

The Cup of Our Life Filled with Divine Presence

Lenten series: The Cup of Life and Vessels We Hold

Psalm 116:12-14, John 15:4

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What can I give back to God for the blessings poured out on me?

I'll lift high the cup of salvation - a toast to God! I'll pray in the name of God;

I'll complete what I promised the Holy One I'd do, and I'll do it together with

all the beloved people.

Psalm 116:12-14 The Message

Jesus said, "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. John 15:4 NRSV

I don't know about you, but Jeffrey and I have a good number of mugs and cups in our cupboards. Many are functional and ordinary. Some are connected to special memories. I bought a new mug when we went to Rock Creek Lake in the Eastern Sierras last summer. I have a few tea cups that were given to me over the year. I have sipped coffee from some really nice cups, and the same coffee tastes better from a better cup. I have tasted some coffee that no cup could improve. I appreciate having a variety of cups, each with an invitation to drink either alone or with someone. A share cup of coffee or tea is best I think.

Today we also use a special cup, often called a chalice, that we use for the sacrament of communion. We celebrate it communion every Sunday at the early service. We use lovely pottery chalice and pitcher. And for this service we have this beautiful glass set. Every church I have served has unique communion cup and plate, sometime ornate, sometime simple. A chalice to remind us of Jesus' last supper as he gathered around the table in an upper room with his followers. He transformed the symbolism of the Passover meal into something different. And we gather around this table and hold the ancient and newer meanings of bread and cup shared.

I have missed gathering with people around this table and other tables in person. We are getting there slowly. I am so grateful. This past 2 years of isolation and holding our pieces of bread or crackers and glasses of juice or water or wine up to Zoom screen – a new way to be together. Today I am grateful we are gathered here in person and with those watching on line. We use our small cups of juice and drink in our seats. Cup of love poured out for the reconciliation of the world. Yes, a small cup and yet as we hold and drink the Spirit flows in us and through us, weaving stronger threads of connection and hope. We practice sharing this meal until all are fed and all have a cup of life filled to the brim.

How might a cup invite us into a season of reflection this year during Lent? About 12 years ago I read a book that has been one of the most personally meaningful for spiritual life. *The Cup of Life* by Joyce Rupp. She writes:

I have found the cup to be a powerful teacher for my inner life. The ordinariness of the cup reminds me that my personal transformation occurs in the common crevices of each day. The cup is an apt image for the inner processes of growth. The cup has been a reminder of my spiritual thirst. As I've held it, filled it, drunk from it, emptied it and washed it, I've learned that it is through my ordinary human experiences that my thirst for God is quenched. In the cup I see life, with its emptiness, fullness, brokenness, flaws and blessings.

A cup is a container for holding something. Whatever it holds has to eventually be emptied out so that something more can be put into it. I have learned that I cannot always expect my life to be full. There has to be some emptying, some pouring out, if I am to make room for the new. The spiritual journey is like that – a constant process of emptying and filling, of giving and receiving, of accepting and letting go.

One of the spiritual lessons for Rupp is her lifelong experience of Divine Presence, the Holy. This inner presence was a dynamic source of guidance and consolation. She became more deeply rooted in the belief that this indwelling God loved her totally and unconditionally. She writes:

I am a container holding the presence of God. This awesome and humbling gift of the Divine indwelling constantly enlivens my spiritual path and guides my transformation.

The more I become aware of God's presence in my life, the more I thirst to know this Sacred One at an even deeper and deeper level. Like a cup that seemingly has more and more room to be filled, so I feel by capacity to be joined with the Holy One Keeps expanding.

A cup is a simple container. It speaks in our solitude, as a teacher and bringer of wisdom, whispering truths of an indwelling, abiding Source of Love, Friend, in the container of our souls. We are invited to imagine our cup filled. And we are invited to sip often from this wellspring that slakes our spiritual thirst.

A cup of life – a metaphor, a symbol of God filling us up and making a home in us.

John uses a special verb in his metaphor for the relationship with Christ. Jesus said in John 15:4, "Make your home in me. Abide in me." Abiding is important in John, where love of God means mutual indwelling. The verb "abide" has a related word; this noun appears in one of John's most famous verses, 14:2. The "many mansions in the Father's house" (in the familiar KJV) are actually "abiding places." So the vine image is another way of talking about abiding places (places where one is deeply at home), and both the vine and the abiding places are ways of talking about love.

God is not out there. God is also here within us. We have become the home of the Holy One who is love and love us and all creation.

Using the cup as a metaphor for the spiritual life, Henri Nouwen took this symbol in a different and beautiful direction. *Can You Drink the Cup?* is Nouwen's reflection on verses in Matthew 20. This was Nouwen's final book before his death in 1996. He wrote:

The cup of life is the cup of joy as much as it is the cup of sorrow. It is the cup in which sorrows and joys, sadness and gladness, mourning and dancing are never separated. If joys could not be where sorrows are, the cup of life would never be drinkable.

The title comes from Matthew, where the mother of the sons of Zebedee asks if her sons can get the seats next to Jesus in his kingdom. Jesus pretty much answers that they first must go through life with its sufferings and joys. Everyone has a place but not special places of honor. There is not jockeying for position or trying to be at the front of the line or head of the table.

This invitation is not about perfection or achievement. It is practice and openness. Can we fully live our spiritual lives? Can we accept our own cup of life or are we spending too much time comparing our cup with others? With our cup of life, Nouwen invites us to consider three actions with our cups: holding, lifting, drinking.

Holding: reflecting on life, looking critically even when it's scary; holding our own cup (our own choices in life). It's both a cup of sorrow, and of joy; there may be moments of joy within sorrow, and whatever cup is like in whatever point of life, there is always hope.

Lifting: to affirm and celebrate life together, contributing to the community. To find people whom you can trust and with whom you can be open about yourself with, to be grateful of life. Let us remember the chalice of communion, the cup of love poured out for you and let us toast one another and give thanks to the Holy One.

Drinking to the bottom of the cup: accepting our life (not easy) and being true to ourselves. Having moments of silence when we reflect, celebrate being connected to others in community, and move us toward actions of compassion.

May Sarton wrote – This cup holds grief and balm in equal measure, light, darkness.
Who drinks from it must change.

I invite you to consider choosing a cup to be your symbol for Lent this year. Be mindful when you use it how it holds what you need. Hold the cup, lift it, drink from it. When it is filled, remember you are filled with Holy Presence. Amen.

Excerpts from The Cup of Our Life: A Guide for Spiritual Growth by Joyce Rupp