

SERMON: Proper 24B (RCL)

Mark 10:35-45 & Hebrews 5:1-10

Preached Sunday, October 18, 2009 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

"Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?"

It may be the most unfair question Jesus ever asks the disciples: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?"

Jesus has just predicted his rejection, condemnation, arrest, abuse and crucifixion, but it goes right over the heads of the disciples. We know they miss the point because, in the next moment, James and John make an outrageous request. They ask to be granted the places of highest honor when Jesus comes into his glory.

It's a painful illustration of how self-centered we human beings normally are. Jesus has just shared an awful secret: that he will suffer and be killed. And two of his top lieutenants can only hear it as an opportunity to make a selfish appeal to secure their own futures. No wonder Jesus nicknamed James and John the "Sons of Thunder"!* They rarely miss an opportunity to blurt out exactly what's on their minds, no matter how inappropriate it may be.

And I say this about the two brothers with a great deal of admiration and sympathy. James and John were real, live human beings, just like us. They had their weaknesses and flaws, just like us. They made mistakes and said the wrong thing, just like us. Not to mention they were trying to make sense of Jesus and his teachings in real time — *unlike us*, who've had nearly 2,000 years to reflect. When Jesus asks if they're able to drink the cup that he drinks, we shouldn't be surprised they don't understand. And immediately the sons of Zebedee respond, "We are able."

So, what is the cup Jesus is talking about? Think of the cup that Jesus tearfully asks God to take away from him in the Garden of Gethsemane — the cup that Jesus ultimately accepts. Think of the cup Jesus shares at the table with the disciples on the night before he dies. Think of the words he speaks when he lifts it up and says: "Drink this, all of you: This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many" (BCP, p. 363). Think of the cup from which we drink every Sunday when we come together in this place. My friends, it's all the same cup: the cup of suffering and death, the cup of joy and new life — all flowing into a single and profound mystery. In this cup, we begin to see that suffering and death are not only inevitable, they also are somehow integral to the life God intends for us.

When Jesus tells James and John they will drink the cup that he drinks, he's speaking a truth they cannot yet comprehend. They will share in the suffering that Jesus accepted. In fact, the death of James is the first martyrdom recorded in the New Testament. It's a stark reminder that the way of Jesus includes pain and suffering. Christian faith is not an escape on a magic carpet or a blanket of divine protection, as much as we might want it to be. No one in his or her right mind desires pain or suffering — not even Jesus. But when it becomes inevitable, Jesus names it, wrestles with it, anguishes over it, and finally embraces it: "not my will, but thine, be done."

In his book, Can You Drink the Cup?, Henri Nouwen describes the way of Christ as one in which sorrow and joy, darkness and light, loss and gain, failure and achievement, despair and hope, are all mingled together. In the book, he talks about the symbolism of toasting, when glasses are lifted up at a common table. After translating various toasts from different languages, Nouwen concludes, "The best summary of all these wishes is 'to life.' We lift the cup to life, to affirm our life together and celebrate it as a gift from God."**

That is a profound thing God asks us to do — affirm and celebrate life, come what may. It's a great challenge to live this way in a culture that can't seem to be grateful for hardly anything, especially in tough economic circumstances. Yet, here we are this morning, offering up our gifts in thanksgiving for the many ways God has blessed us. And I know that some of you are making genuine sacrifices to support the ministries we share, and I am very grateful!

I once heard an author give a talk on a rather esoteric branch of theology. As you might well guess, I didn't go to the lecture expecting any profound revelations. In fact, I don't remember a thing the woman said in her prepared remarks. But I'll never forget what happened during the question and answer session that followed. A man stood up and asked how the author made sense of the passage in Genesis when God looks upon creation and calls it very good. "There is so much pain and suffering in the world today," said the man. "I'm sure I don't have to give you a list from today's newspaper. So how is it that God can look upon our world, with all its sorrow and heartache, and call it 'very good'?"

"Well, I've actually studied the Hebrew word that we translate 'very good,'" she said. "And I've come to the conclusion that it means the life God has created for us on this earth — including the pain, suffering and tragedies — is worth it."~ That's what we affirm when we agree to drink the cup that Jesus drank. We don't know what will happen to us or our loved ones. We don't know how or when suffering will come to us. But in faith, we trust that God will be with us as we go through it — just as God saw Jesus through his time of trial. We drink the cup that Jesus drank even in the face of this tremendous uncertainty. But all the while, we proclaim that the life God created for us *is worth it.*

Suffering is one of the great mysteries we come to know by virtue of our faith. The devotional writer Oswald Chambers said this: "Suffering is the heritage of the bad, the penitent, and the Son of God. Each one ends in the cross. The bad thief is crucified, the penitent thief is crucified, and the Son of God is crucified. By these signs we know the widespread heritage of suffering."+

Suffering may be our heritage, but God can help us bring good from it. "Most of the Psalms were born in difficulty," observes one writer. "Most of the Epistles were written in prisons. Most of the greatest thoughts of the greatest thinkers of all time had to pass through the fire. [John] Bunyan wrote Pilgrim's Progress from jail. Florence Nightingale, too ill to move from her bed, reorganized the hospitals of England. Semi-paralyzed..., [Dr. Louis] Pasteur was tireless in his attack on disease."^

Even though God brings new life from death, I don't want to sound too Pollyanna about it. There are times when we can't see any good that can come from our pain or the suffering of others — and then we have to rely on grace alone. Mother Teresa once put it this way, "I know God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish that He didn't trust me so much!"

In the reading from Hebrews today, Jesus is described as the great high priest who "learned ... through what he suffered" (5:8). And that raises a good question: what can any of us learn from suffering?

The first thing we might learn is to not get stuck in suffering and to trust God. Winston Churchill once quipped, "If you're going through hell, keep going!" Corrie Ten Boom, the great missionary, said it this way: "When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away the ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer."< And that's exactly what Jesus did: he entrusted himself to the loving hands of God.

There once was an elderly woman who lived alone. She had some real problems. But they were made worse by the fact that she worried all the time and clung to her fear that even worse things might happen. She had a caring family who helped as best they could; but the woman persisted in her fretting. At the end of a visit by her family one evening, her daughter turned to her and said, "Mom, we've done all we can for you. You're just going to have to trust God for the rest." "Oh dear," she replied. "Has it really come to

that?" What Jesus showed us is that, in the end, it always comes down to trusting in the grace and mercy of God. Rather than ending up there as a last resort, we might want to try starting there instead!

*This is what "Boanerges" means, according to Mark 3:17.

**Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1996, p. 57. Thanks to Dr. Mary-Blair Valentine for suggesting the book and loaning it to me for this sermon!

~Lecture given by Dr. Marjorie H. Suchocki on the subject of sin in the context of "process theology," The School of Theology, University of the South, Sewanee, TN, circa 1991.

+Christian Discipline, n.p.

^Tim Hansel, You Gotta Keep Dancin', David C. Cook, 1985, p. 87.

<Both quotes found at Bible.Org (no other citations given).

@Southern Mail, 1929, translated from French by Curtis Cate.