

SERENITY

Serenity is defined as the state of being calm, peaceful, and untroubled...a state of being stable with an enduring sense of inner peace, a peace that lasts through good times and not so good times, even through trials and tribulations. The word serenity comes from the Latin word, *serenus*, meaning clear or unclouded, calm, without storm and turbulence. The storms of life can frighten us, freeze us, burden us and break us. Our trust in God's presence with us brings us serenity even in the midst of storms. Serenity is a calm, confident, quiet and peaceful state of being, a conviction that everything is all right, that everything is in the hands of our loving Father.

The book of Exodus tells us the story of Moses following the Lord's directives in all details. He prepared a dwelling for the ark with a tent covering it. He put the commandments in the ark, placed it in the dwelling and covered it with a veil. A cloud covered the tent as a sign...only when it lifted did they go forward on their journey. God gave them his sign...cloud by day, fire by night – this was the sign of God's presence among his people. (Exodus 40:16-21, 34-38)

God gave his people many signs and symbols of His presence among them...a rainbow in the sky, cloud by day, fire by night, lamp unto my feet, light unto my path...signs of his unfailing presence, his steadfast love, his presence every step of the way, and they moved on to where God was leading them. Trusting in His presence on the road, inspired by the signs and symbols that proclaim His presence, Moses and his people moved on to where God was leading them. It is this trust in God's abiding presence that helps us be calm and serene wherever we may be and whatever we may be doing, even through troublesome times.

Psalms 131 speaks of the "stilled and quieted" soul that finds confidence: "Hope in the Lord both now and forevermore." Peaceful communion with God can happen without words. "I have stilled and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother. (Psalm 131:2) Like the satisfied child who has stopped crying and is in its mother's arms, so can "my soul be with me" in the presence of God. The psalmist is describing his experience of "serenity" – being present, undisturbed, quiet and peaceful. He gave up his self-sufficiency, like a babe enjoying the comfort of its mother's lap and placed his trust in the Lord. He moved from his "self-reliance" to "God-reliance" and found serenity within. This movement helped him to quiet and still his soul and find serenity within and rest "like a child in its mother's lap."

St. Francis de Sales teaches us that serenity is not the absence of trouble but finding inner peace during troublesome times through trust in God's steadfast and loving care and focusing on the present moment and not on the anxieties, doubts and fears of the future. He advises us to find serenity within by accepting God's plan, being patient with self and others, avoiding

haste and anger, finding God in quiet prayer and daily duties, and knowing that God provides strength for carrying our burdens.

I do not know the source of the following story. The story, however, gives us good insight into the nature of serenity. Years ago, a farmer owned land along the Atlantic seacoast. He constantly advertised for hired hands. Most people were reluctant to work on farms along the Atlantic. They dreaded the awful storms that raged across the Atlantic, wreaking havoc on the buildings and crops. As the farmer interviewed applicants for the job, he received a steady stream of refusals. Finally, a short, thin man, well past middle age, approached the farmer. "Are you a good farm hand?" the farmer asked him.

"Well, I can sleep when the wind blows." answered the little man. Although puzzled by this answer, the farmer, desperate for help, hired him. The little man worked well around the farm, busy from dawn to dusk, and the farmer felt satisfied with the man's work. Then one night the wind howled loudly in from offshore. Jumping out of bed, the farmer grabbed a lantern and rushed next door to the hired hand's sleeping quarters. He shook the little man and yelled, "Get up! A storm is coming. Tie things down before they blow away!" The little man rolled over in bed and said firmly, "No sir. I told you, I can sleep when the wind blows."

Enraged by the response, the farmer was tempted to fire him on the spot. Instead, he hurried outside to prepare for the storm. To his amazement, he discovered that all of the haystacks had been covered with tarpaulins. The cows were in the barn; the chickens were in the coops; and the doors were barred. The shutters were tightly secured. Everything was tied down. Nothing could blow away. The farmer then understood what his hired hand meant, so he returned to his bed to sleep while the wind blew.

When you are prepared, spiritually, mentally, and physically, you have nothing to fear. The hired hand in the story was able to sleep because he had secured the farm against the storm. We secure ourselves against the storms of life by grounding ourselves in the Word of God. We don't need to understand; we just need to hold His hand to have peace in the middle of storms. We find serenity deep within us when we faithfully attend to our daily chores, fulfill our responsibilities, trust in the Lord and leave everything in the provident care of the Lord. In Him we find serenity.

Serenity is not freedom from the storm, but peace in the middle of the storm.

The psalmist calls us, "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10) Being still is about silence and solitude, peacefulness and serenity. It is about creating a "desert within," where we can be quiet and still in God's presence.

Sometimes we are apparently silent, and yet we have great discussions within, struggling with imaginary partners or with ourselves. Calming our souls requires a kind of simplicity. The

psalmist says, "I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me." (Psalm 131:1) Silence means leaving to God what is beyond my reach. A moment of silence, even very brief, is like a minute vacation, a holy stop, a sabbatical rest, a truce from worries, a moment of stillness and serenity.

The gospel of Mark tells us the story of Jesus and his disciples in the Sea of Galilee. The boat was being tossed about by a violent storm and waves were breaking over the boat, so that it was already filling up. In the midst of this violent storm, Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion, an image of serenity. The Sea of Galilee was known for sudden and violent storms. Jesus trusted his men with the boat in an unpredictable sea and went to sleep. He could rest and sleep "soundly" because He trusted his men to navigate through the storm and bring him safe to the other side of the sea. (Mark 4:35-41)

We meet the disciples who were afraid of the storm but unafraid to wake up their master in their urgent need. Jesus woke up to save his men. What a wonderful relationship between master and disciples, trusting each other, being free with each other, unafraid of each other. Trusting each other, they could live through the storms of their lives and find peace and serenity.

The turmoil of our thoughts can be compared to the experience of Jesus and his disciples. Jesus was sleeping through the storm and the disciples were anxious and afraid, and feeling helpless and unable to calm themselves. With Jesus in our boat, trusting in his power to calm our storms, we have nothing to be afraid of. We can afford to be still, peaceful and serene.

Being quiet, silent and still, we trust and hope in God. When God's word becomes "a sound of sheer silence", it is more efficient to change our hearts. The heavy storm on Mount Sinai was splitting rocks, but it was the sudden silence that spoke to Elijah. (1 Kings 19:11-14) God's silent word is able to break open human hearts of stone. Silence makes us ready for a new meeting with God. In silence and solitude, God's word can reach the hidden corners of our hearts.

Serenity is being still with a listening heart and an open mind.

One day, Jesus was before a crowd of people, the elders and chief priests and a woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). How embarrassing it must have been for the woman to be caught in adultery, paraded before the crowd, accused by the law-abiding people, shamed before the public, humiliated and powerless to stand before Jesus, a Holy man. Jesus was before the crowd, their self-righteous leaders and before a scared woman – a situation that was fearful, shameful and tense, and then Jesus got into a posture of serenity.

In the midst of it all, Jesus sat down and scribbled something in the sand...just imagine serenity scribbled in the sand. From this serene moment came the challenge...to the self-righteous men to go ahead and do what they came to do if they were free to do so and to the woman to go

home and not sin anymore. There were no lectures, judgments or condemnations, just a gentle, quiet and still voice that was a challenge for all them and for all of us now.

Life may have become a mess, and we may very well have messed it up. God's chosen people messed up their lives many times and God's chosen and anointed kings messed up their lives as well. The same is true of some of the apostles, like Peter and Paul, and some of the great saints of our history like St. Augustine and St. Camillus. But God, in his infinite wisdom, all-embracing love and mercy, forgave them, and they changed and became new in Christ. The voice of Jesus is gentle, peaceful, quiet, still and serene. Listen to Him in stillness, solitude and serenity.

Jesus came bringing forgiveness, healing and new life. He came to tell us not to live in our past failures, mistakes, and sins. He came to call us to let go of our past and live a new life, a life of Grace and truth and walk in forgiving and healing love. In Jesus, there is always new beginning, new meaning, new opportunities, and another chance at life. In Jesus, our sins are washed away, our brokenness is healed, and there is freedom and hope for all. In Jesus we have peace and serenity. "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10)

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