

Drinking from the Cup and Doing the Dishes

Jeremiah 45:1-5 | Psalm 126 | Acts 11:27 – 12:2 | Matthew 20:20-28

MATTHEW 20:20-28

²⁰ Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him. ²¹ And he said to her, 'What do you want?' She said to him, 'Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.' ²² But 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 able.' ²³ He said to them, 'You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.' ²⁴ When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. ²⁵ But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ²⁶ It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; ²⁸ just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

INTRODUCTION

This morning, I want to start with a poem from one of my absolute favourite poets, former US Poet Laureate, Billy Collins:

To My Favorite 17-Year-Old High School Girl: Do you realize that if you had started building the Parthenon on the day you were born you would be all done in only one more year? Of course, you couldn't have done it alone, so never mind, you're fine just as you are. You are loved simply for being yourself.

But did you know that at your age Judy Garland was pulling down \$150,000 a picture, Joan of Arc was leading the French army to victory, and Blaise Pascal had cleaned up his room? No wait, I mean he had invented the calculator. Of course, there will be time for all that later in your life after you come out of your room and begin to blossom, or at least pick up all your socks.

For some reason, I keep remembering that Lady Jane Grey was Queen of England when she was only fifteen, but then she was beheaded, so never mind her as a role model. A few centuries later, when he was your age, Franz Schubert was doing the dishes for his family but that did not keep him from composing two symphonies, four operas, and two complete Masses as a youngster. But of course, that was in Austria at the height of romantic lyricism, not here in the suburbs of Cleveland. Frankly, who cares if Annie Oakley was a crack shot at 15 or if Maria Callas debuted as Tosca at 17?

We think you are special by just being you, playing with your food and staring into space. By the way, I lied about Schubert doing the dishes, but that doesn't mean he never helped out around the house.¹

¹ Billy Collins, "To My Favorite 17-Year-Old High School Girl," in *Aimless Love* (New York: Random House, 2013).

The brilliance of this poem is in how Collins juxtaposes seven incredible people who achieved much in their middle-teens, and the implied and much-deserved accolades of their achievements, with the mundanity of this normal girl who apparently struggles to help with the dishes and pick up her socks. The contrast here, as does the contrast in our Gospel reading, gets at a very basic activity of humanity, our ability to assess ourselves—introspection—and the ever-present temptations to self-importance, self-entitlement, and overestimations of self. What I think Matthew would have us learn from this little story of James and his brother is this: If we are going to follow Christ, we will have to get over ourselves. If we are going to follow Christ, we will have to get over ourselves. Let's take a look.

1. A SILLY QUESTION

The Gospel reading begins on the cusp of the end of Jesus's public ministry. Just seven verses after our passage, the story of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the final days before his crucifixion begins. But also importantly, our passage follows immediately behind Jesus's third prediction in the Gospel of his death and resurrection. This placement in the wider context of Matthew's Gospel is not an accident. It demonstrates a contrast. Jesus, ever mindful of his looming sacrifice of his own life, is presented with a request.

The request is quite simple, really. Here in Matthew's Gospel, it comes from the mouth of the mother of James and John, the wife of Zebedee. But don't miss the details. Jesus sees through this ploy and responds, not to her, but to the boys. Whether she was boldly, if not preposterously, asking on their behalf without their prompting, or whether they were so cowardly as to push her forward to make this overly confident request, we cannot tell. But Jesus's response was in the second person plural, so he must have been addressing more than just the mother. And, more importantly, his question was answered by the boys, indicating that they understood Jesus to be talking to them. This was their request. And it was audacious.

They asked to sit at his right hand and left in his kingdom. They asked for the places of prominence, power, and praise. They wanted to be seen as significant, lauded as important, and why? It isn't clear. What have they done to deserve this honour? No clue, they don't make much of a case. But two things become abundantly clear. First, the other ten guys definitely do not believe they deserved it. They were incredulous. They became indignant. This was not two middle-aged guys drinking beer and watching the Eurocup on television and one declaring that he deserves a spot on the Austrian team because he is such an amazing footballer. This is two best friends working in the same office and one telling the supervisor that he deserves a promotion and a raise because he's just a superior worker—far better than his friend. Imagine the frustration they must have felt, the sense of betrayal. Imagine Peter, one of the trio, possibly Jesus's best friend, standing in the back listening to these guys make such a self-interested request. I wouldn't be surprised if this the day when Peter started carrying a sword.

2. A SOLEMN COST

Secondly, though, not only did they alienate their friends, but they completely underestimated the cost as well. Jesus, not only tells them that it isn't his place to give out these honours, he is likewise not shy about telling them exactly what effort it will take. He uses a metaphor—drinking from a cup. It's a metaphor they likely knew from their Bibles, from the Old Testament

Scriptures, that speak of the cup of God's wrath, the cup of judgment.² They did not yet know of the final meal they would all share, in which drinking from the cup would come to represent sharing in the spilled blood of Christ. They did not yet know that in his darkest moment, Jesus would ask God to spare him from this cup—and then walk humbly to his death on a cross. They had no clue what it would cost to take on the honours they sought. 'Are you able to do this?' Jesus asked. 'Yeah, sure. We can do it. No problem,' they foolishly responded. And yet, Jesus acknowledged that they would—they would come to bear the cost of being a follower of Christ. According to tradition, John would live decades more, embattled for the cause of the gospel, fighting the good fight until time wore him away. And James, as we heard in our Acts reading, would simply be beheaded for the sake of the gospel, in an act of utter cruelty by Herod. But they couldn't yet appreciate what it meant to drink the cup in that moment because they had yet to learn an important lesson.

3. A SACRIFICIAL CHRIST

And in the final third of the story, speaking now to the whole group—not just James and John—Jesus brings home the critical lesson they needed to learn:

...whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.³

It's such a foreign lesson in our day—where to sell the book, you have to engage in a little self-promotion on social media; and to get the degree, you have to prove your worthiness to a committee; and to get the job, you have to write a cover letter extolling your total awesomeness; and to feel like you're getting ahead in life, you have to focus primarily on yourself. But no, this is not the ethics or economics of the kingdom of God according to Jesus Christ. There, the focus is on serving others. Now to be clear, I'm not suggesting that you do nothing to take care of yourself. Not at all. But there is more to life than your job, your comfort, your advancement, and your self-realisation. Christ not only says as much here, he demonstrates it. In arguably the clearest statement about substitutionary atonement in the Gospels, Jesus tells us exactly what he told us a few verses before our reading—that he would go to his death for the sake of his people—to not only serve them, but to save them, to become the ransom paid for their sin and deserved judgment, our sin, and deserved judgment.

This, this is Eucharistic living. Following Jesus means drinking from his cup—and when we drink from his cup—we follow him. Now, I know that right now we are not drinking from the cup in our Eucharistic practice—and rightly so, given the pandemic. To take communion in one kind is to participate in the communion fully—but do not miss the point of the cup even while you are not physically drinking it. To drink this cup is to follow Christ into the costly sacrifice of serving others. There is no room for self-importance, self-entitlement, and overestimations of self. If we are going to follow Christ, we will have to get over ourselves. We must repent of our self-absorption and lay our sins at the foot of the cross. Only then can we follow.

² Ps 75:8, Isa 51:22, Ezek 23:31–34. This cup metaphor is probably related to the drink offering, one of the sacrifices in the cycle of sacrifices back in Leviticus and Numbers. Only rather than pouring out God's wrath upon an altar like a libation, the wrath is taken upon the person, hence Jesus's reference to 'drinking the cup.' Cf. Revelation 14-16.

³ Matt 20:26b-28.

This is no easy task. We need to make peace with being less recognized and less important than we think we deserve. We need to be okay with helping others succeed, even if it means never being rewarded ourselves. As Patrick reminded some of us yesterday, this is especially important within the covenant of marriage. And I could point to several examples in our church of a spouse serving the other in great times of need—Philip and Sally, Jan and Neal, and many others. But it is a lesson we must all learn. We need to live not only for ourselves, but get over ourselves, and truly and humbly live to serve others. And for some of us—I'm not venturing any guesses; you know who you are—it starts with doing the dishes.

CONCLUSION

As I begin to conclude, I go back to the mother of James and John. I wonder what she heard as she listened to Jesus teach that day. Because as bold as was her question, there was also a profound faith in it. She knew. She knew that Jesus was going to rule over an incredible kingdom. And as preposterous as was her request, she had faith in the victory of Christ Jesus. I don't know if it clicked for her that night. I don't know if she maintained that faith, even witnessing the cost up close on a different night a week later. You see, she shows up one more time in Matthew's Gospel, at the end of chapter 27. There, Jesus Christ hung on the cross, cried out, and breathed his last.⁴ Matthew then records:

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.⁵

She witnessed the cost that night. And after seeing the resurrection, her boys bore the cost as well. They undoubtedly repented of their self-importance and self-absorption, they trusted in Christ Jesus, and they gave themselves to serving God's people. May we follow in their footsteps, in the footsteps of these saints.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for sending us your Son, our Saviour, as a ransom for our sins. Help us to repent, to get over ourselves, and serve as he did—that many would come to know you. We ask this in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ Matt 27:50.

⁵ Matt 27:55-56.