

“THE FATHER’S CUP”

Good Friday, the Crucifixion of Our Lord

April 7, 2023

Zion Lutheran Church

Fort Wayne, Indiana

TEXT:

“Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given Me?” John 18:11 (ESV)

Many years ago, as a student at Concordia College in Bronxville, New York, I remember being in the Dean of Students’ office one day and seeing on his office wall a piece of Christian artwork that I had never seen before. As a matter of fact, I’ve never seen it since either. It was an abstract painting of a chalice, turned upside-down, with these words: “He took our cup of bitterness and drained it to the dregs.” It was obviously referring to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ taking upon Himself the punishment for sin that we rightly have coming to us. The word “cup” in the Scriptures is often used figuratively to refer to a person’s lot in life, be it good or bad. In the well-known and well-loved Twenty-Third Psalm, for example, King David sings of his cup running over with the blessings of the Lord. Jesus uses the expression “drink My cup” to refer to His suffering and death when He warns James and John, the sons of Zebedee, that their request to sit at His right and left hand in His kingdom will also involve bearing His cross (*Matthew 20:22, 23*).

The Lord Jesus uses this word in a similar fashion when He prays in Gethsemane that His Father would “take this cup from” Him (*Mark 15:36*)—the “cup” obviously being the venting of God’s wrath against human sin. This was not really Jesus’ “cup” to drink; it was ours. We are the ones who have offended our holy God with our sin and we are the ones who have invited His wrath and punishment with our belligerence and impenitence. And yet Jesus, out of His incomprehensible love for lost sinners like us, chose to submit to the Father’s will that sin be punished and went to the cross for us so that our sin might be punished in Him. As we gather this evening at the foot of His cross, let’s consider the cup of bitterness that He drained for us, contrasting how we deal with the cup of God’s wrath with how Jesus dealt with it.

We deal with the “cup” of God’s wrath against our sin in the same way that we deal everything else that is unpleasant in life: We pretend that it doesn’t exist until we can’t pretend any longer. We resist it at all costs. That’s exactly the way Simon Peter dealt with it when Jesus spoke to His disciples about His approaching demise. We read in the sixteenth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel: “Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.

And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying ‘Far be it from You, Lord!’ ‘This shall never happen to You.’ But He turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! You are a hindrance to Me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man’” (*Matthew 16:21-23*). I’m afraid that very often we, like Peter, want a “sanitized” Gospel—one that is all joy and celebration without any pain or suffering or cross—with no thought at all, in fact, to the cost of it all. At the risk of being guilty of “preaching to the choir,” I might add here that a lot of people who would never miss an Easter Sunday service wouldn’t even consider attending a Good Friday service. They want to celebrate the fact that Jesus rose from the dead but they aren’t that big on remembering that He suffered and died first—and that it was that suffering and death of Christ that paid for their sins.

Some people go even further than that. They move beyond indifference to Jesus’ cup of suffering to being outright hostile toward it. These are the people who think that it is a morbid and terrible thing that we should publicly read and commemorate so bloody a story as the crucifixion of our Lord—the people who think teaching children that Jesus suffered and died for them is a form of child abuse—the people who think that it is ludicrous and offensive that the emblem that we hold up for all the world to see is a Man hanging on a cross. To all of this I can only echo the words of Saint Paul: “Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (*1 Corinthians 1:22, 23*). Why do you suppose that the movie “The Passion of the Christ” was considered to be so “controversial” and that the crucifix causes offense even to some Christians? The crucified Christ is offensive to many because they don’t want to be reminded that their sin is offensive to God and to be shown in graphic detail just how offensive it is. But like the Israelites in the wilderness who had to look in faith at the bronze snake in order to be healed from snakebites, we look in faith at the cross of the Crucified, no matter how unpleasant it may appear, because it is here and here alone that we behold our salvation from sin and death.

Thank God that Jesus was more direct than we are in dealing with the cup of God’s wrath against our sin. Not only did He refuse to avoid this cup of suffering; He confronted it head-on. In his Gospel Luke tells us: “When the days drew near for Him to be taken up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem” (*Luke 9:51*). Going to Jerusalem to face the cross was not something that Jesus had to do and finally ended up doing it reluctantly only because He couldn’t escape it; it was something that He did willingly and with determination, out of His infinite love for sinners like us. And because of that loving sacrifice of Christ you and I are forgiven of our sins and are assured of everlasting life and joy in heaven.

Jesus had such determination to go to the cross for us not because He was a masochist of any kind, but because He was totally committed to getting the job done, as it were—the “job” being making atonement for the sin of the whole world. This was not a matter of just getting by with the bare minimum; it was fully and completely making satisfaction for all the sins of all people for all time. That’s what He meant when He said from the cross “It is finished.” (*John 19:30*). He was proclaiming that redemption was accomplished for all sinners. This is the very reason why He came into the world: to lay down His life as the sacrifice for sin so that sinners who deserve to be banished forever from the mercy of God might be spared from the judgment that they deserve and might instead, through faith, receive the blessing of everlasting fellowship with God in His glorious kingdom.

The cup of God’s wrath is rightfully ours, since we are the ones who have offended Him by our sin. But in His mercy God has provided, in His Son Jesus Christ, a Substitute to drink this cup of wrath for us. Because Jesus did this for us, the cup of bitterness is passed from us. John the Baptist was talking about this very thing when, so many years before, he looked at Jesus and said of Him: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (*John 1:29*). On this somber day of repentance we nevertheless find something to quietly rejoice in: The crucified Christ is the Fulfillment of every promise of redemption that God had made to His people throughout their history. He is the Paschal Lamb—the Scapegoat—the Sin Offering. On Him rests everything that we have done and failed to do to offend the holy God and in Him all of it is put to death forever. That is our hope and our joy today and always.

Amen.

May the One who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, making us kings and priests before His God and Father, lead you to a life of repentance and trust. May He also be glorified in the lives of you, His people. He who calls you is faithful, and He will do it. Amen.