

“Sacred Struggles”

Luke 19:28-40 and Mark 14:32-38

The cup from which you don't want to drink. Sooner or later, we all end up having to drink a cup of something we don't want - something you find truly distasteful and would do almost anything to avoid. But because it is necessary, you end up having to drink it anyway. These drinks are especially common with medical procedures: liquid medicine for children, barium for ex-ray procedures, or that stuff they make you drink gallons of before a colonoscopy. Outside of medicine, there are other cups from which you might not want to drink. Years ago, I visited some folks who served me a cup of this stuff called Postum, which is a grain-based substitute for coffee. I didn't want to drink from that cup, either. (shudder)

In our reading from Mark's Gospel, we see Jesus praying to the Father, pleading that "a cup" might pass from him. But the cup he referred to was not an actual cup or beverage - it was the suffering and death he was about to endure. Jesus and his disciples had already entered Jerusalem and then withdrawn to the countryside. The excitement and energy of Palm Sunday had quickly passed, and the authorities had decided that Jesus was a threat to their power. So they looked for a way to get rid of him. Watching carefully, they couldn't find an opportunity to get him because Jesus was always surrounded by crowds of supporters. They knew they had to get him when he was away from the crowds. It was then that Judas', one of Jesus' own disciples, intervened. He volunteered to lead the soldiers to a place where they could capture Jesus without causing a riot. Jesus, of course, could sense the betrayal. Maybe he didn't know exactly when or where it would happen, but he knew it was coming. He went to the Garden called Gethsemane to await his arrest. The disciples came with him up to a point, but he took only Peter, James and John - his most trusted disciples - with him farther into the garden. And even then, he asked them to sit and wait while he prayed. Jesus then went a little farther into the Garden, and began to pray with great anguish. He pleaded with God that the hour might pass, and that he might not have to drink the cup of suffering that was coming. Because we know that the story eventually ends with Jesus' resurrection and triumph, it's tempting to think this was easy for Jesus - but, clearly, it wasn't. Jesus had staked his entire life on the belief that God was the true Ruler of the world - not the Temple Leaders, and certainly not Caesar. Jesus had also forsaken the path of violent revolution. He was ready to suffer for the sake of God's kingdom, and he trusted that God would make everything right. But in the Garden that night, his beliefs and convictions were put to the test. He wrestled with his understanding of God's will. Maybe he could avoid arrest and crucifixion? He hoped so. And so he asked his father if that might be possible. But he remained firm in his commitment to God's will. He prayed, "Not what I want, but what you want." In other words, he said to God - I don't want to go through this, but THY WILL BE DONE! And so it was that the soldiers came and arrested Jesus, the authorities put him on trial, and then put him to death. It was only after Jesus was dead and in the tomb that the resurrection was revealed. He drank the cup of suffering and death, and eventually triumphed by God's power - but there were some dismal days along the way.

Think of that metaphor of a cup from which you don't want to drink. Just as Jesus had his, we also have ours. Each of us must face things in life that we would do anything to avoid, and yet they come to us just the same. Perhaps you can think of some...

The fact of life is that we are going struggle through difficult times and face problems we would never choose to have. These struggles, just like Jesus' struggle in the Garden, are sacred struggles, because they become a chance for us to live by our faith, to grow in our faith, and to discover the presence of God in our midst as we do. Jesus shows us how. So what **can we learn from Jesus?**

The first thing that is obvious from the story of Jesus is that we don't have complete control over what happens to us. We can't control other people, much less nations and governments. We don't even have complete control of our bodies and the processes of disease and aging that affect them. But there are some important things that we do control. From Jesus, we learn that each one of us can **choose our values and priorities.**

Jesus chose to make God his highest priority. He proclaimed and enacted a vision of what the world can be like when it is ruled by God, instead of Caesar or any other human Empire, Government or authority. He called this the Kingdom of God, and his message wasn't primarily about going to heaven when you die. That element is certainly present, but Jesus had hardly given up on this physical world. Rather than encourage his followers to dream of escaping the world for a heavenly paradise, he told them that heaven can come to earth when God rules our lives. He envisioned a realm in which all people live in equality before God; he proclaimed a new form of community in which all are fed, healed, made whole, and forgiven without regard to their social status or wealth, and without resort to violence or oppression. You may not agree with the vision, but it's the vision Jesus received from his Father, and it became the basis of his values and priorities. It's in the Book! No matter what happened, Jesus held firmly to his values and priorities. That was something he could choose.

Whether our lives are cruising along normally without crisis, or if they are being torn apart by illness, conflict or tragedy, we are still free to choose our values and priorities. We can choose to value what Jesus valued. We can choose to be people of grace and mercy; we can remain firm in our commitment to God's justice and the equality of all people; we can choose to remain faithful, and to hold on to our integrity. When you don't feel well, when you are worried or afraid or stressed out, when your life is going out of control, it is much harder to remain true to your ideals. Take for example a married couple I knew who went through a rough time in their relationship. They were having trouble getting along, and found themselves frequently disagreeing and arguing. Much of this was due to circumstances beyond their control involving the economy and their extended family. It would have been easy for them to give up on each other, and seek comfort in new relationships. But they took very seriously their vow to love and care for each other for better or for worse. And while they couldn't avoid their struggles because of circumstances beyond their control, they were able to choose their values, and so they stuck together and worked things out. It wasn't easy. If either partner had wavered, their marriage would have been over. But the point is, when they both chose the same values, it shaped the outcome of the conflict.

In the same way, we learn from Jesus that we can **choose our actions and responses.** Based on his priorities, Jesus chose to enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in a provocative way. Entering the city on a colt while his followers yelled "Hosanna" was a direct challenge to the way the Roman governor Pontius Pilate would have come into Jerusalem that Spring. It was a contrast between God's humble, peaceful Messiah, and the dominating, violent power of

Rome. Jesus chose his actions based on his values. In the same way, he went into the Temple and drove out the money changers as a prophetic demonstration against what the Temple had become - a money-making enterprise in collaboration with Rome. These were actions he chose. He also chose how to react when the Temple Guard came to arrest him and the Roman's took him into custody. He told Peter to put away his sword; he commanded him not to fight the Guards who came to arrest Jesus. Jesus continued to affirm his vision of God's kingdom even as he was arrested, tortured and crucified. On the cross, he still says, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." Jesus knew what he was doing. He was choosing to act and respond based on his values and priorities. And we can choose our acts and responses as well. A couple weeks ago many of us saw the film "Invisible Children," about the effects of civil war in Africa. One young man talked about how he was attending school and doing well until his father was killed by one of the groups in the conflict. His first response was to quit school and devote himself to revenge. If it weren't for the patient, loving response of one of his mentors, he would have probably wound up dead. Instead, he was persuaded to return to school. He went on to become a teacher himself, committed to Christian ideals, and dedicated to fighting violence with education instead of armed resistance. Now, I readily grant that we all have times when we betray our values, and that we've all picked up some unhelpful ways of reacting to conflict or pain. But we do have a choice about these things. We can choose to act in ways that fit our values, and to react in a Christ-like way, even when we get handed big disappointments. When we act and react in accordance with our deeper values, God is revealed through our struggles. If Jesus had totally lost it and started throwing rocks at the Temple Guard; if the disciples had pulled out their swords and turned the whole scene into a bloodbath, we would not now be reflecting upon these moments as a decisive revelation of God. Our actions and responses make a difference, and we do have a choice about them.

The ultimate lesson we get from Jesus is that we can **trust God for the result**. We can choose our values and priorities. We can choose our actions and reactions. But we can't control what other people will do to us, whether it is in our individual relationships, or in a larger social context. We can't entirely control what diseases or natural disasters may affect us. There comes a point where all we can do is the best we can, and trust that God is going to be faithful no matter what happens. As Jesus suffered in the garden, he remained firmly committed to his values. When he was arrested, his reactions still reflected his ideals. But how was this possible? It was possible because he trusted God to be God, even when a good resolution was totally hidden from human sight. Jesus faces his darkest hour saying, "God, I don't want to go through this. But let your will be done, not mine." Jesus trusted that God knew best, and that God would be faithful no matter what. And that is the challenge for us. To keep facing our struggles, confident that God is at work revealing God's self in the process, and that God will not abandon us - that our lives are always in God's hands.

As the Bible shows us, this path of radical trust in God is not easy. God doesn't spare us the pain of living in this broken world. But when we make Jesus' values our own, act in accordance with them, and trust God for the result, God will be revealed in us and through us. Life on earth is hard, and it always will be until God's kingdom has fully come. But the way we face life's difficulties makes all the difference. We can either let our problems drive us to despair, and cause us to betray our deepest values and convictions, losing our dignity and integrity in the process - or we can remain firmly committed to our identity as followers of

Jesus, confident that our struggles are sacred in nature, and that God will be revealed through them. As you go through your own times of pain and conflict, remember this: **There would be no Easter without Good Friday. There would have been no empty tomb if Jesus hadn't been hung on the cross. There could have been no resurrection without the crucifixion.** Likewise, our own triumph comes not by being problem-free, but rather by remaining faithful to God as we go through our own sacred struggles.