of it as only God can do.

I fine sermon I recently read affirms that “genuine Christian humility,” the kind born of the prayer of relinquishment, expresses itself “In being seen at work, not wondered at; in being more interested in others than self; in being more committed to truth than convenience, to truthfulness than spin; in being more inclined to look up to others than down on them, and, like the incarnate Son of God, being more comfortable with the lowly than the great” and is “embodied in all the glory of Christ-like servanthood and strength.” (the Very Revd. Dr. Christopher Hancock, Dean of Bradford Chapel, UK).

For heaven’s sake, for our own sake, for the sake of our family members and friends and the whole world, we need to keep growing this humility within us. The Serenity Prayer can only get us so far. Fortunately, Richard Foster offers a few more practical, helpful ways to pray that add up and open us up to relinquishment and genuine Christian humility (Foster, pp. 55-56). These are not struggle-free steps to a better prayer life, but they are practices to pray your way into a stronger relationship with God as, together, you experience everything life dishes out.

One practice is to meditate on the prayer of self-emptying, the one mentioned in this morning’s lesson from Philippians. Pray to see yourself as a servant of God and bid, as Foster puts it, “the brooding Spirit of God to apply your prayer to the specifics of your day.” Then, “wait quietly ... listen carefully ... and obey immediately.” Truth be told, the only way I can ever finish preparing and writing a sermon is to pray in exactly this way!

A second practice is to learn to surrender yourself in prayer the way Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane. “See his sorrowing soul,” Foster says, “let your soul be saddened too,” and then “struggle with him in seeking other options, hoping to avoid the cup.” Do this so as to arrive at the point, as Jesus did, of saying to God “Not my will, but Your be done.” Pray further for God to interpret what these familiar words truly mean in your life.

Yet another practice is to pray for release. This means lifting up your hopes, dreams, angers, resentments, along with your friends, families, enemies and all and placing everything into the loving care of God. It means giving all into God’s hands and walking away, trusting the God will “care for everything as he sees fit.”

The last practice Foster suggests that I want to lift up today is learning to pray for resurrection. I like the particular way he suggests to do this, so I don’t want to paraphrase his words. Instead, I offer a direct quote from page 56 of his book on prayer. It reads, “*Lord, you may pray, bring back to life what will please you and advance your kingdom. Let it come in whatever form you desire. Let it be in your time and in your way. Thank you, Lord, for resurrection.* Some things will remain dead – it is better for you that they do. Others will burst forth into new life in such a way that you will hardly recognize them. In either case, rest in the confidence that God is better than you are at resurrection.”

It’s been so many years now since I was first introduced to the whole notion of prayerfully relinquishing my life into the hands of truly loving God. Yet what I learned in that small classroom adjacent to the main fellowship hall of the considerable-sized, gothic-stone structure of the Presbyterian Church in my hometown has enabled me to not only remain faithful to Christ, but also to my calling as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament. There’s a historical reason from my early life, then, for why I often sign notes, cards and emails by writing, “Courage and Serenity in Christ.” It’s my way of praying for whoever I am addressing to know for themselves the power of letting go and letting God. Amen.

O Lord and Father of the household of faith,  
we thank you for the gift of faith  
worked within us by your Holy Spirit.  
We thank you for having called us to yourself,  
for consecrating us to your service,  
for having set us apart to the sacred ministry of prayer.

O Lord and Father of the household of faith,  
we pray for the church  
in all her breadth and variety,  
gathered out of every nation, family, people, and tongue,  
to be a kingdom of priests serving you.  
We pray for the church in all the world,  
for churches in North America, Europe, and the Middle East,  
for churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America,  
for young churches and old churches,  
small churches and large churches,  
weak churches and strong churches.  
Grant to the church true lowliness  
and genuine humility where there is pride, unity where there is division.  
Grant to her truth where there is error and wisdom where there is folly,  
that you might fulfill your purposes for her.

O Lord and Father of the household of faith,  
we pray for those stewards to whom you have  
entrusted the affairs of your house,  
for pastors, elders, deacons, lay leaders, volunteers, and committees.

We especially thank you for calling Joanne Grosinski to nearly ten years of service  
with our family of faith here at FPC.  
With this call came genuine care, friendly collegiality and administrative gifts  
that have been of great benefit to our ministries,  
especially through all the transitions of recent years.  
Bless her time of retirement fully, Lord,

And grant her the serenity of knowing we will always consider her one of our family.

Give us all the spirit of willing service and true humility.

Give us all a sense of spiritual devotion.

Give us all delight in those whom we serve.

Grant that we may lead your people in the way of Christ, that thereby we might all enter the land of our heritage.

O Lord and Father of the household of faith,

We relinquish to your care

those who are troubled,

those who suffer,

those who are discouraged

they they might find support in time of need

especially from your church.

Particularly we remember before you

the work done for the troubled, the suffering, and the discouraged

by the deacons and elders in our congregations

and by denominational and Christian agencies.

O Lord and Father of the household of faith,

we pray for our nation and

those who lead the nation:

the president and his advisors,

the congress and the courts,

the diplomatic corps as they negotiate for peace and justice,

and our military upholding life and liberty.

We pray, especially, for those listed in this morning's bulletin ...

Ellie Sterling and family

The Weiland family

[read]

All these requests we present to you,  
O Father of mercy, in the name of Jesus Christ,  
who even now is seated at your right hand to intercede for us  
and who will come at the last trumpet to gather us all into  
his holy city, the Jerusalem that is above,  
and toward which we journey even now.  
Here us as we pray with the words he taught us ....

**Amen.**