

“Let This Cup Pass” – The Terrifying Obedience of Jesus

For many years Charmaine Adamson worked in the labor and delivery department at what was then St. Mary’s hospital, now Covenant Children’s hospital. Many of the members here were born in that hospital including all three of Lisa and my children. And for most of those births, Charmaine was there, tending to the needs of all the family and friends as well as the more immediate needs of the mothers and children. On scores of occasions when I was in the waiting room with family and friends I watched as everyone fixed their eyes on Charmaine when she would come out to let us know how things were going. As long as she was in good spirits, calm and in control, we were confident everything was all right. But if she ever came out distressed or worried we would be terribly disturbed and unsettled.

There is something similar in our story today. The official title is “The Hour of Darkness.” The chapter begins with the Lord’s Supper and takes us through the terrible events on the cross. I want to focus on one moment in the story, the episode in the Garden. I would title my sermon, “Let This Cup Pass: The Terrifying Obedience of Jesus” because the Jesus we see in this chapter is not all right; he is not calm. He is deeply troubled, stretched to the breaking point. To see Jesus this way was disturbing to his disciples, it is

disturbing to us and so this chapter is unsettling to us and yet this chapter is not just important, it is the most important chapter in God's Story.

Turn to Matthew chapter 26:36-45. *Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"*

This isn't the Jesus we are accustomed to seeing. Jesus is always in control. He responds to every situation with calm and grace, even humor. There is nothing calm about Jesus here, by his own admission. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." He does not simply kneel in prayer, he falls face down, prostrate before the Father. It is surely this moment that is referred to in Hebrews 5 verse 7 where it is written, "His prayers were accompanied with loud cries and tears." Luke tells us his anguish and suffering is so great that sweat drops of blood bead up on his forehead. His suffering is so great that nothing less than angels are able to comfort him. It's good the angels came for there would be little comfort from his disciples who were snoozing clueless through the whole ordeal.

But none of these things are nearly as disturbing as the prayer Jesus prays, not once, not twice but three times. "Father, if it be possible, may this cup be taken from me." Here we see the Son of God hesitate to do God's will. What was this "cup", so bitter that even the Son of God hesitated to drink it? We know the bitter chapter that is about to unfold. We've all read the story. Jesus will soon be betrayed by one of his own disciples, with a kiss. Another disciple will deny he even knows Jesus three times. Then all the disciples will desert Jesus, run and hide. Jesus will be despised by the Jewish rulers, brutally whipped by Roman soldiers, raucously condemned by

a bloodthirsty crowd, forced to endure unimaginable pain by crucifixion, then humiliated and mocked as he hangs in shameful display as if he were nothing more than a miserable and contemptible criminal. Who would not hesitate to drink such a bitter cup!

But, are these the reasons Jesus hesitates? Maybe, but Jesus has known all this was coming for awhile now. He had told his disciples at least three times he would be handed over to the Gentiles, mocked, flogged and crucified. He had also told them he would rise again. Further, he had told his disciples to be prepared, for they would experience the same rejection and persecution. Jesus' physical suffering is unspeakable, but not unprecedented. Before and after Christ, there have been martyrs, heroes of faith who have experienced as great if not greater physical suffering. Peter would be crucified; Polycarp would be burned alive, future believers would be thrown to the lions. Jesus was surely troubled by the road of suffering that was to come, but I do not think it was the road that overwhelmed Jesus' soul to the point of death, as it was the destination, Calvary.

Where did this road lead? What was the bitter cup that only he could drink at Calvary? It was a cup from which no man had ever drunk before. It was a cup God wanted no man to ever have to drink. This is why God sent his Son, to drink it for every man, to drink sin's condemnation, sin's curse.

Scripture tells us, “He became a curse for us.” Scripture says, “God made him who had no sin, to become sin for us.” Scripture says, “he took our pain and bore our suffering...the punishment that brought us peace was upon him.” Jesus took upon himself the condemnation of all the world.

One writer has attempted to help us understand the depth of Jesus’ suffering. Listen to these words that I have slightly edited. “For all the physical pain brought to others, that pain is now brought to Jesus. For all the lives that have been taken, Jesus’ life is now taken, but not before he is tortured, as so many have been tortured. For all who have been stripped naked, Jesus is stripped naked. For all whose families have been made to watch loved ones writhe in pain, Jesus now witnesses his loved ones watch his pain. For all the names others have been called at moments they could least bear it, Jesus is called names. For all the mocking people have endured, Jesus is mocked. For all the times people have been hated and provoked, Jesus is now despised. For all those who have been judged despicable, Jesus is now made despicable. For all the times people have been taken advantaged of and defeated, Jesus is now trampled while he is down.

For all the various ways others have been made victims, manipulated by power, insulted without thought or care, the same is now done to Jesus. All the helplessness people have ever suffered Jesus now suffers. All the

pride demonstrated at others' expense, all the times people's dignity is taken away by those pretending to be righteous, Jesus is now surrounded by "righteous" men who strip away his dignity. For all the poor and suffering people who surround us all but are ignored and neglected and not given any compassion or time, Jesus is now surrounded by those who ignore and neglect and pass him by, oblivious to his suffering. For all those whose pride made them certain they were right, Jesus is now surrounded by proud people who are certain he is evil.

The cup Jesus hesitates to drink is far more than physical suffering or death. It is a spiritual suffering we can hardly imagine. It is a cup of suffering that he alone could bear to drink. And in drinking it he suffers an aloneness, a forsakenness, a lostness we cannot fathom, an aloneness that elicits from him a cry of anguish we never thought we'd hear from Jesus, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" This, I believe, is what Jesus saw in the garden. This is the cup Jesus hesitated to drink. This eternal moment in which Jesus not just bears our sin, but as the Apostle Paul expresses it to the Corinthians, he becomes our sin! In that first garden Adam was faced with the choice to eat or not to eat. Adam eats and we are lost. In the second garden, the second Adam is faced with the choice to drink or not to drink. Jesus drinks and we are found!

This is a terrifying obedience. There are different kinds of obedience. There is that obedience when we know God's will and we want to do it. There is that obedience when we do not know God's will but we want to know it so we can do it. But there is another kind of obedience, a terrifying obedience, when we know God's will and we don't want to do it; we are afraid to do it; we plead with God, "Is there another way?" This is not the moment we seek God's will; it is the moment his will seeks us. This is not the moment when we feel the anguish of doubt or uncertainty about God's will but the anguish of faith and the full knowledge of God's will.

Jesus' garden prayer calls us to a different level of obedience, to do what we know God wants us to do even when we fear the consequences. It is when we are called to obey God, not because of all the benefits and perks our obedience might bring, but in spite of the likelihood that our obedience will take such things away. We hear quoted often today the words in Jeremiah 29:11 "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future," comforting words for sure. But what is not often mentioned is the context for these words. They are in a letter written to exiles, people who have seen their homes, their holy city, their cherished temple completely destroyed, people who have been forced to march hundreds of miles away

from their homeland to live in a pagan land as slaves. It is true that these words we see so often varnished on decorative plaques and neatly scripted on coffee cups are words of hope and promise, but not a promise that we will be spared from suffering, rather a hope that whatever suffering may be included in God's plans for us will not be the last chapter of our story. The promise that when the last chapter of our story finally comes we will see the redemptive value of every terrible, heart-breaking moment we have had to pass through. In the garden God is saying to Jesus, "Here are the plans I have for you. Trust me. Blessing will come, but first must come suffering."

Jesus' obedience moves me; it haunts me. Jesus did not have to do this and it haunts me that he did. I cannot easily walk away from this. It puts me in such profound debt. I know the song, "He paid a debt he did not owe; I owed a debt I could not pay" its light hearted melody belies the heavy hearted truth of the enormous debt of my sins. But in paying that debt Jesus creates in me a far greater debt, a debt of grace. There is nothing I can do to repay that debt. I can never give or do anything that evens the scales. To believe this story puts me in an eternal debt of grace, marvelous, infinite, matchless grace, a debt far greater than my debt of sin ever was.

Yet, though I could never repay this debt if I were to give Jesus everything I have and am, Jesus' terrifying obedience moves me to try and

give it anyway. This terrifying obedience in the garden and on the hill has inspired in poets the greatest lyrics. Isaac Watts wrote, “Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small; love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all. Benard de Clairveaux wrote, “What language shall I borrow to thank thee dearest friend for this thy dying sorrow thy pity without end. O make me thine forever and should I fainting be, Lord let me never, never outlive my love for thee.”

Hear is the gospel, the good news of God. Though he prayed, “Let this cup pass from me,” ultimately he obeyed and drank the cup for you and me. And so, as disciples of this Jesus, who was “obedient to death, even the death of a cross,” we are encouraged not to run away from our own crosses, instead we pray for Jesus to keep us near his cross, to keep its scenes before us, to live in its shadows, strengthened with the sure hope that he who died for us will one day come back to us and forever take us out of this world’s temporary exile to his new world, his eternal rest, which we are told is just beyond the river.