Invitation to the Table

In today's Gospel reading from Mark, Jesus asks James and John if they are able to drink the cup he will drink.

The Cup. It's a universal symbol, and it runs throughout the Bible. It's not just something we use to drink. Some cups speak of victory—soccer cups, The Stanley Cup. They speak of bravery, fame, and power. The cups in Isaiah and Jeremiah and Revelation are the cups of God's wrath. Then there is Jesus' cup, a symbol of life filled with humility, service, and love, and the risks involved in all the above.

The implication in Scripture is that we each have a cup to drink. Henri Nouwen writes, "Holding the cup of life is a way of looking critically at who we really are, accepting our various skills, inadequacies and differences from others, and rejoicing in our radical singularity."[1]

Taking the cup means looking deeply into our lives. Just living our lives is not enough. We have to process, reflect, discuss, and make decisions about who we will be as living, breathing beings—individually and in community—all our uniqueness and imperfections.

Take the cup. Ask Christ for more revelation, more truth, and more resolve.

Pastoral Prayer

O Lord, deal gently with us.

We all are subject to weakness: weakness of will, of courage, of heart.

Still, you call us to follow you: to learn obedience to the ways of Christ, to be great by serving others.

When we realize our lack of wisdom and strength, remind us we are able by the power and through the gifts of your Spirit to be who you create us to be; to go where you send us; to do what you call us to do.

As we worship this hour, may our eyes be opened wide to the awesome glory reflected in the beauty of your creation—above us, beneath us, before us, and behind us. Keep our feet on the ground, remembering it is from the ground you made us. And keep our minds clear, and grant us a vision of the fullness of Christ Jesus, our model for life, who came to serve and in whose name we pray. Amen.

Son of Man

MARK 10:35-45 (NRSVUE) *James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."* [36]*And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?"* [37]*And they said to him, "Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."* [38]*But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"* [39]*They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized,* [40]*but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to appoint, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."* [41]*When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.* [42]*So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.* [43]*But it is not so among you; instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,* [44]*and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.* [45]*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many."*
The Word of God for the people of God!

Most serious students of the Bible have heard of Luke's travel narrative. Luke 9:51: "Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem." The die is cast; Jesus knows what lies ahead and goes to meet it. Ten chapters later, after several encounters, the Travel Narrative ends with Jesus on top of a hill overlooking Jerusalem, ready to enter.

What I had not noticed until preparing these sermons from Mark's Gospel is that Mark has his own Travel Narrative. I've been calling it a transitional section, and it is that; but from Mark 8:21, through 10:52, Jesus is traveling from Caesarea Philippi, north of Galilee, south to Jerusalem.

The journey begins with the two-stage healing of a blind man who, after the second try, finally "sees everything clearly," and it closes with the healing of a second blind man who "regains his sight and follows Jesus on the way." Two outsiders granted clear vision, while the core of disciples demonstrate their ongoing blindness.

Three times during the journey, Jesus tells the disciples who he is and what he's about: "The 'Son of Man' will suffer and be rejected and killed." Three times; but they don't get it. (They had beans in their ears.)

The first time, Peter takes him aside and says, "Come on Jesus! Messiah doesn't die!" and Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan"—he called him 'Satan!'"

The second time he tells them, they immediately start arguing over who will be the greatest in the new empire.

In today's text, he's just told them the third time, and in the very next words James and John ask, "When you get elected Messiah, can we sit on your cabinet?"

The request seems incredibly brazen. Where have these guys been? Were they sitting on the back row shooting spit wads when Jesus took a child and said this is what the kingdom is about? Did they totally miss the point when Jesus told the

rich young man he needed to take a break from his possessions? Were they deaf when Jesus spoke of his own future and the risks of following him? In Matthew, it's the *mother* of James and John who makes the request. That seems more plausible.

In the first part of the Gospel we see the reason behind the disciples' lack of understanding. Six centuries earlier, when Israel was in Babylonian exile, a hope emerged for a Messiah—a military hero who would restore the nation of Israel to the glory it enjoyed under David and Solomon.

Jesus' followers thought he was that guy; and they were getting ready for the revolution. But then he got crucified. Two generations later, Mark's readers are not Jews. Messiah means nothing to them, and crucifixion was the empire's way of dealing with losers; and so, for non-Jews, to claim Jesus was Messiah was a joke.

So, in the first part of his Gospel, Mark is setting up his readers to understand. The people, including the disciples, were blind; and whenever the idea of Messiah came up, Jesus would shush it: "Don't talk about what you don't understand!"

And then the Travel Narrative begins when Jesus heals a blind man. It takes two tries, but he heals him. Then he asks his disciples, "What are people saying about me? Who do they think I am?" The answers are all over the map, so he asks, "Then who do you think I am?" And when Peter says, "You're the Messiah," Jesus rolls his eyes and shakes his head, and says, "Guys, read my lips."

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. But the disciples were not listening.

Note: Jesus taught them that the "Son of Man" must suffer. That's crucial to understanding Mark. In Mark—in Mark—Jesus never claims to be Son of God or Messiah. Immediately prior to today's reading, Jesus—for the third time!— told the disciples "Look, we're going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death…"

And immediately, James and John ask, "Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left…" They're still expecting the revolution, and they're asking to be appointed to the highest-ranking positions in the empire. The next time we'll see that "right hand/left hand" phrase is in chapter 15, when those on Jesus' right hand and left hand are those who are crucified with him.

Jesus responds, "You don't know what you're asking." This is Mark's primary theme in this transitional Travel Narrative. They don't know. "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" Mark's readers will make the connection with the two Christian sacraments that recall Jesus' death.

We might wish Mark had chosen different symbols. Every time we take the

cup, every time we witness a baptism, we not only celebrate the extravagant grace they represent, but also are reminded of the risks we take if we truly follow Jesus. "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?"

And then Mark's transition finally reaches its climax; the dissonant chord is resolved: *"...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many."*

Jesus has been teaching them that all along. His way is counter to the world's way. His journey is not toward fame and fortune or power and empire. In fulfilling the intentions and purposes of God he has redefined the vocabulary of Israel's hope—and ours. Where they used the word, 'Messiah," Jesus uses the word, "servant." When they say, "Son of God," he saysm, "Son of Man."

The disciples and the crowds that cheered came crying, "Jesus how can you enable us to get what we want?" Jesus came teaching that by being and doing what God wants, they would discover life abundantly more than wealth and empire.

Gratefully, Jesus keeps teaching his disciples, keeps pointing them to the way that accomplishes God's intentions and purposes: a world brought back to God, a world united, not by power, coercion, violence, and glory—that's the way the world gets what it wants—but through serving and loving. But there is a cup to drink.

A colleague's son—11 or 12 years old—was having difficulty in school; so, they took him for counselling. After a few sessions, the counselor concluded, "Unfortunately, your son has an exaggerated sense of empathy for other people. He's distracted from his schoolwork when he sees other students having difficulty. He's kind, sympathetic, and really concerned about others. Congratulations. You've done a great job of raising a Christian. Unfortunately, none of those traits lead to success in school or in a world that values competition, assertiveness, power, and prestige."

"Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

I think Mother Teresa captured it well in her poem, "Anyway."

People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered.
Love them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.
Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and true enemies.
Succeed anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.
Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness will make you vulnerable.
Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.
Build anyway.

People need help but will attack you if you help them.
Help them anyway.

Can you drink the cup?

Prayer Slide