

Fourth Sunday in Lent March 26, 2017

Matthew 20:17-28 (EHV) – ¹⁷As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside; and on the way he said to them, ¹⁸“Look, we are going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and experts in the law, and they will condemn him to death. ¹⁹They will hand him over to the Gentiles to mock, flog, and crucify him. On the third day he will be raised.” ²⁰Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to him with her sons, kneeling and asking something of him. ²¹He said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Promise that in your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right hand and one on your left hand.” ²²But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to him, “We are.” ²³He said to them, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not for me to give; rather these places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.” ²⁴When the ten heard this, they were angry with the two brothers. ²⁵But Jesus summoned them and said, “You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶It will not be that way among you. Instead whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wants to be first among you will be your slave— ²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Introduction

If you’d look through our cabinets over at the parsonage, you’d probably find more than twenty different styles of drinking containers. There are coffee mugs and cups of all sorts of different styles. Drinking glasses of the 16, 12, and 8 oz varieties. An assortment of plastic cups for kids. Flutes, goblets, pint glasses, and the like for “adult beverages.” Plastic souvenir cups from various ballparks. Insulated travel mugs for use on the road. We use ‘em all at some time or another.

Theme: God’s Children Drink from the Cup Called “Service.”

Today, Jesus teaches us about a cup that all of his followers drink from. He’s not talking about a certain style of “holy grail” for use at the Lord’s Supper. He’s not talking about individual cups vs the common cup. He teaches us that **GOD’S CHILDREN DRINK FROM THE CUP CALLED “SERVICE.” Jesus was committed to drinking that cup. We’re privileged to share in that cup.**

Part I: Jesus was committed to drinking that cup.

The first part of our text is the third time in Matthew’s gospel that Jesus predicted what would happen to him in Jerusalem. The first time, he was met with opposition. Peter rebuked him and tried to prevent him from following that path; and Jesus had to put him in his place. The second prediction came just after the Transfiguration, and the message seemed to be sinking in a little more. Matthew writes that **“the disciples were filled with grief.”** Now in the verses of our text, perhaps just a day or two before Palm Sunday, Jesus predicts the imminent future. In this prediction, he describes the cup he’d drink in three ways: (1) he willingly serves the will of his Father; (2) he humbly serves by enduring the punishment that a world full of sinners earned for itself; and (3) he serves by boldly proclaiming the victory he’d win.

First of all, let’s hear how he willingly serves the will of his Father. **“As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside; and on the way he said to them, ‘Look, we are going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and experts in the law.’”**

The road of Jesus’ life eventually wound its way around to Jerusalem. Nothing could prevent him from following that course. There could be no detours or bypasses. **“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,”** Paul said. If he was going to carry out that mission, he was going to have to follow the path laid out

for him by his own Father. And throughout Jesus' life, from beginning to end, Jesus willingly followed that path of service. **"We're going,"** he says to his disciples.

Was it cruel of God to ask his Son to endure the things that were looming literally just over the hill? Some might think so. You might hear them say, "Any God that could be so heartless as to demand those sorts of things from his only Son is definitely not the God for me, thank you very much!" Jesus, however, didn't think about it in those terms. His will and the will of his Father were perfectly in tune with each other. Jesus knew from day one – actually, a lot earlier than that – what his Father's will and his whole purpose for coming to earth were. What was the cup from which God's only Son drank? His love guided him to drink from the cup called "service" in willing obedience to his Father's will.

His cup also meant that he humbly endured the punishment earned by a world of sinners. **"They will condemn him to death. They will hand him over to the Gentiles to mock, flog, and crucify him."**

We just saw that Jesus was bound and determined to follow the path his Father laid out for him. Now we hear just where that path led. The cup Jesus was committed to drink ended in death. Oh, the injustice of it all! Condemned on the basis of trumped-up charges, to which multiple witnesses couldn't even agree. To add insult to injury, they turned him over to the Roman governor and his soldiers to mistreat as they pleased. Blindfolded and bloodied, they egged him on. Forced to undergo the most severe and cruel punishment that a person in his right mind couldn't imagine coming up with. Certainly, Jesus' life had to have more meaning than that!

No, not really. That pretty much sums it up. **"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us." "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities... Though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth, yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer."** The epitome of Jesus' life was to serve as our substitute and drink the cup that we sinners earned for ourselves.

But did draining the cup of sacrificial service end in a meaningless death? No way! Sadly, the disciples shut their ears to this devastating news so that they ended up missing the third part of Jesus' service. **"On the third day he will be raised."**

If there's any question that Jesus' death served a good purpose, his resurrection answers it completely. Over and over, Jesus boldly proclaimed the victory he'd win. He's destroyed death's dominion. He's turned something that's universally feared into something that's welcomed and anticipated by the believer. Because Jesus lives, we, too, will live. Death has lost its sting forever.

Transition

Jesus' life, death and resurrection – all three are wonderfully meaningful. Now let's hear Jesus describe the meaning of our lives.

Part II: We're privileged to share in that cup.

Jesus' service was meaningful because it was so unselfish. Sadly, the very next thing we hear about is a selfish request. James and John wanted to gain some advantage out of Jesus' payment for sin. **"Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to him with her sons, kneeling and asking something of him. 'Promise that in your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right hand and one on your left hand.'"**

Can you believe their nerve? Not all that long before, Jesus had taught the lesson not to sit in the place of honor at a wedding feast because someone more distinguished than you might've been invited and then you'd be asked to move further down the table. Rather, a person should sit at the foot of the table so he'll be honored when his friend asks him to move up toward the head. **"Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."** James and John and their mother Salome hadn't learned that lesson yet.

Matthew goes on to tell us, **“When the ten heard this, they were angry with the two brothers.”** I’m not all that sure they were upset with the request itself as much as they were upset that James and John thought to ask it before they did. We can sense the spirit of competition among the disciples.

Way too often, we follow the wrong model for our lives. Namely: “Whoever’s at the head of the line – whoever’s at the top of the heap – ultimately wins.” The disciples had a distorted view of what Jesus’ kingdom really was. We do too, sometimes, because it’s a view so prevalent in the world around us. It’s hard not to get caught up in it ourselves. The technical term for this distorted view is the *Theology of Glory*. It’s preached by several televangelists and best-selling religious authors. It’s hinted at in all those forwarded emails that promise blessing after blessing if only you pass this on to at least ten people in your address book. Martin Luther describes the person who follows that line of thinking in this way: **“He prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil.”** How often do we follow that line of thinking ourselves? “What good things can we get for ourselves out of Jesus’ suffering?” How unwilling are we to drink the cup of sacrificial service? But, in reality, that’s a dangerous path. Luther continues: **“These are the people whom the apostle calls ‘enemies of the cross of Christ,’ for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works. Thus they call the good of the cross evil and the evil of a deed good.”** Sounds like people today who don’t want to think about Lent or talk about the cup of suffering Christ drank or even go so far as to deny the existence of the literal hell he endured for us.

Biblical theology and Lutheran theology isn’t the *Theology of Glory*. That’s what Jesus reminded James and John and the others. **“You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It will not be that way among you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you will be your slave.”**

To be a follower of Jesus means that you follow in his footsteps – that you drink from the cup from which he drank. We take up our crosses and follow him. The Christian’s life is filled with daily struggles and added persecutions. According to tradition, James was killed within ten years of Jesus, and John finished his life in exile for proclaiming the faith. All the other disciples died martyrs’ deaths as well. Who knows what we’ll endure during the rest of our days? Here is how Luther describes the *Theology of the Cross*: **“God can be found only in suffering and the cross... Therefore the friends of the cross say that the cross is good and works are evil, for through the cross works are destroyed and the old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified. It is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God’s.”** The model we seek to apply to our lives isn’t a cushy life, seated on a throne, but one on our hands and knees, washing the feet of our brothers and sisters in humble service.

Conclusion

Of all the cups we have, our favorite is the cup called “service.” Just think what our lives would be like if Jesus hadn’t drunk the cup that was placed before him! Just think what our lives would be like if we had no opportunity to offer our thanks and praise by sharing in the privilege of sacrificial service! Our text concludes, **“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”** Now go and eagerly serve the Lord and each other as redeemed children of God. Amen.