

“We Are Able”
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Psalms 104:1-9, 24, 35c
Mark 10:35-45

“Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” Jesus asks this question of his disciples. We have seen this cup before. Maybe it is a cup he brought home from the wedding at Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine. Perhaps he first got this cup from the Samaritan woman at the well; she gave him a drink of water. He gave her a living water that would cause her to never thirst again. Maybe it was the Samaritan woman’s cup which Jesus poured, and held, and blessed at the last supper, telling the people, “Drink from it, all of you.”

There is something bitter or burdensome about this cup, too. So much so that Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, throwing himself onto the ground and asking God, “Abba, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”

What is this cup from which Jesus asks whether we can drink? The disciples seem to believe they are able. Are we able, too?

As we explore this question, I would like to ask you to do a creative, meditative exercise with me. If it feels helpful to you, you may close your eyes for a bit. I won’t tell you when to open them; if you feel the need to leave the meditative space, or if you want to connect by looking at me or anyone else, you can simply open your eyes.

For this meditative journey, you need a cup. Instead of picking out one of the cups on the communion table, I invite you to journey with me in your mind to an ancient garden, older than time. This is the garden where we are told that God dug into the earth, and fashioned the first human out of wet, fertile earth-- and then breathed the spirit of life into that human.

This is the garden where you will find the clay from which you will fashion a cup. Go ahead. Sit down or kneel down. Scrape your fingers into the dirt and fill your hands with it. You don’t care about being messy; creation is sometimes messy. You scrape away any pebbles or grit so that what you are left with is nutrient-rich, wet dirt. Feel how the warmth of your hands makes the clay stick together, makes it transform from something loose and formless to something that takes on the shape of whatever your hands are making it to be.

Now you see there is a potter’s wheel before you. You take the lump of clay, and put it on the wheel. Keeping it malleable with just a little bit of water, you stick your thumb into the lump, one thumb, then the other too, all while the wheel is spinning. As the middle starts to hollow out, you pinch the outside of the clay with your other fingers. The shape of a cup starts to form. As you put just the smallest amount of pressure between your thumbs and your fingers, the walls of the

cup start to rise. Not too much. Just enough. You see in front of you, you have formed a simple, useful, cup. Just a little bit more water, to make any rough edges smooth. Now to the fire.

Hours have passed. Your cup has hardened in the fire. You have poured salt on it to create a glaze. Your cup has cooled. It is ready for drink. You notice it has some imperfections. Maybe a little lopsided. Maybe there is a crack along the rim. But, imperfections notwithstanding, it is good.

We see that the cup can hold water. It can hold wine, or milk and honey. It can hold something hot. It can hold bitterness and tears.

Today we are going to see this cup as a spiritual container, to hold what God has given you. But before you hold that cup out to receive, let's first examine the inside. Sometimes, a cup has residue. A coffee cup that is refilled repeatedly without being washed has rings around the inside, showing what it once held. What anxiety, resentment, harsh judgment, self-pity, or mistrust is already taking up space inside your cup? Do not be afraid to look at what is in there and examine it-- for it is not unless we realize it is there, that we can try to clear it away. Anxiety, resentment, harsh judgment, self-pity, or mistrust. It may be there, and perhaps we can simply wipe it away with a firm swipe of a cloth. Or maybe not. It's also possible that there are cracks in the ceramic where any of these things can get stuck. That's okay, too. Just try to know what is there.

Now hold your cup out to God and ask God to fill it with love and blessing. Receive, receive, receive. Like the Psalmist once said, "My cup, it overflows." What will you do with this cup? Will you sip cautiously from it? Will you turn immediately to someone else and offer them a drink? Will you gulp thirstily, like a child drinks on a hot summer day, gasping for breath after it is all gone?

Now notice. What is in your cup? Is it full again? Is it empty? Have you spent what was in it on others? Examine the form of your cup. Notice how its existence creates a natural boundary. The Psalm today notes how God, in the stunning act of creation, making mountains and valleys, set a boundary with the waters that they may not pass, a boundary so that they might not again cover the earth. In the same way, the boundaries of the cup means it can only hold a certain amount at once. This is a problem; but it is also a grace. We cannot take on more than what we can hold.

Spiritual teacher Joyce Rupp says that "The spiritual path is a constant cycle of emptying and filling, of dying and rising, of accepting and letting go. The full cup is repeatedly emptied so that it can be filled again and again. This emptying happens in many ways. Sometimes I choose to be emptied of my fullness when I get involved in a situation when someone's life asks a lot of my time and energy. This emptying can be draining, but it might also be rewarding and satisfying because I have a sense of truly giving to another. A

“At other times,” Rupp says, “life empties my cup without ever asking my permission. Challenging, inconvenient, messy, struggling, frustrating experiences constantly empty me. I am also emptied when I choose to let go of my habits and behaviors that are harmful to myself and to others. While the process of emptying may be painful, it can also be ‘growthful.’ The empty times may feel useless, fruitless, and non-productive, but they are actually a means of our falling into the immense depths within ourselves where we see more clearly, learn to be less controlling, long more deeply for God, and touch life with greater reverence and gratitude. We enter into the deep realm inside of us that is filled with the mystery, awe, and endless beauty of God. Emptiness is a gift that opens us further to the transforming power of God.”¹

The truth of our spirituality is that God sometimes fills our cup with something other than refreshing water-- though the streams of living water are always available as an undercurrent granted to us by our baptism. Sometimes what is in our cup is not always as sweet as the milk and honey God promised in the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery. Sometimes the cup holds something bitter. This is true not because God wants to make us cringe or worse, give us poison to eat. This is true because God shares the world with us, and with it all the freedom and choice it offers, and also all the suffering and life it sustains.

Without death, we will not have life; the cup Jesus shares knows this, and Jesus tries to warn the disciples of this truth. Putting this cup to your lips will not make you powerful. It will not give you a seat on either side of a throne. It will not bestow glory upon you. It is a more simple, humble cup than that-- the kind of cup a servant would drink from. To drink from this cup, no matter how full it once was, is to also know emptiness. The kind of self-emptying Jesus did required him to be empty of ego. Empty of fear. Empty of jealousy. Empty of greed. Empty of the desire to please, to give others the answers they wanted to hear.

What would you like God to empty from you? How can God help you form an emptiness inside that makes a greater capacity for love, love for God; love for others; love enough to see yourself as God's beloved child?

Cradle the cup you have fashioned in your hands. Know that it is your cup. It is Christ's cup. And you are that sacred cup: full of life, full of death. Sometimes empty, sometimes full. Bitter and burdensome, refreshing and life-giving. Enough for you. Enough to share with others who thirst. Christ has made you that cup, because you have told him you are able to drink from the same cup as him. You hold in you his life-- and his death-- in the contours of your body. As you discover the blessing and challenge of serving him, may each day become a chance for resurrection.

¹ Joyce Rupp, *The Cup of Our Life: A Guide to Spiritual Growth*. 1997: Notre Dame, Ave Maria Press. p. 39-40