



March 24, 2016

**A Maundy Thursday Meditation
by Brent J. Eelman**

The Empty Cup

The teachings of Jesus embrace a different type of logic: the logic of irony and paradox. Jesus spoke of the importance of a large faith, but used the metaphor of a mustard seed to describe it. Some of his more perplexing parables conclude with the prescription: "The last shall be first, and the first shall be last." When he spoke about the greatness of an individual he said that "the greatest of all is a servant of all".

Power for Jesus was not might. True power was always in relation to service. Glory was in terms of humility. When he taught about the importance of generosity, he held up the gift of two pennies from a widow. Irony, paradox, and tension were an integral part of Jesus' view of reality.

This evening, Maundy Thursday, we are face to face with Christ's challenging logic and how his life speaks to our contemporary expression of Christian discipleship. Twenty years ago churches discovered marketing. Three color brochures, mass mailings, and the like are part of this season. The upbeat, positive language of our religious marketing is revealing. I fear we tell only half of the story. We read words like:

- Abundant
- Bountiful
- Fullness
- Overflowing
- Blessings
- Rich

Perhaps it is this superficiality that makes us averse to Holy Week services. "They are such a downer!" We want the joy of Easter, the fullness of life, the blessings of God... without the experience of Good Friday. The truth of Holy Weeks is that "The only path to the hope of Easter is through the struggle of Holy Week. Like the assurance offered in the 23rd Psalm, we're not given a shortcut around the Valley of the Shadow of Death." (from *Why Many Christians Skip Holy Week: Huffington Post: Mar 22, 2016*)

The challenge of life is dealing with those times when life is not filled with abundance; those times when our cup is not overflowing, but in truth, is almost empty. Christ would tell us that it is when our cup is empty, only then, is it ready to be filled with goodness of God's love and grace.

In the third year of my ministry, 36 years ago, I was at a crucial point in my life. I was feeling empty. Some good friends at the church where I was serving invited me to a Memorial Day brunch. There they gave a framed calligraphy that all of them had signed on the back. It is still one of my most precious gifts from nearly 40 years of ministry.

The calligraphy was a verse from Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians: *'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness.'* The cup of my life was empty... but it was to be filled with the grace of God. My weakness allowed me to experience the power of God

Empty is full.

The expression we often use is "running on empty". "Running on empty" is when we are sick and tired of being sick and tired. We don't associate discipleship with emptiness, and yet emptiness was at the center of Christ's suffering passion. Paul, writing to the Philippians, said that Christ, "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.... humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death... even death on the cross." He emptied himself. Christ's emptiness is our fullness of life!

Nowhere is this more evident than on his final Thursday. Following his last meal with the disciples, he went to the garden to pray. Knowing his fate, knowing his own limitations as one fully human, he prayed, "that this cup could pass from me." What was that cup? It was the cup of suffering... the cup of emptiness.

Empty...

- it was the emptiness of loneliness, knowing that though he was surrounded by others... he was alone in his fate.
- It was the emptiness of injustice. He faced a kangaroo trial by the Sanhedrin, the politicized "Supreme Court" of his day.
- It was the emptiness of suffering in all its forms: physical, spiritual, emotional.

The cup that Jesus prayed to be removed from his life, was the cup of emptiness.

It is often our prayer. There are the moments when our cup is not overflowing... indeed it is empty. It is the emptiness of loss,

- The emptiness of grief
- The emptiness of illness
- Loneliness
- Injustice
- Confusion
- Rejection.
- Undeserved suffering

But even in our emptiness, there is good news... it is the profound good news of this holy week.

Remember... the logic of Jesus is irony and paradox. It is when we are empty, hitting bottom, tired of being tired, that we are most open to be filled with the grace and love of God. It is when we are most weak that His power is most manifest.

It is in our moments of emptiness that we are ready to be filled, not with the stuff of our creation, but with the goodness and fullness of life that is God's alone to give.

We live with that hope, knowing that in the events of this week, the empty cup resolves into the empty tomb. This emptiness is filled with life... life eternal. Amen.