

Proper 24 B

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Loving Cup

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It is called the Loving Cup and its origin dates back hundreds of years. Although we are used to seeing its familiar cup with two handles shape used mostly for trophies in our modern times, the Loving Cup had a different cultural use in the past. In Celtic and Jewish cultures, the two handles of the Loving Cup symbolized the union of two people or two groups coming together, and the cup symbolized the life they were coming together to share. Loving Cups were part of wedding ceremonies where the couple shared their first drink of their new life together. Loving cups were used ceremoniously to welcome visitors, who drank from the cup with their host. Loving cups were also part of christening celebrations.

Because of their symbolism of unity and friendship, sometimes these two handled cups were called Friendship Cups, as friendship is also a type of love and commitment to share the ups and downs of life together. Over time, Loving Cups or Friendship Cups became popular gifts for weddings, christenings, or other major events in people's lives. To receive such a cup was considered a high honor, it was symbolic of the commitment the giver intended to share with the person who received the cup. To drink from such a cup with another person was no silly or unimportant ritual. To share a drink with someone from the same cup was a big deal, it was an expression of unity and being accepted as a welcome part of a family or community. And to be invited to drink with a leader of a family or community from a Loving Cup was a high honor, one that came with expectations of living into the values of that community.

That powerful historical memory of the Loving Cup came to mind when I read today's Gospel where Jesus asked two of his more ambitious disciples if they were able to drink from the same cup as Jesus. It might be very tempting to focus on James and John and their demand to Jesus; to shake our heads and dismiss them as not understanding what was going on with Jesus. They were two of the disciples who were not only following Jesus, they were two of the disciples Jesus often invited to go into situations he intentionally left other disciples out of. James and John had seen Jesus transfigured on the mountain. And they had seen him restore life to a child everyone was certain was dead. They had seen more and heard more than the others and instead of being humbled by their privilege at being so close to God's power and love revealed in Jesus, we could interpret their demand as evidence they believed they deserved a higher rank and were ready to ride the power they saw in Jesus side by side with him into glory. Why else would he invite them into such moments?

Or we might think they saw Jesus was powerful and wanted to advocate for their place in that power. Maybe they had read the latest self-help book about how to achieve success in this world, and were just doing what they believed was right, even if it left others behind. After all, isn't that part of success, leaving others behind? No wonder we heard the other disciples were angry when they overheard what James and John had demanded from Jesus.

It would be easy to preach a sermon about the sins of their ambitions and then point the finger back at ourselves and how we too have fallen short of understanding what Jesus' power and glory really is. But instead of focusing on James and John, I want to focus on Jesus, his response to their demand, and his Loving Cup.

It might be understandable if Jesus had responded to their demand by losing his cool with his disciples and asked them why they still didn't get what he was up to, how they still hadn't figured out the difference between God's Kingdom and the violent oppressiveness of Rome. But instead Jesus asked them about drinking from his cup and talked about what that means.

Did you notice, Jesus didn't go into much detail about who would be at his left- and right-hand sides when he was in the moment of glory? All he did say was it was not up to him as to who would occupy those places. And when that moment did come, James and John were not at his left nor his right-hand sides. They were in fact, somewhere else entirely. Those places were occupied, Mark's Gospel tells us, by two bandits, the two people whose names were not recorded who were crucified the same day as Jesus. And it wasn't Jesus who decided who would occupy those places, it was the Roman system of criminal punishment that exercised their power and made that decision.

That is what Jesus' glory looked like, and James and John missed it. But Jesus did promise them they would drink from his cup. Very often that line is interpreted as sharing in Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. And there is the truth that following Jesus does involve suffering, but it is not suffering for its own sake, it is the redemptive kind Jesus makes possible through his death and resurrection, because through Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus has freed humanity from its stubborn desire to hold each other down by creating systems like the ancient Roman civilization where might is right, and violence is justified and accepted, and certain people have less value than others. That is what we are so used to, whether we live in Jesus' day or our own, that it is often hard to imagine any other way.

But there is another other way, that Kingdom of God way, and that is what Jesus brought to us, and offered to us: a totally different way of being together. Where the only justice is God's justice, and strength looks more like the vulnerability of forgiveness and mercy. Where personal desires for prestige, power, and importance, are gladly given up to make way for care and concern for the greater whole. And personal contributions are made not for self-aggrandizement, but for the opportunity to be a part of something larger than ourselves. This is the cup Jesus asked his disciples if they were capable of sharing with him. A cup that symbolizes the Love of God, love that loves us so much Jesus died so that we could be free of the ways of sin, of harm, of selfishness. That means the Loving Cup of Jesus isn't just a cup that tastes of suffering, it also tastes of freedom, for we who follow Jesus are free, we don't have to believe might is right. We don't have to believe people who are different from us are a potential danger. We don't have to believe all that matters is getting ahead in the world, no matter who we step on along the way. Instead we are free to see all people as God's beloved, and free to live into what God has for us, free to listen to God's Holy Spirit, and free to follow Jesus wherever he leads us.

That means our ministries can be expressions of God's Love, of sharing that Loving Cup of Jesus, not just when we feed the hungry, or visit those in prison or the sick. We can also show God's love when we share how we see God in something others see merely as entertainment, like the TV show Doctor Who. It has been a joy to present a few episodes of this long running TV show and help viewers see the Judeo-Christian themes in these episodes. Such revelations are liberating, as folks realize God really is closer than we might think, and we are free to see God really is with us even in places we might not expect. We share that Loving Cup with Jesus through our friendship with our brothers and sisters of St. Luke's in Merida, Mexico, committing to walk with them through prayer and relationship together as followers of Jesus in what our Presiding Bishop calls the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement. And believe it or not, we are sharing the Cup of Christ through our coffee shop ministry, for we have committed to walk with the employees by contributing to their lives not just with money for their wages, but through the opportunities CrossRoads Café offers to connect more deeply with our neighbors, figure their way through challenges, and celebrate its successes. We share the Cup of Christ when we take part in any of these and our other ministries.

And there is more to it than our deeds. There is the cup itself, of which we are all invited to share every time we share Holy Communion. Sharing the Cup of Salvation is how we participate in what we call a sacrament, an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace of God acting to us and in us and through us. It is how we

both receive God's love and share that loving cup with Jesus, which can taste of suffering, which tells us freedom from sin is not simple or easy. And while it does not erase the presence of sin or evil or injustice in the world, it does offer us a different way through, God's Kingdom way, reminding us we are free to believe and practice God's Kingdom way, in our relationships, our families, our school, our work, and of course our ministries.

While there are lots of cups that might be offered to us: cups of power, prestige, anger, vengeance, greed, I hope we all remember Jesus offers us his liberating Loving Cup of mercy, forgiveness, peace, healing, and hope. And however it might taste, sharing this cup is sharing the love and life of God in Jesus.