

**Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24) – Year B – October 18, 2009**  
**Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45**  
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Have you ever been on the road to somewhere you would rather not have to go? What about a trip to the doctor's office or hospital where in your heart of hearts you know that there is bad news waiting. On the other hand, what about journeys made with great anticipation: the trip of a lifetime, Thanksgiving with family, joyous reunions with friends. We don't even have to travel far from home to know that we are on the move, especially when we are growing and learning. When we are facing trials and difficulties it may feel like we are taking one step forward and two steps back. This is, as Henri Nouwen would say, the cup of life: both a cup of joy and a cup of sorrow. Would it be what God desires for us, if we could choose to only drink the joy and not the sorrow from our cup of life? More importantly for followers of Christ, if we look to avoid pain and maximize our pleasure, are we really disciples of the Lord?

We continue our journey with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem today. He knows precisely what awaits him: betrayal, beatings, trumped up charges, a sham trial, and finally the cross. Nothing will deter Jesus from fulfilling His purpose. Just before today's Gospel lesson, Jesus has made His third passion prediction. The disciples continue to follow, but fearfully, and anxiously. We too have been trying to make sense of Jesus' teachings on kingdom living that seem so contrary to everything we know. So far, in the issue of relationships, when the Pharisees challenged Jesus on the question of divorce, we learned that kingdom living embodies the virtues of compassion and mutuality, faithfulness and integrity. When confronted by worldly wealth that has bound the heart of the rich man, Jesus tells us to give generously and build treasure in heaven. To be transformed, working for justice and equality, and finding true freedom in Christ. Today's lesson offers us disciplines for kingdom living that lead to eternal life, forged by service to others, and self-sacrifice, as opposed to self-serving ambition.

In Mark's Gospel, John and James come to Jesus with a rather dubious request for positions of power in glory. Since we know the rest of the story, we can feel a little embarrassed on behalf of James and John, and their crude ambition. Still, we can afford some compassion here. How many of *us* have completely misread a situation at some time or other, only to find ourselves, quite unexpectedly in hot water. James and John seem to believe that Jesus is going to Jerusalem to kick out the Romans and take his rightful place as the glorious new king of the Jews. As so often in Mark's gospel, the irony is cutting. Jesus' place of glory will be the world's place of shame and humiliation, nailed to a cross. James and John wish to be at his right and left, but those places are already designated for two criminals. In the Garden, Jesus will pray that this cup will pass Him by, even as He surrenders His will to God's will.

After all that Jesus has said about what will happen to Him, we may be tempted to wonder why James and John still don't get it. What drives them to request assurance of their places in God's kingdom with Jesus? When the other disciples hear of the request, they're angry, probably because they were thinking along the same lines. Mark has already told us that the disciples were following Jesus to Jerusalem with fearful hearts, and fear does strange things to us all. Do you remember where you were and what you were doing when the events of nine eleven transpired? The wave of shock and fear, anger, and the desire for retaliation spread like mutant tentacles throughout the country. We all wanted answers to the burning questions: "How could this happen?" and "What are we going to do about it?" As the initial shock and heartfelt compassion for the victims wore off, didn't we want to feel safe again? The fact is that fear breeds a desire for security. So it's not beyond the realms of possibility that in their own fear, James and John just wanted Jesus to make them feel safe again with the assurance of being in His close presence whatever happens. Our instinctive desire for survival is a very powerful motivating force. Think now. Is there anything we can admit to ourselves before God that we have tried to secure in the world out of fear for the future? There are many ways that the world can trap us into a false sense of security. Without exception, everyone will make the decision about where our real security lies. God's cup of life is offered to all. By our words and deeds, we will choose whether to drink deeply of the gift of

life, or not.

Jesus says to James and John, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized.” The images of baptism and the cup give us the feeling that we are both looking backwards and forwards. John the Baptist made the way for Jesus and baptized Him. His death foreshadows Jesus’ crucifixion, and being baptized means that we too are on the way of the cross. We are also looking forward to the Last Supper where Jesus will institute the Eucharistic feast, our cup of salvation in the blood of the New Covenant. As we share the cup each week in the fellowship of all the saints at the Eucharistic feast, we are inviting the whole community of faith into full participation in Christ. The promise of Jesus is not just that James and John will share crucifixion, but a promise that in Christ they need not be driven by fear. Nor do we. Rather, it is that they -- that we -- will be empowered to take up our cross and follow Jesus. Even with our imperfect understanding of Jesus’ revelations of the path before us, one where service to others leads the way to everlasting life, we can be confident in God’s constant care and encouragement. The cup of joy and sorrow is also the cup of blessing and salvation in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Gospel presents us with a new shape, a new texture and color to discipleship quite opposite to the business-as-usual attitude that is the way of the world, where power and ambition rule. Nouwen suggests that there are three specific disciplines in our walk as disciples that can help us to celebrate life, lift up the cup of salvation and drink deeply from our baptismal promise in Christ. Paradoxically, as we empty our self by drinking the cup that God has given us, we trust that the One who is love and faithfulness will transform us and fill us with everlasting life. The disciplines that pave the path to the promise are silence, sharing in word, and action. The first is described as way to reflect on the journey. We become closer to God as we accept all parts of the cup we are blessed with and begin to see the light, the darkness, and the shadows as gifts that help us to live into the fullness of being beloved children of God. In silence, we can begin to quiet our own anxious voices and discern the voice of the Spirit, who will always lead us to God. In the discipline of sharing in word, we are enfolded by the love and encouragement of trusted friends, as we share our doubts and fears, as well as the joys of who we are in Christ. The body of Christ is one, and never more so than when we come together and build the community of faith by giving of ourselves to others, and letting others give of themselves to us. In sharing, we find that the sorrows of our lives no longer have power to paralyze us, and the joys of our lives are held in perspective. The third discipline of action requires much discernment, because it is not easy to distinguish between doing what we are called to do, and doing what we want to do. Being busy for busy’s sake is not true action. Action that draws us closer to God, and bears fruit for God’s glory shows that we have surrendered our will to God’s will. In drinking our cup, we offer to God and one another an act of selfless love and immense trust. Here is a final word from Nouwen, “Spiritual greatness has nothing to do with being greater than others. It has everything to do with being as great as each of us can be.” You and I have a purpose in life. Jesus is the way. Will you drink the cup?

Amen.