

Praying for Grace in the New Year

January 2020

Well! This has been a year! With bitter cold, partisan divisions, and a coming major election, 2020 could be a duzzy! In optometry 2020 is considered 'perfect vision.' We could use some of that going forward into the new year.

Over the past several months I have been privileged to be a part of a study of Elisabeth Sifton's book, *"The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of War and Peace."* It is the story of the context and the creation of the well known and beloved Serenity Prayer by her father, Reinhold Niebuhr, a pastor, theologian, and seminary professor. It first appeared in 1944 in the "Book of Prayers and Services for the Armed Forces." It was later adapted by Alcoholics Anonymous for use in their meetings. As much as I have loved the now familiar text, the original version has touched me deeply. Here is how Reinhold Niebuhr first wrote the prayer in 1943:

"God, give us grace
to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
courage to change the things
that should be changed,
and the wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other."

I had always heard it as, "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." To pray for serenity is not the same as asking God for the grace to accept something with serenity. That would be kind of like praying for patience. The more I pray for it, the less patience I have. Praying for serenity can be a reminder that we lack peace in our lives. Praying for God's Grace, on the other hand, is asking for a strong partner in our endeavor - in this case, asking God for the grace to accept with serenity that which is beyond our capacity. Further, when we ask God to give us grace, it is an acknowledgment that we are not alone. Prayer is always more than a personal enterprise - it takes a community to pray. Courage seems a little more possible when we have others with us. Wisdom, rooted in the larger community, seems wiser. Praying for God's Grace so that we may accept life is a healthy prayer. Praying for courage and wisdom for the choices we make in our lives is an empowering prayer. Praying for God's Grace in the new year is a perfect place to begin!

As we enter the new year we know that there is much that needs to be changed. That will require courage and wisdom, along with patience and serenity. It will be necessary to have a clear eyed vision of justice and kindness as we walk humbly together with God. Although the political and cultural divisions may seem beyond repairing at the moment, we live in the hope that the arc of the universe bends towards justice. Although the dream of peace on earth and good will towards all seems impossible at the moment, we live in the faith that in God all things are possible. Although meanness and violence seems the order of the day, we live in the knowledge that God is Love.

Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote: "Nothing worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing that is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate

context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing that we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love.” Hope, faith and love! These great gifts are the source of our capacity to live faithfully and fruitfully. Let us then pray for Grace in the new year, that the wisdom of God may give us courage to work together for that common good which God seeks for all people.