

Can You Drink The Cup?  
Mark 10:35-45  
The Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost  
October 21, 2012  
Rachael Weasley

I've been reading a little book someone gave me almost ten years ago by Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest, contemplative, and author. When I read this week's gospel text I immediately thought of this book. The title is Jesus's question to James and John when they ask to sit on his right and left in his glory. The question, and the title of this little book, is Can You Drink the Cup? Nouwen explores Jesus' question in a general way, wondering what it means to us in our lives as Christians together.

When I read Nouwen's book I was living in Nicaragua, working in a preschool and living with a host family. My students' parents had been living in the city dump scavenging for recyclables to sell. These ten families had jumped at a chance to move to the countryside and form a community where they could learn job skills and literacy, but they were still haunted by poverty. They still went hungry sometimes, still had patterns of addiction to overcome, still had traumas to grieve. One of the challenges of these families was changing the way they interacted with one another. In the dump, in order to survive they had to compete with one another. Now, in a rural community together, they were attempting to cooperate, trust each other, and share resources. I knew these families personally, taught their children, and was a guest in their homes. Surrounded by so much suffering, so much pain and scarcity, I picked up this book to read, and Nouwen asked me in Jesus' words, "Can you drink the cup?"

Can I bear to love these people and share, because of that love, in their anger and grief?

The cup is the cup of our lives together. It is the boldness of loving people enough to join in their struggles. It's staying up all night with your sick daughter, being patient with your parent who has dementia, standing up to your friend's bully. It is the courage to look at my grief, my own fears of scarcity. It is the daring to see ourselves, to see each other, imperfect as we all are, to look honestly and compassionately into our own hearts, and not to flinch or run away. Nouwen challenges us to look into our own cup. What is there? What pain or fear, self-doubt or self-loathing? My instinct is to idealize, to deny, to look on the bright side. It reminds me of the movie Pleasantville, where everything is pleasant. Or the dystopia Lois Lowry describes in her book The Giver. In these two fictional worlds there is no pain, no conflict, no risk, color, no art, no love, no discovery, no joy. When characters begin to ask questions, to look honestly, to be curious, to take risks to know and love each other, they begin to see color and they begin to feel pain. The cup of life has many flavors. Love doesn't just feel good. It also bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Nouwen suggests that looking into Jesus' cup means waking up from numbness into abundant life.

Abundant life means pain and joy. It means relationships that matter to us so much that we become brave and daring enough to deepen them. It means welcoming children, even the child Kara described in her sermon a few weeks ago, a child we've been taught to be suspicious of.

Even children like that—especially children like that—belong in the kingdom of God. Abundant life means giving up power-over for power-with. It means dismantling systems of tyrants lording it over us. It means becoming one another's servants. When we leave behind power over others for the sake of the good news, we receive new relationships of power *with*, brothers and sisters.

Living in Nicaragua, Nouwen challenged me to drink Jesus' cup. The cup of loving my students and their families enough to be angry at the systems of domination that created their poverty. Enough to grieve and mourn with them, to laugh and dance with them. When I demonstrate for worker justice in Chicago, I am thinking of my friends in Nicaragua working twelve-hour days in the sweatshops. This is the cup Jesus offers us, to drink deeply and abundantly of our lives together, to feel outrageous love for each other and to live that out at the cost walking together through hardship. The cup is not the trophy of sitting pleasantly to either side of Jesus in his glory. Jesus' glory is the community we make with each other, when we share equally in the bread of life, when we drink deeply together of the cup.

We are about to see a real cup, and we will be invited to drink from it together. I'm new here but many of you have been together long enough to know one another's stories, to hold each other's stories in your own lives. If you accept the invitation and come forward to drink, who will drink just before you? Just after? What stories do you know about their lives? Perhaps you've been to each other's weddings, been to a funeral with them, bickered with each other, brought each other casseroles. Look around: this is who we're drinking with today. And there are others who we share the cup with in our heart... and perhaps people who we haven't drunk with in a while, and would like to drink with again. This is the cup of our lives together. And the good news is, none of us is alone. Jesus has already drunk this cup, and today we will drink it together.