

Can You Drink the Cup? Lifting the Cup
Jeremiah 25: 15-16, 27-29, 1st Corinthians 10:16-17, 11:23-26, Luke 22:14-20
July 29, 2007

If I could life all over again I think I would do it as an Irishman. I love the poetry of W.B. Yeats, the fiction of James Joyce, the green grass of Ireland, the melody of Irish culture, the luck of the Irish. But, alas, I am only 1/8 Irish. Luckily I married a Kennedy! What I like most about the Irish are their toasts, the famous, lyrical Irish blessings. I am in the second of a series on the Eucharist, inspired by a book by Father Henri Nouwen called "Can You Drink the Cup?" Today's Eucharistic movement is "lifting the cup." This is the movement of the toast. I like Irish toasts the best. Here's my favorite that I remember so well:

May the road rise to meet you. □
May the wind be always at your back. □
May the sun shine warm upon your face. □
And rains fall soft upon your fields. □
And until we meet again, May God hold you in the hollow of His hand.

Or how about this Irish blessing...

May your neighbors respect you, Trouble neglect you, The angels protect you, And heaven accept you.
□ May the Irish hills caress you. □ May her lakes and rivers bless you. □ May the luck of the Irish enfold you. □ May the blessings of Saint Patrick behold you.
□ May your pockets be heavy and your heart be light, □ May good luck pursue you each morning and night.

What you must also realize is the Irish are also famous for their curses. With that same lyrical note they can cast a curse just as well as a blessing. Try this one for size:

May those who love us love us. □ And those that don't love us, □ May God turn their hearts. □ And if He doesn't turn their hearts, □ May he turn their ankles, □ So we'll know them by their limping.

Or how about this one invoking an angry God...

May the curse of Mary Malone and her nine blind illegitimate children chase you so far over the hills of Damnation that the Lord himself can't find you with a telescope.

It is a cursing, angry God that reflects the vision of God's cup that we hear from the prophet Jeremiah. This is a cup of wrath. Israel, suffering from a long exile from its homeland, tries to understand how a loving God could separate it from its promise. Surely their turning from God in idolatry has caused their misfortune. God, enflamed with anger over their betrayal lifts the cup not in love but in anger to force the wine down the throats of not only Israel but all of their neighbors. They stumble away – drunk and vomiting. Punishment by the sword upon all of the nations of the world will be their fate. This is a worldview that still pervades many churches and many religions. It is one in which God continues to bring judgment and wrath and judgment upon world. AIDS – must be a judgment upon the world for all its disobedience. War – must be a lead up to Armageddon and the final battleground of the world. This is the cup of wrath that God forces upon the wicked.

But our gospel text and the text from Paul this morning represent not the cup of wrath, a cup of curses, but instead a cup of blessings. Our two texts from Luke and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians represent the Biblical basis for the words of institution for our Eucharist. The words we share each week point directly at these texts. When I lift the cup and say, "when the supper was over, He took the cup, gave thanks, gave it to his disciples and said, *this is the cup of the new covenant poured out for you and for many for forgiveness of sins*" I echo the words reported from the lips of Jesus. When I lift the cup a second time and say, "is the cup not a means of sharing?" I again echo the words of Paul. This worldview of offering the cup of salvation to the world is in

radical opposition to the prophecy of Jeremiah. Where one offers doom, the other offers God's forgiveness; where one is forced upon the world in anger, the other is offered freely for us to accept in joyful obedience. Where one predicts a people stumbling and vomiting in a drunken stupor, the other offers the sobering thought that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. The really good news is that with God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, the cup is forever half full.

It is easy to look around our city and our world and say "we're all going to hell in a hand basket." Our newscasts are filled with violence and shattered relationships. Peace in any corner of the world seems like a fantasy. Diseases like malaria and AIDS kill millions. Seemingly there has never been such a gap between rich and poor, the vanquisher and the vanquished. Skepticism and cynicism are constant temptations to our souls, are they not? We shake our heads and say, "When will we ever learn?" Who could blame us if our worldview suggested that our cup is not only half-empty but we are truly running on empty? And if we give in to this worldview, this cup of God's wrath, we could end up like Joe. Joe had changed jobs every few years, although he was still a young man. He just couldn't seem to get along with people. Joe was a factory worker, a working man. The day he joined a new plant an old timer named Charlie was sitting in the break room. He said to Joe, "hey you are the new guy, right?" "yea," said Joe. Joe asked the old-timer, "tell me about this place." Charlie gave Joe a long look and said, "What was your last job like?" Joe said, "it was awful. Working conditions were terrible. Pay was really low. There were always labor disputes. The tension between management and labor was so bad you could cut it with a knife. Most people couldn't wait to get out of there every day." Charlie looked at Joe again and said, "You'll find

that it's pretty much the same here." As Joe walked away another new young worker named Rich walked up to Charlie. He said to Charlie, "This is a great place to work, don't you think?" Charlie sized Rich up and asked, "I don't know. What was your last place like?" Rich smiled and said, "The people were really great and everybody pitched in to do whatever it took. Pay was fair and management was always open to what the workers had to say. The hours were long, but I looked forward every day to going to work there." Old Charlie smiled and said, "I think you'll find that it's pretty much the same here." Wise, old Charlie knew what we know in our hearts, that is, that the cup is full for those who maintain an attitude of gratitude.

The ancient word Eucharist means thanksgiving. When we come to kneel at the altar each Sunday, we do it for many reasons: for forgiveness, for reconciliation with God and one another, for a foretaste of God's Kingdom, to be a part of the Christian family at Bering. But most of all we do it with an attitude of Thanksgiving. The act of lifting the cup lifts our hearts and spirits. It recognizes that when the world was at its absolute worst, God didn't send a wrathful judge; God sent a redeemer to teach us how to live life abundantly. That is the lesson of the new covenant and why we choose to lift our cup to God.

John was the kind of guy you love to hate. He was always in a good mood and always had something positive to say. When someone would ask him how he was doing, he would reply, "If I were any better, I would be twins!" He was a natural motivator. If an employee was having a bad day, John was there telling the employee how to look on the positive side of the situation. Seeing this style really made Rick curious, so one day Rick went up and asked him, "I don't get it! You can't be a positive

person all of the time. How do you do it?" John replied, "Each morning I wake up and say to myself, you have two choices today. You can choose to be in a good mood or ... you can choose to be in a bad mood - I choose to be in a good mood." Each time something bad happens, I can choose to be a victim or...I can choose to learn from it. I choose to learn from it. Every time someone comes to me complaining, I can choose to accept their complaining or... I can point out the positive side of life. I choose the positive side of life. "Yeah, right, it's not that easy," Rick protested. "Yes, it is," John said. "Life is all about choices. When you cut away all the junk, every situation is a choice. You choose how you react to situations. You choose how people affect your mood. You choose to be in a good mood or bad mood. The bottom line: It's your choice how you live your life."

Rick reflected on what he said. Soon hereafter, Rick left the Tower Industry to start his own business. They lost touch, but Rick often thought about him when he made a choice about life instead of reacting to it. Several years later, Rick heard that John was involved in a serious accident, falling some 60 feet from a communications tower. After 18 hours of surgery and weeks of intensive care, he was released from the hospital with rods placed in his back. Rick saw him about six months after the accident. When he asked him how he was, he replied, "If I were any better, I'd be twins...Wanna see my scars?" Rick declined to see his wounds, but I did ask him what had gone through his mind as the accident took place. The first thing that went through my mind was the well-being of my soon-to-be born daughter," he replied. "Then, as I lay on the ground, I remembered that I had two choices: I could choose to live or...I could

choose to die. I chose to live." Weren't you scared? Did you lose consciousness?" Rick asked. John continued, "...the paramedics were great. They kept telling me I was going to be fine. But when they wheeled me into the ER and I saw the expressions on the faces of the doctors and nurses, I got really scared. In their eyes, I read 'he's a dead man'. I knew I needed to take action." "What did you do?" Rick asked. "Well, there was a big burly nurse shouting questions at me," said John. She asked if I was allergic to anything 'Yes, I replied.' The doctors and nurses stopped working as they waited for my reply. I took a deep breath and yelled, 'Gravity'." Over their laughter, I told them, "I am choosing to live. Operate on me as if I am alive, not dead." John lived, thanks to the skill of his doctors, but also because of his amazing attitude.

This morning we celebrate the commissioning of those who will be going to Nashville next week for the RMN Convocation. This event, my first, I am told is like a rally. It is to remind us that we are not alone in our reconciling efforts. It is also the place we will read God's Word, celebrate the Eucharist, and receive training for the hard reconciling work ahead of us, particularly in dialog with those brothers and sisters who are opposed to us in our efforts. It would be easy to get cynical, to say, "here we go again. Is anything ever really going to change? We are outnumbered again." We really have two choices. We can let cynicism win, to drink the cup of wrath. Or we can lift the cup of grace and thanksgiving, recognizing that we are part of something that, in God's time, will prevail. Choose to lift your cup...choose to give thanks...choose life.