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Drinking from the cup

What would you ask Jesus for? [Pause] I got stuck there when reading that first part of our Gospel reading this week when James and John ask Jesus to do whatever they ask. Of course, like most of us here, I spend time each day praying, making supplications, asking for help from the Spirit's guiding wisdom. But I stopped with this question for a while, what would I ask Jesus for? If he were in front of us all, right now, in this moment, what would I ask him for? Before I dig any deeper into that, I want to examine this first section of our gospel a bit more, particularly in light of what happens just before our reading picks up today.

We join Jesus and the disciples as they are walking towards Jerusalem, the holy city of the Jewish people, and we pick up with them after Jesus has foretold of his suffering and death to the disciples. "They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles (the Romans); they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'"

This is important context for what James and John ask of Jesus next. It shows how they are probably confused and afraid. Jesus' prediction of his own demise is startling, even if it is the third time in the Gospel of Mark that he tells them this. They trust him, they've seen him perform miracles like no one else could ever do, they cannot believe what they're hearing from him. He's too powerful for any fate like this to befall him. And that makes them confused, and anxious,

and, afraid. They fear prolonged death at the hands of their Roman overlords, who crucify people, sometimes randomly, as a show of dominance over their conquered colonies throughout their vast empire. They don't want their friend and leader to perish in such a publicly humiliating way, and they certainly don't want it to happen to them. So who can blame them, their fear is real, and the Romans are cruel to anyone who seems disorderly to their world. And yet, Jesus is telling them, pretty flatly, that this is his fate, and he's hinted many times that it is likely the fate of his followers as well.

That fear rises in them, and like fear always does, it makes them extremely myopic, short sighted to the plight of others, navel gazing for their own glory. So James and John go up to Jesus, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." A little presumptuous, but still, Jesus addresses them. "What is it you want me to do for you?" "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

For all their faithfulness to Jesus, they haven't really listened. Their shortsightedness, based in fear, is now seeking power, desperately. Their fear of persecution and death leaves them stranded in the search for the one thing they crave over their enemies who have a monopoly made of a legion of iron fists. They see the threat, and want to mimic it, the only way they see to respond.

When the disciples' focus, supplications, and desire turns to who will receive the glory among them, he shows compassion. "You don't know what you are asking," he tells them. He knows they are afraid of the Romans, and are seeking power out of their fear. He asks them if they can drink his cup and be baptized as he's been baptized. When he asks if they can drink his cup, he's using an idiom of the time, basically, asking if they will share in the consequences of his ministry, essentially asking if they can face their fears.

His question about baptism also deserves some attention. The Greek reads: ἢ τὸ βάπτισμα ὃ ἐγὼ βαπτίζομαι βαπτισθῆναι. It's translated for us as can you "be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? βάπτισμα literally means immersion, or submersion. He's asking, will you be immersed with the immersion that I've been immersed with? Will you be totally enfolded into something that seems scary, going under, to rise again? Will you share my fate and be as immersed in the Spirit and grace as me?

Without any real thought, they rush to assume they can. Of course they do, they think that this line of questioning is about their ability, when really, it's about Jesus' compassion for them. I thought about this part of the passage this week while also re-reading portions of Henri Nouwen's classic pastoral inspiration, "The Wounded Healer." As I went over and over Jesus' response to James and John, this passage of Nouwen's stuck out for me as it relates compassion.

"This compassion is authority because it does not tolerate the pressures of the in-group, but breaks through the boundaries between languages and countries, rich and poor, educated and illiterate. This compassion pulls people away from the fearful clique into the large world where they can see that every human face is the face of a neighbor. Thus the authority of compassion is the possibility of man to forgive his brother, because forgiveness is only real for him who has discovered the weakness of his friends and the sins of his enemy in his own heart and is willing to call every human being his brother."

In Jesus' power of compassion, he sees through their desire for power and understands that they are asking out of their fear, because Jesus is a human himself, and understands what it is like to respond too quickly, or without thinking. He doesn't berate them, he blesses them. "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized." He blesses them, just in ways I'm sure surprised them upon reflection when they took over the shepherding of the faithful.

Because to share in Jesus' cup, his fate, is ultimately what he promises to us his followers. Jesus himself wept and cried and was afraid in his last days. After having a Passover feast with his closest friends, he washes their feet, and then goes to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray and supplicate God that "this cup pass from him." Ultimately, though, Jesus' predictions of his own demise become his reality, as he knew it would. But even in that demise, the world is turned over, the power of death's script is flipped on its head. Throughout all of this, Jesus has been given the authority of compassion, which leads him to minister to the poor, the sick, the children, the soldier, his arguments with authority, to the Last Supper and the foot washing, and then to the cross and the grave, and then out of them again.

To partake then, in holy communion, Eucharist, is to partake in the fate, the cup of suffering, with Jesus. But it is a blessing, not because it bestows us with some otherworldly power, but because it helps to ingrain in us that same compassion, that same authority of Jesus' as he looks on his friends, his enemies, and the entire world. The power and authority of Christ Jesus in us is compassion. We need grace to wield it. Grace that flows forth from the waters of baptism, that immerses us into something so much larger than ourselves. Less fear. More compassion. More grace. That's what I need to ask Jesus for.