

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
Can You Drink This Cup?
Matthew 20:20 – 28

Welcome to our Lenten journey. Tonight, we begin as we begin every Lent, with Ash Wednesday. Some of us have participated in receiving ashes for as long as we can remember. Others of us may be here for the first time. Welcome, everyone, to this journey of Lent.

Ash Wednesday is a fascinating church practice. It began in the 11th century, and until recent years, only certain denominations practiced it. In the past few decades, receiving the ashes has become increasingly common and important to American Christians. Some churches offer drive-thru ashes or a quick imposition of the ashes before getting on the metro. Others offer worship services like this one, where we spend time to contemplate and to receive the presence of Jesus in the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

Receiving the ashes is a physical sign both to ourselves and to others. As timid as we may sometimes feel to share our faith, we *want* others to know that we are Christians on this day; we *want* to join with other Christians around the globe in receiving this sign. To bear the mark of the cross on our bodies for all the world to see. This mark, this reminder of our mortality, our sinfulness, our desire to turn toward Jesus, the mark of what Jesus has done for us, is *deeply* important to us. This outward sign, this bodily practice, *moves* us.

As I shared last year, Ash Wednesday became poignant for me when I began placing the ashes on *your* foreheads. It struck me as profound and audacious, that I would be reminding you that you are mortal, and that one day, you will die. In years

past, I had heard the words, “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return,” but for the first time, *I* was the one to say those words.

No sooner had I shared about that experience, than it was time to do it again. I placed the sign on your foreheads, spoke those words, and then I came to Pastor Dan. He thought I was so moved, that I couldn’t speak. The truth was, I had forgotten what to say! I had remembered what to say to all of you, and then when it came to speaking those words to my *boss*, I completely forgot the words!

Tonight, we put bravado aside. Tonight, we remember what no American wants to remember – that you and I will *not* live forever in these bodies, and that life is not about us. Tonight, we begin our sermon series on the Questions Jesus Asked. Each Wednesday evening and through Holy Week, we will explore questions Jesus asked. Tonight, Jesus’ question is, “Can you drink the cup?”

I invite you to enter the scene. Jesus is with his twelve disciples. A mother is there, the mother of two of his closest disciples. They are on their way to Jerusalem. Jesus has told them that he will suffer and die there. They have not turned back; they have continued to follow him. They have continued to follow him to Jerusalem. They believe he will establish a new kingdom, a kingdom of heaven. They have asked who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, and Jesus has responded by calling a child to come forward, and telling them that unless they humble themselves and become like a child, they will *not* enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 18:3 – 4).

Now, the mother falls at Jesus’ feet. Jesus asks her what it is that she wants. She says that she wants Jesus to appoint her sons to sit on his right and on his left in his kingdom. She believes that Jesus will become king, and as king, he will sit in his

royal chair and he will have seats of highest honor next to him. She wants those seats of honor to be for her sons. Her request makes sense – her sons are very close to Jesus, and hearing this promise will ensure that her sons will be taken care of. She can take Jesus' promise to the bank, and her sons can cash in on it later.

Jesus doesn't laugh or scold her. His patience is incredible. He replies to her sons, "You don't know what you are asking...Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" (Matt 20:22a).

A cup was no mystery to them. A cup was one's lot in life, one's destiny. To drink one's cup was to live that destiny.

Jesus had expressed to his disciples that his destiny was a difficult one. His destiny was suffering and death. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"

They reply in the affirmative, "We are able" (Matt 20:22b). They don't seem to be shocked by Jesus' question. They have committed to following Jesus, and have prepared for the challenge that following him will bring. They have prepared for the challenge, and look forward to the glory to come, sitting at the right and left of Jesus in his kingdom. What a triumphant day that will be!

Jesus affirms them. They *will* drink the cup. They *will* have a destiny like his, but it is not up to Jesus who will sit next to him in his kingdom; it is up to his Father.

Like anyone might do in that situation, the other disciples get angry with the two. How selfish and unfair of them to try to elicit promises of status from Jesus!

Jesus reminds them that their culture most esteems the ones at the top, the ones giving orders. But they are to be different. They are to be *so* different in fact, that the one who is the greatest is at the bottom; the one who is the most highly

esteemed, is the slave of the others. They are a *different* community. They are *not the same* as those around them. The measure is different. The scale has been turned upside down. The disciples of Jesus, the community that has formed around him, is to be marked by *servanthood*. This is not just words; this is no empty vision. They are to be servants, because that's how Jesus lived his life and that is why he died. Servanthood.

Every community that has followed Jesus since has received the same calling, to be servants of one another. This is the most difficult calling. It is one thing to sacrifice, to "drink the cup." It is another to be a servant. As Richard Foster says in *The Celebration of Discipline*, "Radical [sacrifice] gives the feel of adventure. If we forsake all, we even have the chance of glorious martyrdom. But in service we must experience the many little deaths of going beyond ourselves. [Servanthood] banishes us to the mundane, the ordinary, the trivial."¹

Servanthood is a position of humility. It is to place yourself below others; to be compassionate with them in their distress; to "forgive their malice;" to encourage their success; to believe that they have much to teach you regardless of their age, education, or experience; "to condescend to do the lowest offices to the lowest of [humankind]."²

Servanthood is unnatural, and it goes against every fiber of our being. We would rather pick and choose when to serve and whom to serve. We would like our acts of service to be seen and recognized. We would like our acts of service to in fact serve *us*.

¹ Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline*, 126 – 127.

² Foster, 131.

But church, that is not our calling. Our calling is not to serve ourselves, but to be servants of one another.

As you consider your life, I invite you to ask this question: How do I live this life God has given me? Do I live in service to others, or do I live in service to myself?

Tonight, we confess that we are far from the mark. We confess that our attention has been on ourselves. We turn to Jesus. We turn to the model he set for us, the model of servanthood, the model of complete humility. We ask him to guide us that we may live lives that look like Jesus'. We ask with hope, because in his great love for us, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Christ died for you.

Pray

We sing, praying together that Jesus would protect and keep us.