

A PASTOR'S QUESTION

Thomas Long, a professor of preaching, tells of what happened at the close of a communion service in the small Georgia village church of his growing up years. It was a hot summer Sunday, and the church windows were open to catch an occasional breeze from the outside. As the pastor read the familiar words of the Apostle Paul, "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered unto you...", the congregation could hear sounds from the outside. Birds singing, muffled conversation coming from a neighboring house, the passing of a car. When the communion service was over, the pastor started to replace the silver cover for the trays, but then paused and asked, "Has everyone been fed?" No one responded. Once again he started to replace the cover for the trays, but again he paused and asked, "Has everyone been fed?" The congregation became unsettled. What is he talking about? Of course all have been served. But then they began to get the drift. From outside came the sounds of an engine starting, someone laughing, a baby crying. The pastor's question was very relevant. The communion table is for all, and all who come to the table will be blessed by what the table represents. The pastor's question was being directed outward to a world of many hungers, and the spiritual meal would not be finished until all had been fed.

And what does this table represent?

It represents God's gift of eternal salvation;

It represents your personal faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord;

It testifies that as we participate in holy communion, we are a community, in fellowship with others who gather for worship, responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, caring for one another, and performing service in the church and to those in need outside the church.

We may not often think of it, but our presence at the table relates us to a great company of believers in our town, throughout our nation, and throughout the world.

And so we come this morning and respond to the invitation on Janet Steiner's beautiful worship banner, "Yes," we say, "We will Come to the Table."

PASSOVER

Three weeks ago when Christians were observing Holy Week, Jewish folk from around the world were celebrating Passover. This ritual dates back some three thousand years to a great event in the history of the Hebrew people when they were dramatically liberated from 450 years of slavery in Egypt through the leadership of the great Moses and an action of God. A mournful song arose among the slaves in America which pointed toward their own dreams and prayers for emancipation:

When Israel was in Egypt land, "Let my people go!"
Oppressed so hard they could not stand, "Let my people go!"
Go down Moses, way down in Egypt's land,
Tell ol' Pharaoh to let my people go....

and then lyrics were added that expressed the plight of the American slaves:

We need not always weep and mourn,
and wear these slavery chains forlorn,
Your foes shall not forever stand,
You shall possess your own good land and then

A person living in the present added words pertaining to our world:

O let us all from bondage flee,
And soon may all the earth be free.

It was at Passover that Jesus met with his disciples in an upper room in Jerusalem. The Passover meal included roasted lamb, bitter herbs and sauce, unleavened bread, and cups of wine mixed with water. Each part of the menu symbolized some aspect of the liberation of the Israelites from the Pharaoh. Jesus attached a new meaning to the bread, saying that it represented his body that soon would be given for many. He attached a new meaning to the wine, saying that it represented his blood that soon would be shed for many. And this understanding of the Passover meal accompanied the disciples as they traveled the Mediterranean region with the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

TENSION

The evening in the Upper Room was not without its tense moments. Jesus and Peter had two exchanges when Peter's bold statements about his respect for Jesus and his absolute loyalty to the Master were challenged by our Lord. While they were eating, Jesus shocked the disciples by saying, "One of you will betray me." One can picture and hear the commotion as all asked, "It isn't I, is it?" The finger seemed to point to Judas when he left the meal—Was the treasurer of the group going to pay the room rent and for the food, or perhaps make an offering at the temple?

A Passover tradition included the host taking the final morsel from the bowl and giving it to a guest whom he wished to honor. Jesus had given the last morsel to Judas. I have wondered if that was Jesus's way of inviting Judas to repent of his intended purpose, and to return to the Upper Room.

It was now several hours beyond nightfall. Jesus and his disciples walked across the darkened city to the garden of Gethsemane in the Mount of Olives. As they walked along Jesus gave a valedictory message to his friends, words of comfort, instruction and hope. When they arrived

at the garden, Jesus asked Peter, James and John to come to an inner garden to pray with him. They were exhausted and fell asleep. Twice. Jesus agonized in his prayer: "Father, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not my will but yours be done." Soon the Temple Guard arrived, Judas identified Jesus with a kiss, and by nine o'clock in the morning Jesus was hanging on a cross.

HENRI NOUWEN

Henri Nouwen, a native of the Netherlands, was a Roman Catholic priest who spent forty years in North America, first teaching at three noteworthy American universities for 20 years, and then for the remaining years serving as the pastor to mentally and physically limited residents at l'Arche Daybreak Community outside Toronto. He was a prolific writer of 39 books, generally on themes of spirituality, the devotional life, social justice and ministry to mentally and physically challenged people. He is regarded as a spiritual giant of the 20th century. One of his books found its way into my library, entitled Can You Drink the Cup? Some thoughts from this book are very fitting as we observe the Lord's Supper this morning.

The title comes from an episode in the Gospel of Matthew where the mother of two disciples, James and John, comes to Jesus and asks that in his coming kingdom her sons will sit with Jesus on his throne, one on the left hand, the other on the right. Jesus asks the brothers, "Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They answer, "We are able." Well, they don't know what awaits their Master in the days ahead.

Nouwen's thesis is that the communion chalice, or Cup, represents the life of faith that is ours though our commitment to Jesus as our Savior and Lord. And so he writes, "We hold the Cup." And as we hold the cup he writes that we must look critically at the quality of our spirituality, the quality of our faith in Jesus. Does it make a difference that we are Christ-believers, Christ followers? The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. (II Cor. 13:5). I recall a sermon based on this text when in my college years I was becoming serious about my identity as a Christian. The sermon had a very simple outline: Are you in the faith? How far are you in?

Nouwen continues: Not only do we hold the Cup, we also lift the Cup. Lifting the Cup is an affirmation and celebration of our life together, a choice gift from God. Life is filled with gains and losses, joys and sorrows, ups and downs. In our life together as a church family, as Paul writes to the church in Rome, "[we] rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." (Rom 12:15) The church is a fellowship of mutual care. There is a harmony in our caring. We frequently hear this at the time when we share our prayer concerns for others. We lift the Cup together.

(An initiative that arose out of our church family a few months ago was the forming of a small group who call themselves the Pastoral Care Team. The intent is to support Pastor Rebecca by

assuring that our church family functions effectively in care for one another as together we lift the Cup.)

And writes Henri Nouwen, We drink from the Cup. Drinking from the Cup addresses the dark voices of the inner life that harbor the memories of past episodes of pain and sadness, or even bitterness or anger. Drinking from the Cup presents the possibility of replacing those dark voices with softer, gentler voices of the light that comes from your faith in Jesus. Nouwen states that drinking from the Cup in the fellowship of the body of believers can lead to healing from past events that negatively affected you. The truth-telling about what is in your Cup, when practiced with good judgment and discretion, leads to a healthy church. Molly Stuart's "Journey Through Life" ministry on Thursday mornings may be a good place for you to begin testing these waters.

And so this morning we respond to the invitation of our worship banner. We come to the Table to hold, to lift up and to drink from the Cup. Get focused. Our Lord is present to meet us here.

A SUGGESTED PERSONAL PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, This morning I declare that you are my personal Savior and my living Lord. I believe that you have received me as one of your own, here in fellowship with this body of your people. The faith of our church is my faith, too, and I ask that I might grow in my faith. I am aware of my weaknesses and failures; thank you for the gift of your forgiveness. I ask that the Holy Spirit will teach me how to grow in my response to your Lordship over every aspect of my life. I praise and thank you, living Christ, for these mercies and for so much more. In your Name that is above every Name, Amen.