

Holding An Open and Empty Cup

Lenten Series: Our Cup of Life and Vessels We Hold

Ruth 1:18-21, Psalm 23:5-6, Matthew 26:27-28

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When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" She said to them, "Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for God has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty..." Ruth 1:18-21

You treat me to a feast, while my enemies watch. You honor me as your guest, and you fill my cup until it overflows. Your kindness and love will always be with me each day of my life, and I will live forever in your house, Holy One. Psalm 23:5-6 Common English Bible

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my lifeblood, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Matthew 26:27-28

So many things need to be opened in order for them to serve their purpose. A book requires opening before the contents can be shared. A house has to have a door or window opened before it can provide shelter. A cupboard door needs to be opened before we can retrieve the cup or plate we need.

The same is true of our spiritual lives. **Being open** is essential for spiritual growth. The Holy One is always present and the Spirit is moving in us and among us. And yet, unless we sense an openness and a readiness to receive a deeper connection, a new truth, an aha moment, we will stagnate. Our mind and heart need to be receptive so that we can hear and receive what God is offering to us, to communicate with us, nourish us, stretch us toward deeper awareness renew us with love (pg. 44)

Openness is also about wonder and surprise. Christine Lore Weber writes, "All life is a beginning. I need an open, spontaneous, joyful attitude that knows it does not know. I need an emptiness in me... I need to find the part in my soul still empty, still able to be surprised, still open to wonder." (*The Finding Stone*)

What does it mean to be open and **make space for the Holy One**? To have an open cup, an open heart? It can mean times of silence alone or with others. Time to reflect, to write, to walk. Literally make space – clean out clutter on our desks or a table or closet or floor. A space, an open space, to be open to Spirit. Jesus modeled that. Going away alone to pray. Sabbath time. Quiet time. Clearing out time. Staying open to the Spirit.

In this season of Lent, as we use our cups as symbols of our spiritual lives, let's ponder our openness and what bold or small steps we may need to take to empty out what might be keeping our spiritual cups from being filled by God's love and grace and healing.

Clutter

Sometimes I may be open, but do not have much room to receive due to my inner clutter that crowds our mind and heart. This clutter can claim a great deal of mental and emotional space and keeps us from receiving the good things we need. Just as our bodies breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide, so our spirits need to take in what is life-giving and empty out what is not. Sometimes that is hard to recognize.

We can begin to see the value of an open cup, an empty cup. But there is often much clutter. There are so many kinds of inner clutter – things like anxiety, resentment, harsh judgments, self-pity, regret, mistrust. Fears – real and imagined. These can take up a lot of inner space.

What if we use our symbolic cup and leave it on its side for a day or two. Symbolically emptying out the clutter of our inner life. Feel the peace and even joy of a non-cluttered heart.

Having an empty cup is somewhat of a paradox. If we are empty, we have nothing left to give. We are spent. But it can also mean we are receptive. What does emptiness mean for you?

The spiritual path is a constant cycle of emptying and filling, of dying and rising, of accepting and letting go, giving and receiving. The full cup is repeatedly emptied so that it can be filled again and again. Sometimes we choose the emptying. Sometimes life, circumstances forces us to have an empty cup. That is how I felt sometimes during the pandemic.

Sacred relationship requires a generative emptiness. Not the emptiness of stasis, apathy or despair but of receptivity. This is an emptiness out of which new life can emerge.

Openness, emptiness makes us ready to receive.

In Rupp's book she offers an invitation. "Hold the empty cup in your hands. Look at all the room the cup has for filling. Picture an inner part of yourself. Notice how much room there is for filling. Hold the cup out before you in the gesture and ask God to fill you."

Fullness and Emptiness in the story of Ruth and Naomi

One of my favorite books of the Bible is Ruth. There are some interesting themes throughout the book of Ruth, some opposites that play off of each other – full and empty, life and death, food and famine, hope and despair. And it is a story of redemption. At the beginning, Naomi has a full life. She has a husband and two sons. But emptiness surrounds her. In the first verse of Ruth, the writer tells us that there is "a famine in the land." (1:1) There are people dying in the streets, and hungry people begging for food in the streets of Bethlehem.

Bethlehem in Hebrew means “house of bread.” But there is no bread in Bethlehem.

Naomi and her husband Elimelech decide to leave their home in Bethlehem and travel to the wilds of Moab to find food, the possibility of life instead of death. Moab was a rough out of the way place. You don’t want to go there unless you have to. The Moabites were considered outsiders, unclean, and unacceptable by the Jewish people.

But there was food in Moab. And Naomi and her husband are desperate. They take their sons and move to Moab. And wouldn’t you know it? No sooner did their sons reach dating age that they start dating a couple of Moabite girls.

While they are living in Moab, the worst possible thing that could happen happens. Elimelech dies. Now Naomi’s security and place in the world become very tenuous. And her sons are infatuated with these foreign girls. A few months later, Naomi finds herself with two Moabite daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah.

Then ten years later the worst possible thing happens again to Naomi. Both her sons die. This leaves her a widow in a foreign country with no way to support herself and two daughters-in-law. Her life is empty.

So Naomi does the reasonable thing. She decides to return to her homeland, and to tell Ruth and Orpah to go back to their homes. But Ruth clings to Naomi and wants to make new life with her. Ruth and Naomi arrive back in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. Instead of a famine, there is now a harvest in the house of bread, emptiness to fullness.

Yet, Naomi’s emptiness and grief overwhelm her. She calls to her friends, “Don’t call me Naomi (meaning pleasant) but call me Mara (bitter.) or as my Old Testament Professor Johanna Bos more accurately translated, “Don’t call me Sweetie. Call me Sourpuss for God has dealt bitterly with me.” She is empty and full of despair. And she let people know. Naomi could stay bitter the rest of her life.

However, God used Ruth to heal Naomi’s heart and to offer her a glimpse of a better future. Ruth helps redeem and heal Naomi. Have you had a person in your life who reached out to when you were ready to give up on life, when your cup was empty and you could not figure a way to fill it, let alone make it half full? How did God use that person in your life? Have you been a Ruth for someone else?

Ruth and Naomi had to find a way to survive. Ruth takes the initiative to provide for the household and suggests she go gleaning in the fields, one that belongs to a relative named Boaz. He makes sure she does not go home empty and fills up her containers with grain.

The book of Ruth is a story that reminds us that by relying on God and each other can we face the future. That is what it means to be the church. The end of the story of Ruth is full of life and hope. Ruth and Boaz marry and they have a son Obed, a grandson for Naomi. Naomi's empty life becomes full in ways that are life-giving. Naomi's life moves from full to empty to full because she is open to Ruth and to God's redeeming love back home in Bethlehem where her community brings her back to life.

Ruth, a foreigner, a Moabite woman, an outsider, through the twists and turns becomes the means of revealing deep love for all people. Through her love for Naomi, Ruth, an outsider, who may have faced an empty life as a widow in Moab finds a home and a full life in God's covenant community because she was open and willing to move into a new place and path.

An open cup, an empty cup, a shared cup. When Jesus offered the disciples the cup at the Last Supper, he was urging them to empty themselves of their ego-made plans and make themselves receptive to the energy and love of Spirit. Every time we gather at this table, we remember that empty cup being filled and shared.

These are hard days. There is much on our minds and hearts. The contemplative practices and the social justice peacemaking practices all require openness and an awareness that we need to stop, empty out the clutter, sit with empty open cups.

"The Open Cup Prayer" by Joyce Rupp

Generous God
So many times I've come
With my empty cup
Devoid of nourishment
Depleted of energy

And you have filled

Generous God
So many times I've come
Afraid of unknowns
Full of negatives and many "no's"
Closed and resistant to change and growth

And you have opened

Generous God
So many times I've come
With a spirit
Crammed with cultural noise

Caught in endless clutter
Crowding my inner space

And you have emptied

Generous God
I come to you again
Holding out my waiting cup
Asking that it first be emptied
Of all that blocks the way
Then asking for its filling
With love that tastes like you. Amen.

Parts of this sermon were inspired by and reflect themes in Chapter/Week 2: The Open Cup in *The Cup of Our Life: A Guide for Spiritual Growth* by Joyce Rupp, (1997: Ave Maria Press)