

March 17, 2024  
Fifth Sunday of Lent  
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH  
Pastor Joel Sutton

Mark 10:35–45

JESUS ALONE COULD DRINK THE CUP OF GOD’S WRATH FOR OUR SALVATION.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

Greek mythology tells the legend of Narcissus, the beautiful son of a river god. As the story goes, the handsome young man never found anyone that could pull his heartstrings, until one day, by chance, he caught a glimpse of his own reflection in a still pool of water. But Narcissus didn’t know that it was his own reflection – and he fell in love with the person staring back at him. He couldn’t bring himself to leave the beautiful reflection behind and eventually died beside the pool.

Today, a form of the name of this mythological person is given those who suffer from a personality disorder called *narcissism*. Narcissism describes those who are hopelessly self-absorbed and self-centered. People who suffer from this disease are often unhappy and angry at the world because the world doesn’t recognize their self-perceived superiority. They feel that they deserve privileges and special treatment while at the same time, have an inability or unwillingness to recognize the needs and feelings of others.

In our Gospel text this morning James and John come to Jesus with a request. It’s a huge self-serving request – at an awkward time. For Jesus, the time was almost fulfilled, and the hour of His glory was nearly at hand. He’s walking ahead of His disciples with His face set to go to Jerusalem. (cf: Luke 9:51) In reality, He’s on a death march. The march began at a child’s pace from a manger in Bethlehem. Since His Baptism in the Jordan three years earlier, the march has become arduous. But this journey into Jerusalem will be the culmination for which He became incarnate. He has an appointment with death. He will be condemned and delivered up to the chief priests and the scribes, be mocked, spit upon, flogged, and killed – and three days later rise from the dead.

Three times, Jesus had explained to His disciples what was going to happen in Jerusalem, but they still didn’t fully understand. And we see this with James and John and their sinful human selfishness in our text. They still think Jesus is going to somehow set up an earthly kingdom. So instead of grappling with Jesus’ prediction of His suffering and death, they look ahead and plan the next chapter of their own lives. Jesus just told them He’s going to die and the first words out of their mouths were:

*“Teacher, we want...”* (cf: Mark 10:35)

They’re selfish and self-serving. And it’s not that they’re seeking obscure miracles like a personal healing, or being the most handsome men in Israel, or for Jesus to turn more water into

wine for a party they want to host. They don't ask for favors on behalf of others. No, they wanted a blank check saying:

***"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What do you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.'" (Mark 10:35–37)***

Their request was nothing more than narcissistic, egotistical, assertion of superiority. They thought they were better than everyone else. If Jesus were setting up an earthly kingdom, they believed they deserved to be second in command, one on His right and one on His left. They had apparently conspired behind the backs of the other disciples to make the request – and then – they had the gall to make their request in front of the other disciples. It's like slapping your ten best friends in the face.

The other disciples were outraged! (cf: Matthew 20:24) But they weren't angry because of the request. They were annoyed because James and John beat them to the punch. Each of the Twelve thought they deserved the right or left hand positions of power. They'd all been thinking the exact same thing, but James and John made the request before they got around to it. All Twelve disciples... selfish and self-serving.

It's the story of our lives, right? We start being selfish the moment we're born. As a child begins to talk, the first words out of their mouths are "***mine***" and "***no***." As the child grows and you take them to the store, they'll quote James and John from our text: "***Mommy, daddy, give me whatever I ask of you.***" It's hard to get through the checkout line without buying them something.

Pastors and congregations are not immune to self-centeredness. Our selfish and sinful natures want the glory, and the power that we perceive comes from having a position in the church. Or, maybe you don't want a position – but you still want your voice heard and your suggestions implemented. And if you're not treated as a highly valued parishioner, you'll take your membership, tithes, and offerings elsewhere.

Like the disciples, you and I are selfish. You stop looking at the church as where God serves you, delivering His precious gifts. You stop looking at your neighbor as someone to serve – and instead – you look around and say: "***What's in it for me?***" The sins of narcissism, self-righteousness, and self-centeredness are how churches become fractured, congregations split, husbands and wives divorce, and children and parents become estranged.

That's not how God created us to live with and treat one another. Jesus gives us specific instructions saying:

***"... whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*** (Mark 10:43–45)

James and John really thought they were ready to endure what Jesus was about to endure. And to be sure – they indeed would suffer for proclaiming Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins. According to tradition, ten of the original Twelve would be martyred for their faith. None of them would live the celebrity life of a televangelist, riding fast camels and living in luxury houses. Instead they were often hated and reviled, stoned, stabbed, even crucified. James the brother of John was the first to go, being killed by the sword of Herod Agrippa I. (cf: Acts 12:1–2) Only John would live to old age, perhaps dying on the island of Patmos (cf: Revelation 1:9) after being exiled for his work as a preacher of the Gospel.

The self-righteous and self-centered James and John didn't know what they were asking. So rather than rebuke them just as He had Peter when he was setting his mind on the things of man and not the things of God, (cf: Mark 8:33) the sinless and self-sacrificing Jesus dismisses their question. They didn't understand the cup from which Jesus would drink and the baptism with which He would be baptized. They didn't understand exactly what it meant for Jesus to come into His glory.

He's on His way to Jerusalem. He has an appointment to die on Calvary's cross, where He will drink the cup of God's wrathful judgment against sin, and be Baptized in His own blood. This will be Jesus' glory. And the place on His right and left are already prepared for two robbers who will be crucified with Him. (Mark 15:27)

Jesus is teaching us that the way to glory is through suffering. The disciples would suffer just as you will suffer for being Christian. The Christian life isn't one of praying for and expecting material blessings, or earthly power and glory. It's a life of denying yourself taking up your cross and following Jesus. (cf: Matthew 16:24–25)

We'd like to believe that living a pious life of a Christian would somehow make us immune from persecution and misery. We'd prefer to pray that God remove our cup of suffering because we don't think we can bear it or we think we deserve better. (cf: Mark 14:36) But as Baptized followers of Jesus we pray: *"Not my will, but Thy will be done."* Jesus' life of suffering in faith sets the pattern for all believers throughout the ages, who are encouraged with His promise:

***"... be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."*** (Revelation 2:10)

The uncomfortable truth is – you **will** face hardships. You **will** be tormented and harassed by the unbelieving world. But if the world hates you, know that it hated Jesus first. (cf: John 15:18–19) You may live in this world, but you're not of this world. Jesus chose you out of the world and that's why the world hates you.

We each have our own bitter cups to drink from. It's hard to choke down the dregs of illness and death, disappointment and heartache that can come with this life. It's hard, but not impossible. Even unbelievers experience suffering in this life. But you have something else. You have a promise. You have a covenant, a new covenant in Jesus' blood.

The world has its gods of fairness and being nice and living life to its "fullest." But all that leads to is death. All the good deeds in the world can't keep you alive. All the fairness and equality in

the world can't forgive your sins, can't take away your guilt. You will still suffer. You will still die.

Jesus is different from the world. Jesus is life. He offers you the cup of salvation and He baptizes you into His Name and household. God the Father sent His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. (cf: John 3:16) So, Jesus marches to the cross in order to save you, in order to serve you. He enters into Jerusalem in order to be the High Priest who not only offers up sacrifice – He is the once-for-all sacrificial Lamb of God to save you from all your arrogant self-serving sins and for the sins of the whole world. (cf: Hebrews 7:27) He was born into this world in the flesh of man to be that sacrifice, for without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins. (cf: Hebrews 9:22) For the sake of His innocent suffering and death, God forgives you of your iniquity and remembers your sin no more. (cf: Jeremiah 31:34)

Our song is love unknown because you and I cannot fathom that kind of sacrifice. We cannot fathom the kind of love that loves to the point of suffering God's wrath for our sin – all the sin of the world, focused on one, poor, frail, broken human body. Mocked, spit upon, flogged, nailed to a cross, lifted up and gasping for breath. Unfairly, undeservedly, yet willingly to establish a new covenant with you.

At the font, in the washing of the water and the Word, you were baptized into the Baptism in which Christ Jesus was baptized. You were baptized into his death – meaning all His work on the cross was credited to you. And that same Baptism baptizes you also into His resurrection from the dead, giving you new bodily life in heaven. The cup from which you drink in the Sacrament of the Altar is His precious blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins, strengthening of your faith, and for your eternal life and salvation. By His unlimited grace, He comes to you in His means – not to lord it over you, but to serve you. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, you are brought to faith and sustained in it – not to lord it over one another, but to serve and love one another just as God in Christ serves and loves you.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,  
Amen.