

**“Can you drink the cup?”  
Mark 10:35-45**

A therapist named Donald Meichenbaum<sup>1</sup> tells of the time that the car that he was driving was actually struck by lightning. It was a very harrowing experience. Once he was actually safe at home, he began to share his ordeal with his teenage son, expecting at least a little bit of sympathy. Instead his son interrupted him, “Dad, let’s go buy a lottery ticket. They say the chances of being hit by lightning are about the same as the chances of winning a lottery ticket. This could very well be our lucky day!”

The request by James and John seems just about as self-absorbed as Donald’s not too unusual teenage son, and probably closer to us than we care to admit. The sign I saw outside the church said, “LOOKING FOR PEACE IN LIFE? WORRIED ABOUT THE FUTURE? That’s the questions. Underneath the questions, the answer: JESUS CHRIST IS THE ANSWER.”

Now from what I see, this is a very popular brand of Christianity these days: You have some need, perhaps a need for peace in a troubled life, the need for greater hope and confidence in the future. Well, Jesus is the answer. This is called "evangelism," the attempt to lure people toward the gospel, the effort to win people to Christ, by putting forth all the benefits of following Jesus. Looking for meaning in life? Jesus has got it for you. A sense of serenity and hope in an often difficult and demanding world? Jesus has got you covered.

Years ago I attended a workshop on how to grow a congregation. "First find where people itch; then find a way for the church to scratch that itch," the consultant advised. "The church is here to meet people's felt needs," he said. Our scripture this morning is from Mark's gospel, the earliest of the gospels. Mark certainly wants to reach people with the message of Christ. Mark's gospel begins with "Here is the good news of Jesus Christ." Here in Mark is the good news about Jesus. But it is actually quite different than the itch and scratch advice.

Remarkably, when compared with the way we talk about Jesus, Mark has little to say about our felt needs, our struggles and our difficulties. Mark mainly talks just about Jesus. And when he talks about Jesus, it's not Jesus as the answer to our problems that Mark stresses but, rather, Jesus as strange and demanding Lord. Take today's scripture. As the disciples walk along with Jesus, a couple of the disciples say, "Lord, grant us to sit at your right and your left when you come into your kingdom." Those who sit next to the chief are those who share power with the chief. In other words, "Lord, when we get you elected Messiah and your Kingdom is come, grant us to sit on your Cabinet!"

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Feasting on the Word, year B, volume 4, page 188.

It is an understandable request for the disciples to make of Jesus. After all, here are the ones who have left everything and they've come to follow Jesus, to walk with Jesus along his way. Why did they commit to Jesus? Well, unlike a lot of people, they believe that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, the great leader who would come in, raise an army, kick the Romans out of Judea, set up Israel again as the most powerful nation in the world.

It had not been easy trooping around behind Jesus through Judea. Their request is quite understandable: "Lord, when you finally get everything together and win your kingdom, let us sit beside you in ruling your realm."

Lord, when you at last bring peace on earth, let that peace first be in my heart, in my marriage, in my family. Lord, when you at last lift up the poor and set things right in the world, be sure that I am one of the major beneficiaries.

This is not that unreasonable of a request. After all, James and John have been there from the beginning. They are the ones who came early and stayed late. They are the ones who did all the unspectacular things that never get noticed. They have been the very picture of loyal and committed. After all, fair's fair. I remember once my daughter asked me at the end of a fellowship supper, "Dad, why do we always have to be the last to leave?" James and John were the guys that were always the last to leave. They had made sure the dishes were washed and the garbage was taken out.

Jesus replies to this perfectly understandable request by saying: "You don't know what you're asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

We know what the disciples don't know. The road that Jesus is walking is a road that leads to his cross. The "cup" that Jesus is to drink is the cup of his death.

The disciples show that they are clueless when they respond, "Sure! We can do that! We are able to drink your cup and be baptized with your baptism! You want more chairs set up? No problem! You want us to gather up the leftovers and do the dishes? No problem!"

(a little singing) "'Are you able,' said the master, 'to be crucified with me?' Yea the sturdy dreamers answered, 'to the death we'll follow thee! Lord we are able!'"

We used to sing that in church.

We are the "sturdy dreamers." Are you able to receive the peace, the benefits, the joy, the sense of deeper meaning, the reassurance or whatever it is that Jesus is giving out this week? "Oh, sure! We are able!" we answer.

"Are you able to be crucified like I am to be crucified, to suffer, to be rejected and disappointed like I am to suffer and be rejected?" Jesus asks. And these dreamers, these knuckleheads reply, "Sure! We are able!"

And we kind of expect Jesus to say, "You idiots! Here it is, deep in the Gospel of Mark and you are still clueless? You show by your response that you don't have the foggiest idea of what I've been talking about all along the road, do you?" And maybe Jesus was thinking that.

There are actually a lot of examples in Mark of the disciples being knuckleheads, just not getting it. Jesus tried to teach them a new understanding of marriage and divorce; they didn't get it. The the man with great possessions tries to impress his way into the kingdom but Jesus is totally unimpressed and tells him to sell everything he has and give it away; that really got the disciples shaking their heads. Several times Jesus tries to tell them what is coming and it always falls on deaf ears.

Perhaps Jesus was experiencing impatience here but he did not express it. What Jesus actually said was, "You *will* drink the cup that I drink, you *will* be baptized with my baptism."

Jesus does not promise his disciples that they shall be in glory with him, rewarded and happy. He promises that if they will follow him they shall share with him in his sufferings and challenges.

Two disciples ask to sit next to Jesus in his glory, one on his right, one on his left. When Jesus came into his "glory," it was not on a throne. It was on a cross, with two thieves, derelicts of society, one on his right and one on his left. Unlike James and John, there is nothing to make us think that those two thieves were deserving in any way imaginable. They hadn't been following Jesus. They had not served on any committees. Those guys were the ones who find the unlocked door and come in and raid the food pantry. They are thieves, but to one of them Jesus said, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." What kind of kingdom is Jesus operating here anyhow?

This is the gospel that contemporary followers of Jesus have been reluctant to proclaim to the world, perhaps because we're reluctant to hear this message ourselves! **Jesus is not a technique for getting what we want out of God; Jesus is God's way of getting what God wants out of us.** God wants a world, a world redeemed, restored to God. And the way God gets that is with ordinary people like us who are willing to walk like Jesus, talk like Jesus, yes, and even if need be to suffer like Jesus. But perhaps more than anything else, Jesus is looking for ordinary people who are willing to love like God loves.

I've always thought it would have been enough of a challenge if Jesus had only said, "Even though I am the Messiah, the Son of God, Savior of the world, I am going to be nailed to a cross. So you won't have to be." Unfortunately for lots of our ideas about religion, Jesus said, "There's a cross for you too. Come, take up your cross and follow."

What does it mean to drink the cup that Jesus drinks? What does it mean to be baptized with his baptism? After all, he experienced a horrible, violent death. Kenneth Carder is a retired Methodist Bishop. He put it very simply. He said, "The cup from which Jesus drank is self-emptying love, the giving of one's life for others. The baptism with which he is buried is dying to all the power games of the world, to be more powerful, more popular, to be more esteemed, to be more secure – dying to all of that so that he could be raised to God's reign of justice and generosity and joy."<sup>2</sup>

This week I was reading a book by Thomas Keating called Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit. In it he told about attending an interreligious workshop in which there was a panel of people who had been through the most barbaric events of our century: two world wars, the Holocaust, Cambodia during the time of Pol Pot, and Viet Nam. It was extraordinary. These people had each drunk from cups that would be wished on no one. Keating said that as each person shared their experience it became more and more difficult to react, because anything anyone could say would sound like a platitude.

A vietnamese woman had been abused by both sides in the war because, as a survivor in her village, it was assumed that she had cooperated with the enemy, she was threatened and raped by both American and North Vietnamese troops. A Cambodian boy was forced to watch the torture and murder that went on twice each day in the camp; yet if he had shown any emotion, he, also would have been liquidated. As he spoke, sensing the immense love and acceptance of this group of people., he actually did break down and weep for the first time.

There was also a Jewish woman who as a girl had been in the Holocaust. Both her parents were killed in the concentration camps. As she was telling her story, she mentioned that she had established a humanitarian organization to prevent things like the Holocaust from happening again. Then, she made a casual remark that was very significant, **"I really could not do this humanitarian work unless I was fully convinced that if the situation had been reversed, I could have done the same things that were being done to my people."**<sup>3</sup>

This woman knew what it was to drink deeply of the cup of salvation. Only God can protect us from the harm we are capable of doing. In this bright light of honesty there is only room for true humility of spirit. There is no room for lording it over any other or claiming to be a part of any elite. All of us are in the same boat. We all owe an incredible debt of gratitude to all that God has done and is doing in us and to what others have contributed to us to make us what we hope to be.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Carder in *The Christian Century*, Oct 8, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Tommas Keating in *Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit*, page 100

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