

Can you drink this cup?

20 Pentecost

October 18, 2009

The truck was packed. All of our worldly belongings sat in it, waiting to be moved to Evanston. That last night in Colorado was spent at a neighbor's home. As I lay in the strange bed, I wondered, "What have I done? Why am I uprooting my family like this? Is this about me and my ego or am I truly following the will of God?" I was overcome by mental anguish.

Thus began my journey toward ordained ministry. Clouded by doubt and anxiety, my mind was filled with spiritual suffering. Even so, through hope, I followed the belief in God's call.

The story of Christian formation is written through the suffering we face as we engage the cross of Christ. The words of Isaiah boldly declare, "***Out of his anguish he shall see light***". It is the light of righteousness which illuminates all who follow the way of Jesus. When the sons of Zebedee seek to be exalted along with Jesus, they hear him say, "You do not know what you are asking." These words are followed by "***Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?***"

Discipleship is more demanding than we expect. During the time of Jesus, the symbolism belonging to lifting a cup to drink was described in Psalms and Jeremiah as one of woe and suffering. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus agonized as he prayed, "***Lord, let this cup pass me by.***" He knew what was soon to take place. The cup was one of suffering, yet it would lead to the redemption of humanity. God had provided the means for human reconciliation through the flesh of Jesus. He was born of a woman as we are. He lived as we live, he walked as we walk, and finally, he suffered as we suffer.

We can not deny that the beginning of glory is agony. No growth can occur without pain. The saying goes, "It is the heat of the fire that tempers the steel", and suffering is the fire that tempers our soul. God understands the nature of spiritual growth. As Jesus observed Peter cutting the ear off a Temple servant he cried to him, "***Am I not to drink the cup that God has given me?***" The image of the cup is one of suffering and death.

Soon after my arrival at Seabury-Western, I attended a new student retreat and orientation session. The facilitator led us through a meditation entitled "can you drink this cup?" We explored that which we had given up, the life we had rejected in order to be considered for ordination in the church. We would no longer be in control of our lives for we had given ourselves for the work of the church as administered by our bishops. Jesus points out to us that if we want to share his life, we must become a slave of all. This is not only true for clergy but for all who wish to follow Christ. Each of us is called to a life of service to others. It is essential to our faith for we serve God when we serve one another. We must set aside selfish pursuit and drink the cup of Christ. At the end of the retreat we were each given a token of the experience. This is the one I received.

The sons of Zebedee accepted the challenge of Jesus by declaring that they were able to drink the cup. In doing so, Jesus recognized that they would transform the cup's image from one of suffering and woe into an image of joy and salvation. At the Last Supper, he would take up a cup of wine and invite those gathered to drink from it in remembrance of him. In doing so, he forgave each of them for their part of his suffering to come. Jesus knew of the betrayal, the denial, and the rejection of him that was to come. Jesus knew that as he prayed in the garden his most beloved followers would sleep. Jesus knew that his disciples would desert him. Jesus would stand before Pilate alone. None would speak up in his defense. The cup of Jesus was suffering; mental suffering, physical suffering, and spiritual suffering.

Yet, knowing all this, we come to this place seeking Christ. Are we ready to take the cup of Christ, or do we avoid it? We are filled with conflicting desires: a life of comfort, remaining in control, aspirations of dominance over others, seeking to be number one. Suffering doesn't seem to be anywhere close to the top of our hopes and dreams. Why would it? After all, it's painful. However, deep within us there is a place that is willing to share the life of Christ. A place that is willing to drink the cup of Christ. We accept that through suffering comes salvation. Jesus leads us to both the cross and the resurrection.

In closing, I'd like to share with you a story told by Leonard Ravenhill, an early 20th Century Evangelist. In the early years of his ministry, he served in England. In his own words...

I was going down the street in Oldham, which is nine miles outside of Manchester. I was in my early twenties. I pastored the largest church in town; in fact, the largest Holiness church in England. I was going down the street one day. As I passed a house, the lady opened the door,

"Hi! You're the pastor at the Tabernacle. I often come to your church. I sit on the back seat. I'm very poor. I can't give anything in the offering, but I want to do something for you. Would you come into my house and drink a cup of tea?"

Well, usually, of course, I want tea, so I said, "Yes." I went in, and boy! did that house smell. I got in there and she had finger nails clogged up with dirt. The kitchen sink was filled with dirty dishes. There was a plate with some old bacon covered with mold: That fuzzy horrid looking stuff.

She reached into the kitchen sink to a stack of cups and picked one. You know, the tea had dried on the outside. Oh, mercy on us! It looked as though it had about a hundred bugs at the bottom: dried, dirty, rotten old tea leaves. In fact, some were moldy.

"Well, now" she said, "I'm going to get you a cup of tea."

I said, "All right."

She poured the tea into the cup. It was as black as my shoes, and I don't like black tea.

"Do you take cream?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have none."

"Do you take sugar?"

"Yes."

"I have none."

With that dirty hand shaking, I saw the black stuff that was supposed to be tea, cold as ice.

I hesitated. I felt like tipping it up. But I knew I was on trial.

She held the cup up, "Drink it!"

At the closing of today's gospel Jesus indicates that he came into the world ***"not to be served but to serve; and, to give his life as a ransom for many."*** These words guide each of us toward a life of service. Additionally, we are called encourage others in their service. The previous anecdote from Ravenhill presents to us an example of such encouragement. Thus, I encourage each of you as you accept the cup that is being offered. Drink deeply as you welcome Christ into your life.

In the words of Leonard Ravenhill;

"Are the things you are living for worth Christ dying for?"

Amen.

EJ Rivet+

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