

In the Bible “the cup” refers to God’s own judicial wrath on injustice and evildoing. Ezekiel 23 says, *You will drink...the cup of ruin and desolation*, and Isaiah 51 speaks of those who drink *the cup of [God’s] wrath...the bowl of staggering*. When Jesus speaks of the cup, it shows that he knows he is facing not just physical torture and death; he is about to experience the full divine wrath for the evil and sin of all humanity. The judicial wrath of God is about to come down upon him rather than upon us. Jesus would feel the full force of God’s wrath on the cross, and he was beginning to get a taste of it here in the garden. As he was walking into the garden, Jesus started to pray, and for the first time he found the lines of communication with God severed. For the first time Jesus felt not merely the absence of God’s love, but also the presence of God’s wrath.

And still Jesus prayed, “yet not as I will, but as you will.” Jesus could have given up right there. He could have walked away from the pain and the sorrow. But he chose to stay and suffer and die out of his great love for us. Theologians refer to this as the passive and the active aspects of Christ’s work. When Jesus went to the cross, he took upon himself the punishment for sins that we deserve and that he didn’t. We call that the passive work of Jesus: he received the penalty for our disobedience to God’s law. But if that was all Jesus did for us, although we might be grateful, we wouldn’t truly know God’s love for us. So Jesus also actively fulfilled the demands of the law of God. He not only died the death we should have died in order to take the law’s curse for us, he also lived the great life of love and fidelity we should have lived in order to earn God’s blessing for us.

Up until now, Jesus certainly knew what was to come. He constantly told his disciples that he had come to suffer and die. But his astonishment as he entered the garden reveals that only now is he experientially grasping what he is about to endure. The next day out in public he will be nailed to the cross, and at that point there will be no escaping his fate. But here in the dark, with the disciples asleep, when Jesus could very easily slip away, God gives him a glimpse of what he’s in for; and so, when he goes to the cross for us, Jesus goes with

vivid firsthand knowledge of what will happen. Which makes Jesus’ action the greatest act of love - to God and to us - in the history of the world. No one ever faced suffering like this in order to love, and so no one ever loved like this.

God set the cup in front of Jesus and let him smell it and taste it when it was still possible for Jesus to pull away and protect himself. God effectively showed Jesus his friends, sleeping while he prayed, and asked him, “Are they worth it? Either they perish or you perish!” And Jesus responded, “Yes, they are worth it. Let your will be done.” And with that prayer, Jesus went to his death: taking our punishment out of love and obedience.

Jesus didn’t just die the death we should have died; he lived the life we should have lived. Scottish minister Robert Murray M’Cheyne used to say, “He is not just a dying savior, he is a doing savior.” And because Jesus obeyed, even unto death, his righteousness is credited to us. For just as we received forgiveness for our sins by Jesus’ death on the cross, so too, are we seen as righteous before God because Jesus is righteous before God. We are seen as righteous and obedient, because God sees us through our Advocate Jesus.

I remember a TV detective show I saw some years ago which told of a man in his eighties, an ex-Marine, sadly broken down and accused of a crime. Two big, strapping military police and a snarling Navy lawyer come to arrest him. They speak brusquely to the man. They bark orders at him. They browbeat him verbally. Suddenly one of the old man’s friends reaches over and pulls away his necktie, revealing the Congressional Medal of Honor which he earned decades before at Iwo Jima. At the sight of the medal, the lawyer and the MPs snap to attention. They are not saluting the man personally: in himself he might be a criminal and in other ways a failure. But for the sake of that medal – which represented not only his sacrificial deeds but the valor of hundreds of others in military service over the centuries – the man is treated with honor.

That's just a hint of what happens to us in light of Christ's active obedience. We are not like prisoners freed and given bus fare downtown; we are prisoners freed and draped with the Medal of Honor, with all the rights and privileges that come with it. We are not just given pardon and freedom, but love and delight. That's the active obedience of Jesus at work. And though he has been obeying God by living a perfect life throughout, his active obedience faces a monumental challenge here in the garden. That's why it's so important to see the beauty of his response to that challenge, before he has passed the point of no return.

By this act of obedience, Jesus gives us an unparalleled model of integrity. In the dark, with nobody looking, knowing that he is being called to do the hardest thing anyone has ever done, Jesus still does the right thing. By this act of obedience, Jesus gives us a great model for prayer: he is brutally honest about his own feelings and desires, yet absolutely committed to obeying God's will for his life. By this act of obedience, Jesus gives us a tremendous example of patience with people. Asleep in the garden, the disciples have let Jesus down, but *having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end* (John 13:1).

But Jesus came to be much more than a model for us, he came to be our savior. He changes us on the inside so that we can be slowly but surely made over into his image. Jesus doesn't just tell us how to live; he gives us the power to live that way. Jesus not only pardoned us; he pinned his "Medal of Honor" on us. And if the cup of suffering did not make him give up on us, nothing ever will. This is the love we've been looking for all our life. This is the only love that won't let us down. This is the Master, obedient unto death, so that our life might abound.

This sermon is inspired by Timothy Keller. *Encounters with Jesus*. (New York, Dutton, 2013), 149-170.

The Obedient Master

Sunday, June 29, 2014

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Matthew 26:36-44

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all have accounts of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane; but Matthew's version adds one significant aspect that the other two do not. According to Matthew, when Jesus left the disciples and moved farther into the garden to pray, *he began to be sorrowful and troubled* (v. 37). Jesus is often called "a Man of Sorrows," and throughout his life we see him weeping and sighing much more than we see him rejoicing. But the pain he experienced in the garden was like nothing he'd felt before: *my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death* (v. 38). And, according to Matthew, this pain began as Jesus was on the way to the Garden.

According to Mark, this pain caught Jesus by surprise. Mark uses a Greek word (*ekthambeisthai*) which means to be moved to "an intense emotional state because of something causing great surprise or perplexity." Jesus is reeling, dumbfounded, astonished at the depth of his pain and sorrow. Which seems strange – how can the Son of God be surprised by anything – until we realize that Jesus is facing a death unlike any other. No one before or since faced the death Jesus did. Which is why Jesus prayed, *My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will* (v. 39).

Matthew, Mark and Luke all mention "the cup" as the heart of Jesus' prayer that night. The cup in ancient times, was like the electric chair or lethal injections in our time. "The cup" did not represent just any kind of death in general, but rather a judicial death in particular. Think of Socrates who was forced to drink a cup of poison (hemlock). The Gospel writers mention "the cup" specifically to signify that Jesus knew he was going to be executed; but, scripturally speaking, "the cup" can have a much deeper meaning.