

*Can You Drink the Cup? Holding the Cup*  
*Matthew 20: 20-28*  
*July 22, 2007*

This morning I begin a new series entitled “Can You Drink the Cup?” It is based upon a classic book by the late Henri Nouwen. Nouwen wrote over forty books with a spiritual depth and insight that few have matched in many years. Nouwen was a Catholic Priest who taught at Harvard, Yale and Notre Dame but his final ministry came at a modest home for mentally handicapped adults in Toronto, Canada. It is from that humble setting of servitude that he wrote this book, his last book before he died in 1996. Nouwen writes of the three movements of the Eucharistic ritual that we celebrate every week – holding the cup, lifting the cup and drinking the cup that are metaphors for all of the human, spiritual experience. Each week over the next three we will examine these three movements – holding, lifting and drinking.

Today – holding. I want to hold now for you two cups that mean so much to me. This chalice was the chalice that I received at my ordination in May of 2006, as I was appointed to Bering, that represents not only the culmination of seven years of study and ministry, but also represents one of the most holy tasks of my service to the people of God. I treasure it. This Waterford crystal hock was given to Katie and me by a good friend on the occasion of our wedding in August 1994. The light that reflects off its many facets reminds me of the many facets of our love relationships and the rich love that Katie and I share. (Andy holds, lifts, and swizzles the grape juice, smells it, hums approvingly, and then drinks a long sip). Don’t worry, it’s just grape juice! Somehow it just doesn’t seem the same as a great California Cab. It doesn’t have the bouquet, the tannins...it doesn’t peek the anticipation of the preparation of the joy of the taste and the

experience of that first glass. But for me, as I reflect on my life before recovery, it also doesn't represent the sorrow of the fifth or sixth glass. As grape juice it is very dark and I cannot see through to the bottom of this glass. Both of these cups represent joy and sorrow intermixed – one on a personal level and another on a deeply corporate level as a community of faith. That is the message for today – that when we hold the Communal Cup that we understand that mystery that life lived authentically is to find joy in the midst of sorrow.

The Sons of Thunder in our gospel text had not understood that message today when they sent their momma on her knees before Jesus to ask for a favor. He replied to their approach, “What do you want?” She asked that James and John could have the places of power in his Kingdom, as the two princes of the court. He said, “You don't know what you're asking for. Can you drink the cup?” They rashly reply, “Yes! What ever it takes!” Jesus says with such irony, “yes, you'll drink of the cup.” I think of Jesus just hours later in chapter 26, instituting the Sacrament that we celebrate every Sunday. I think of the great sorrow he expressed as his heart was full of the sadness of betrayal of these same friends. I think of his moment in the garden when he begged with God, “please Abba God please let this cup pass from me...” That was sorrow. But then in the midst of all of that sorrow saying with resolution, perhaps with emerging joy, “but nevertheless not my will but yours be done.” Back in our text this morning the other ten disciples are furious that James and John have pulled this power play and they cry out for Jesus to show them same favor. Jesus teaches him again that his Kingdom is different. It is not like this world where leaders lord it over their followers through power and manipulation. No only God knows who gets the place of greatness, but of one thing

Jesus is sure. To become great you must become a servant, a slave to others. And if you want to become like Jesus, you must follow the example of the one who gave his life as a ransom so that we could be freed from the bondage of sin. Can you drink the cup? It is both a cup of sorrow and joy.

What does this cup mean to the people of Bering? I think of your stories – many of you who have been around this church and community since the eighties, nineties and even before. I think of the origins of the reconciling movement. I think of the darkest days of the AIDS epidemic. I think of a time when the Sunday Eucharist might be the last experience of Holy Communion of a friend to the right or the left. I think of others who had walked or even run away from this table because you had been told to leave...or you just didn't ever feel accepted for who you are. I think of those who grew up in Christian traditions in which the Eucharist did not play a central weekly part of the worship experience, a people who now relish the joy of drinking the communal cup every week. I think of this beautiful liturgy in which we sing together "Holy Holy Holy, God of power and might." I think of singing and even weeping as we break the bread and sing "Lamb of God, bearer of our sins, have mercy upon us. Redeemer of the world, give us peace." That is what I think of in our communal experience of these powerful symbols of Christ's presence and power in our midst. Joy and sorrow. How are those intermixed? Henri Nouwen said that it like entering a dark cave and having to feel one's way around the darkness of sorrow. And then, mysteriously, miraculously, as we feel around damp, sharp, rocky walls, a precious gemstone of joy is discovered. That's joy in the midst of sorrow.

Many of Nouwen's stories that illustrate the paradox of joy in the midst of sorrow come in his book from his experience among the L'Arche Daybreak Community of mentally challenged adults. One of my early experiences comes from the Brookwood Community just to the west of Katy, near the George Ranch. At the Brookwood Community mentally challenged adults live with dignity in a communal setting supporting their own needs through the manufacture of beautiful porcelain crafts. Many years ago my Sunday school class went for a day of lunch and recreation with this community. I had some reservation for what I believed would be a place of sorrow and limitations. What I wasn't prepared for was the laughter playing softball and of seeing the joys in which they lived each day. That for me was the hidden gemstone in a community that most outside would see sorrow.

Julie had been suffering with cancer for five years before I arrived in Montgomery. About a year after I arrived it returned from remission with a vengeance. Julie would spend weeks in intensive care in excruciating pain at MD Anderson's intensive care unit. To this day I don't know how she survived for as long as she did. She was the most incredible warrior I had ever seen. We prayed countless prayers and had hundreds of hospital visits. Finally, after many months battling this terrible disease and enduring sorrow after sorrow of failed procedures to stop its relentless attacks on her body, Julie went home to spend her final days in hospice. She was peaceful. She had a sense of humor. She noticed every day the hummingbirds outside her porch in the country. She was lucid and found depth of living in the final days of her life. And in her last hours as we prayed and held hands I actually leaned on her. In her constant gaze and

in the peace of her speech I found strength and peace. Deep within the cave of suffering and sorrow she showed me the hidden gem, a joy at life's end.

As I was leaving Montgomery to come to Bering, my Children's Director Barb wrote me of a man who was suffering from a heart condition. He was an employee of her husband's firm here in Houston. She asked me to write him an encouraging note, which I did, but I didn't hear from him after a first note, nor did I meet him. Recently we resumed weekly Holy Communion at the Wednesday night BSN spiritual support groups here in our chapel. We had no idea how things would go the first night. We made the invitation over dinner and were overwhelmed at the response as the chapel was full that first night. There was one man who seemed to me most affected by Communion. I learned later that he was the man that my friend in Montgomery had encouraged me to write. Just a couple of weeks ago, Maggie received a note from this man that I want to read to you as we close:

*I took part with communion service last night after the Support Group.*

*I was deeply moved and touched by the explanation of receiving*

*the bread and wine. It has been a long time since I*

*have taken communion, and forgotten what I was missing. I wept with joy during*

*the sermon and felt my relationship with Jesus has been rekindled. My tears were*

*something that I have not felt for Jesus for a very long time. It was an honor to*

*come to the table to share this with you and my peers. Thanks you for being there*

*for us, and for bringing the Lord back to me.*

Can you drink this cup? When we hold the cup we hold the very life of the risen Jesus Christ. Spiritual life hangs in the balance and flows in this cup. Joy is found in this cup, but to get to it we often have to wade through deep sorrow. Hold it anyway, lift it anyway. Drink it to the dregs. For in that experience if you are like me you may find that you have only just begun to truly live for the first time.