

+

This evening’s liturgy is about two cups. We commemorate one of them really well, and we almost ignore the other. The one cup sits upon this Altar every week. But the other “hangs in the air,” as it were, more like the proverbial elephant in the living room.

Let me explain: It is our duty and delight, goes the prayer in which we remember that our Lord Jesus, on this night, took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave a new meaning to the actions he performed. And as the Seder meal was ending, he took a cup of wine, and blessed it, and gave it his disciples to drink, also with an instruction as to its new meaning in the Kingdom of God.

Our model for this night is the rituals of the ancient Passover, in which the households of Israel, who were enslaved in Egypt, were marked with the blood of the Passover lamb, and were spared death, freed from slavery, and sent out to live in freedom. The significance of the Jewish Passover has never been lost or discarded by Christians. This congregation, like many others, has actually performed a Christian version of the Seder meal on this night in commemoration of what happened in ancient days, and in Jesus’ day.

Yet the Christian Scriptures portray a rich new tradition:

+ That on this night, Jesus established a New Covenant in God’s love, not based upon our good deeds but upon God’s grace; and sealed with a memorial in Jesus’ Body and Blood through means of consecrated bread and wine;

+ That on this night, Jesus gave a new commandment to his followers, that we must live in love, and that love be both the manner in which we preserve our unity in his name, and the sign for the world of his living presence;

+ And that on this night he was betrayed, and denied and then deserted by his followers, we should not only pray for strength and courage, but rely above all upon God’s power and grace to bring about the Kingdom of God.

Christians have never forgotten the significance of this night. It was after all the Last time that Jesus and his disciples would be gathered together in one place—all of them—and would receive his last instruction. In the ceremony and prayers which surround the simple act of eating and drinking, we remember. When we eat this bread, and lift this cup, we do so to remember Christ’s new covenant of grace and forgiveness in his name.

Liturgically speaking, that is enough. We have enough on our plates, as it were, to remember the Last Supper. But tonight is the night of two cups, and we often ignore the second cup entirely.

The Gospel accounts tell us that when they had sung a hymn in the Upper Room, Jesus and his disciples went out into the night. Under cover of darkness they made their way out of the City of Jerusalem, across the valley and up to Gethsemane on the little mount opposite the Temple Grounds, where there was a sweeping view of the Holy City. And at Gethsemane there was a Garden where Jesus liked to go, because—in the peace and quiet—he could pray. And in this setting, he encouraged his disciples to watch and pray with him.

As the night drew on he stepped apart from all of them, however, to face his own soul in prayer. And he prayed three times, “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass me by. Nevertheless, let your will be done, not mine.”

So, at this eleventh hour, Jesus still had misgivings about what he was to go through — calling it the “cup” which he must “drink” – and meaning: the terrible events that would unfold,

without stopping, over the next twelve hours: he would be betrayed, arrested and taken away, falsely accused, put on trial, turned over to the hated foreign commander and his soldiers, condemned, flogged and beaten, mocked and ridiculed, and marched to his death in one of the most cruel forms of execution human beings have ever devised.

“Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass me by. Nevertheless, let your will be done, not mine.”

This is the second cup which we almost forget, and we’re not anxious to commemorate it or remember or to re-enact it.

In all fairness, of course, there is no nice, ceremonial way to remember the Garden of Gethsemane.

This second cup, which “hangs in the air,” is visually depicted before our eyes in this very room, in the image of Jesus on his knees, at prayer, in the darkness, with a single, stylized ray of light shining down upon his face. The artist for this window was being kind to suggest that in that darkness, Jesus received his own personal moonbeam or starlight, or divine ray to reassure him. But, the way I read these texts, Jesus was *uncertain*. He *knew* that his outspoken, confrontational way of breaking sabbath laws, feeding the hungry poor and healing the sick, the leper and the blind, and criticizing the religiosity of important leaders, would trigger violent opposition to him and his band of disciples. He *knew* that the conspiracy against him was growing and would cost him his life. Unhappily, he *knew* that one of his own would give up and betray his whereabouts, another would pretend not to know him, and the rest would disappear.

He *knew* this cup of trouble and its bitterness, as much as he knew the evil in human hearts, the selfish greed of his betrayer, the weakness with which his disciples would sleep through the night, the failure of nerve and spine, of heart and hand. He *knew* this cup and if it were “up to him,” he would rather have none of it. Because he was *not certain* he could stand it. If he questioned, deep within his own soul, God’s will in all of this, he also prayed for *God’s* strength, *God’s* spine, *God’s* stamina, and *God’s* relief of his pain.

It is ironic, don’t you think, that this art glass window portrays a moment of uncertainty in a great man’s life — a moment of his Agony in the Garden in which he is asking God *not to go through with his plan*.

But I suspect there’s another reason we would rather ignore this second cup—the cup of suffering and woe in spirit, mind and body. But equally ironic, it is the very reason we should not forget it—*ever!*

The obvious reason we would rather ignore this is because we don’t want to go through with this Cup ourselves. We don’t want to ritualize his agony into *our* agony. We don’t want to imitate his suffering with *our* suffering. In *no way* are we prepared to endure his pain. And we don’t want to follow him in death with our death. With the first cup, we commemorate an event, or link it to our own memory, by participating in it. With the second cup, we really *don’t* want to participate, so we tend to erase it from our memory. On this night, we quickly go from being participants to *at best* being spectators.

This quip is attributed to actress Lily Tomlin, and perhaps it explains why. “Remember,” she said, “We’re all in this . . . alone.” The second Cup which Jesus lifts tonight he lifts alone.

Except: *that’s the very reason we should not ignore it*. Jesus understands the cups we face in our own lives. He knows the aloneness we experience. Jesus grasps the uncertainty, the avoidance, the weakness, the pain and the sorrow which every one of us must at some point—in fact *many points*—in life will face.

In the course of one week, *any week*, as pastor of this little congregation, I hear so much pain and grief, I face so many needs, I am bombarded with so much illness, sorrow, agony, uncertainty, hopelessness: domestic violence, crumbling/ broken relationships, hunger and homelessness, drugs and alcohol, theft and greed, government red tape, anger, duplicity, illness and the specter of death. And this is only a *small* congregation, a small sample of what happens in this city, of the wolves at all our doors and of the anxiety in all our hearts. We are not worse off than the rich and comfortable in the suburbs, or in middle America. We don't have our own special moonbeam or starlight or divine ray shining down on us for reassurance. But we are forced by life's reality to be more honest with the harsh glare of the street light or the searchlight from a police helicopter.

This is the one and only point of why we remember Jesus' second Cup, the cup of agony and of suffering. Because we know that in it he also accepted our cup. He did not come from heaven above to float above this world and offer free spiritual advice to those below. He came from the womb of this world to call us and encourage us, and in being lifted up on the cross to lift us with him into God's embrace, and in drinking his cup of suffering, to drain ours also.

And for this, my friends, we are eternally grateful to God and praise his boundless compassion and unending love. Amen.