

The Cup

A Sermon Expositing Mark 10:35-45

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I don't know if it really happens that way or not, but it sure looks exciting! They all gather around the stone table, not the roughhewn type we imagine in medieval lore, but finely polished granite or marble. It's a central command post where critical decisions are made. The walls are lined with flat panel screens and cameras giving them the ability to connect to any point on the globe at a moment's notice. Servers sworn to secrecy as to what they see and hear bring food and drink to the expensively dressed people in high-backed leather chairs. Junior members of the organization scramble to bring critical research to those around the table. Information comes in, decisions go out. From this central location anything can happen. Billions of dollars can be spent or made, companies can be acquired, hiring and firing by the hundreds. The entire course of a multi-national corporation can be altered with just a few words uttered in this room 50 stories above the bustling streets, far removed from the flesh and blood results of the decisions made.

Or if this scene does not occur 50 stories above the surface of the city, but many stories below in a remote location the decisions may instead send people into harm's way, wars might be begun, resources guarded, missiles fired. History itself could be altered in this room, far removed from the flesh and blood results of the decisions made. I don't know what really happens in these rooms, I've only seen static photos and scenes in movies, but it does make me wonder what it would be like to sit in one of those seats.

Imagine what it would be like for an entire organization, an entire nation to set you aside in a location well removed from the fray, for all of your personal needs to be tended to so you can focus on the task at hand, for a dedicated staff to be focused on getting you the information you need. What it would be like for the landscape of the world to be changed simply because you opened your mouth. It's an idea that is equally revolting and intoxicating. If we're honest, very few of us would pass up the opportunity to sit in one of those chairs.

James and John, the Sons of Zebedee, had no intention of missing such an opportunity either. They had been kicking around with this guy who it seemed might be ready to take over the world and establish a whole new Kingdom. We know in the post Easter world that they didn't quite understand what the coming Kingdom was all about, but they had at least become convinced that something big was coming. They asked for seats at the right hand and at the left of Jesus himself. So James and John didn't know anything about teleconferencing, multi-national corporations, or high-backed leather chairs, but it seems some rudimentary elements of the war-room or board room leadership style have existed for centuries including in Rome. When the sons of Zeb asked for seats, they must have had in mind something like a throne room with a central seat of power and seats of advisors lined up in a row side by side or around a table. In this way high level dignitaries or officials could bring their reports to the entire ruling council and the Emperor could collect the thoughts of his advisors before giving a ruling or decision. We can't be certain of whether this form of ruling took place in actuality, but it was at least an operable metaphor for power. Even if these councils didn't really operate that way the request would be the same as someone in our world asking for a seat in a high-backed leather chair, the point is clear. They

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

asked not only for seats among the council, but to be the closest two advisors to the seat of power. James and John acknowledged the Kingship of Jesus, but beyond Jesus they fancied themselves rulers of all.

It was no more absurd for them to ask for those seats than it is for you and me to horde whatever power we can muster whenever we can. To be sure, it was arrogant and it upset the other disciples, but that only proved that they too had their eyes set on those seats or at least didn't want anyone else occupying them. Perhaps this is the more relevant position for our current culture. It is also popular in our current, individualistic culture to hold one's own autonomy up as a kind of authority. When taken to the extremes that is to say of the broad seats of power, "I don't want to be in them, but I don't want anyone else in them either." In any event, we have no place to down on James and John as if we're better than they are. Jesus's words for them are good words for us.

"Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with," he asks them. James and John don't know what they've asked for and neither do we. We get the impression Jesus doesn't mean his baptism in water some 9 chapters back, but the event which that moment symbolized still looming in the future namely the events of the passion. The reference to the cup is consistent with much biblical literature in referencing a particular plight in one's life. "My cup runs over," says the Psalmist, but the particular plight Jesus now refers to is more ominous. The next cup we will see in Mark will be the one shared by the disciples in what will be their last meal together before the violence of the cross. It is the same figurative cup Jesus will ask to have removed from him in the garden just before his arrest. This is a cup of suffering and service. Jesus repeats his call for the one who wishes to be first to become last of all and servant of all. The coming Kingdom will not be brought by those in seats of power far removed from the trouble of the world. There is no such thing as an ivory tower for disciples of Jesus. To follow Jesus is to engage the pain and sorrow of this world and to make it our own. While there is something truly faithful about enduring the moments of pain, which inevitably come to us in life with grace and poise, these words of Jesus call for something even more, not simply to wait for pain to come to us, but to seek out the suffering of the world and engage it. The cup Jesus speaks of is the one he willingly drank for the redemption of the world. This cup is not for us, the inevitable pain we will encounter in life, but the suffering we will endure precisely because we are disciples. It is the sort of pain assumed by a woman in the streets of Calcutta 1948 who became a beggar not for her own food and care, but for those who had never known an ounce of comfort. It is the sort of suffering held by a man in a German prison who wrote with unwavering love and devotion words that inspire and educate to this day while standing against one of the greatest evils ever known. It is the sort of pain assumed by a Baptist preacher who simply refused to be quiet in the face of bigotry, hatred and violence answering them with love, peace, and a dream for a new world. It is the sort of pain and suffering carried all over this city and this world by those who need much, but nothing more than for someone to simply and willingly carry their pain too. Can we, can you carry their pain?

To follow Jesus is certainly to know the redeeming love of God and inclusion in a community which dreams of a new world, but when we answer this call we must not assume that we know what we've asked for. We don't know in full what it means to drink this cup only that it does not guarantee power, prestige, or comfort, but willful suffering in the example of Christ and in the service of others.

To drink this cup is to prefer to starve than to let another go hungry.

To drink this cup is to prefer to be humiliated than to see another ridiculed.

To drink this cup is to prefer suffering violence than to see harm come to another.

To drink this cup is to prefer suffering and service to power and prosperity.

To drink this cup is to give your life that another might live.

To drink this cup is to follow the one who has done these things for us all.

Drink deeply dear children of God.