

Sermon for Oct. 18th 2009 Mark 10

And they said to him “grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” But Jesus said to them “you do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” We are able, they replied.

Once again we have a situation where Jesus’ disciples just don’t quite get it. The important piece we did not hear in our gospel lesson this morning was that immediately prior to this request of James and John Jesus had told them of his impending death for the third time. Just moments before this bold question was asked, Jesus told all of his disciples that soon he would be betrayed, mocked, spit on, flogged and then killed.

It is surprising then, that these two disciples would ask for seats of honor beside Jesus in his coming glory. Had they not been listening? Clearly James and John do not fully grasp that the ironic place of glory is the cross – and that criminals will be the ones to “sit” on his right and left. James and John were still dreaming of power and prestige. They were still seeing Jesus as a triumphant earthly king in whose court they would like to have a seat.

And, as usual, we get a response from Jesus that does not condemn the disciples or scold them, rather answers the question in such a way that forces them to think about what they were asking. He answers the question with a question: Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?

This question cuts right to the heart - for the question involves drinking the cup of Christ and that includes betrayal and mockery, suffering and sorrow, and eventually death.

His question to his disciples was literally this: “Can you drink the cup that is going to bring sorrow and anguish?” “Can you drink the cup the may cost you your lives?” That would be the ultimate price they would need to pay in order to have the seats they so boldly requested. Perhaps the disciples did not know what Jesus was truly asking when they responded with the words “we are able”.

If they truly knew of the suffering he was speaking of they may not have responded with such affirmation. Regardless of whether they knew what it would entail or not, after they said yes, Jesus told them that they indeed would drink from the same cup.

And eventually, according to tradition they did give up their lives in martyrdom. They were able at last to drink of that cup. For Jesus and his disciples and for Christians of the first centuries under Roman rule there was a costly meaning – many did drink of his cup and gave up their lives.

Can you drink the cup? Asks Jesus.

To drink of it today may not often mean surrendering life in some tragic execution – though indeed in our generation a host of people have done just that. But drinking the cup of Christ today does still involve drinking the cup of sorrow.

Part of the saving grace in this world is a Christ like compassion and response to human suffering. To expose our selves to the hurt of others, to let our hearts be torn with anguish and suffering that we see in this world - that is not easy.

On many occasions I personally have talked myself out of facing devastating issues such as poverty and war and slavery and abuse and torture and death by saying to myself – I know I can't handle that much sorrow – so I am going to distance myself from it. I am going to put up a wall for shelter, put on my blinders and pretend it is not happening.

What I hear Jesus saying to me today in this gospel lesson is that I can not shut the door on the suffering in this world. That I must pick up the cup put it to my lips and take a drink.

What is in the cup that Jesus is asking you to drink? Is it the cup of homelessness? Is it the cup of abused women and children? Is it the cup of poverty in third world countries? Is it the cup of discrimination? Is it the cup of slavery? Is it the cup of Cancer or mental illness or addiction? Is it the cup of the death of a loved one or the cup of facing your own end of life on this earth?

Jesus knows that these are the cups that taste like poison when we put them to our lips. That these are the cups that we want to turn our backs on for fear that if we drink from them we will vomit. That these are the cups that we want to replace with cups filled with something that will numb our minds so that we can forget about picking them up and lifting them to our lips.

Yes Jesus understands how profoundly difficult it is to lift the cup of sorrow. When Jesus said yes to drinking that cup his soul was sorrowful to the point of death and his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood.

Yet he said yes, I am able and we too must answer the question with the words yes, we are able. The reason we have no choice but to say yes is because in that cup, mixed with the wine filled with sorrow are also grapes bursting with joy. The cup of life that Jesus is referring to is the cup of joy as much as it is the cup of sorrow. The cup of suffering, inconceivable as it seems, is also the cup of hope. The cup of death on a cross is also the cup of resurrection. Laughter and tears, fear and peace, despair and delight, are all mixed together in that cup of life. The cup of sorrows and the cup of joys can not be separated.

Henri Nouwen, a Catholic Priest who worked with mentally disabled people in a L'Arche community in Canada, in his book "can you drink the cup" reflects on how he has experienced this sorrow and joy. He says:

"Jesus' priesthood as described in the letter to the Hebrews is one of solidarity with human suffering." Nouwen goes on to say, "somehow this has given me eyes to see joy where others see sorrow. The sorrow is still there but something has changed by my no longer standing in front of others but sitting with them and sharing a moment of togetherness. For anyone who has the courage to enter our human sorrows deeply, there is a revelation of joy, hidden like a precious stone in the wall of a dark cave."

Henri Nouwen is right – we do find joy amidst our anguish. On mission trips to Belize and Honduras I indeed saw deep despair, but I saw more than despair. I also saw hope, courage love and trust and compassion.

Jesus drank the most difficult cup of all. He drank the cup of the cross in order that we may drink the cup filled to the brim with never-ending resurrection. He drank the cup of sorrow for each one of us. And sometimes, we, like Jesus, are asked to drink the cup, not only to save ourselves but also in order that others may not die of thirst.

How then may we be able? Where do we find the strength to lift the cup to our lips?

Practically the entire New Testament is an answer to that question. We are able to say Yes to drinking that cup because we know of God's unending love for us, that it is not we alone who drinks, but Christ who lives in us.

When you see the cup lifted during the Eucharist today. When you hear the words, , "Drink this, all of you: This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you"

Please remember that whatever it is that is in the cup that Christ is asking you to drink – whatever joys and sorrows you experience in drinking it, God will be with you – God will be with you when you first touch the stem, when you raise the glass to your lips, when you taste the bitter sweat liquid on your tongue and as you swallow the sorrows and joys that come with every sip you take.

Can you drink the cup? May your answer be, yes – because of the love of God through Christ, I am able.

