

Falling Upward II - Can you drink this Cup?

Mark 10:35-45

Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC; October 21, 2018

The poet W.H. Auden once wrote: “We would rather be ruined than changed. We would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the present and let our illusions die.”ⁱ These words express the difficulty we have in transitioning into a more mature life, as Richard Rohr brings to the forefront in his book *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the two Halves of Life*. You may recall last week’s story of the rich man who asked Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life. The man had worked hard to build, what Rohr calls, the container for the ego which is the necessary task of the first half of life. He had striven to keep the commandments, to do what was expected of him to belong, and he had managed to accrue wealth. We could say that he had made it for all intent and purposes of that expression.

Out of love, Jesus challenged him to stop basing his identity on his self-righteous conduct and possessions by which he was trying to stay in control. Jesus fundamentally asks him to make himself vulnerable through generosity and compassion for the plight of those who suffer. The man was shocked and went away grieving, afraid this approach would ruin him. However, he is now experiencing a different kind of ruin. Remember Auden’s words: “We would rather be ruined than changed. We would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the present and let our illusions die.” Or as Rohr puts it, “Until we are led to the limits of our present game plan, and find it to be insufficient, we will not search out or find the real source, the deep well, or the constantly flowing stream,” which we call God (FU, p.67). It is our life that becomes the playing field of this transformation.

James and John from our Gospel passage also have yet to “climb the cross of the present” in order to take on the tasks of the second half of life, as Rohr would say. They are on the way to Jerusalem, home of bygone Jewish kings. They want to sit at the right hand and left hand of Jesus when he comes “into his glory (10:37).” They are vying for positions of power in Jesus’ cabinet when he triumphantly takes over the reins from the occupying Romans and their collaborators. They want to be vice president and secretary of state.

All of Jesus’ predictions that the messiah, the anointed and chosen one, will end up getting betrayed and killed in Jerusalem still have not fully registered with them (Mark 10:33ff.). And so he asks them whether they can drink the cup he will drink. James and John blurt out, “We are able.” Only Jesus knows that they are actually speaking the truth beyond their own knowing. Both will die later in their efforts to spread the Gospel. First, they will drink from Jesus’ cup that he offers them at the last supper with the words “This is the cup of the

new covenant in my blood.” It is a cup that speaks both of suffering and new beginnings, sorrow and joy. In the garden, Jesus will pray that the cup of suffering pass him by, if possible, but it did not.

I would contend with Rohr and many other theologians that Jesus’ death is not a quid pro quo atonement of Jesus taking on the punishment we “deserve.” Such an approach may say more about our need for order and control than God’s (more on this in future sermons). Jesus does not become a scapegoat for us. Rather, his death reveals our tendency to scapegoat people in order to preserve control (FU, p.69). Jesus walks on into the certainty of death at the hands of the powers that be in full solidarity with all people who struggle and suffer. He also walks into the possibility of a future he cannot yet see.

Never does he seek for power in the way the world values power. Therefore, Jesus uses the occasion of James and John’s query in to explain that this cup has something to do with servanthood. He invites his followers to risk trusting the promises of a new covenant which involves a new way of being together. Jesus’ question: “Can you drink this cup?” is also meant for us. Rohr suggests that all of us experience at least “one situation in our lives that we cannot fix, control, explain, change, or even understand (FU, p68).” For Jesus and for his followers, the crucifixion became the dramatic symbol of that reality. This is also true for us.

I would like to point of the late Archbishop Oscar Romero as an example of how being confronted with suffering led toward greater integration and depth, the task of the second half of life. Just last Sunday, Romero was declared an official saint. Our Protestant tradition speaks of a much broader communion of saints that effectively includes all of us. So I think there can be room in that for Romero.

He became Archbishop of San Salvador in El Salvador in 1977. Romero was chosen because the church leadership believed that he would be a safe candidate who would not rock the boat. At that time, the Roman Catholic Church of El Salvador was the handmaiden of a systemically oppressive regime that protected the wealth and power of a small minority. These were the days of death squads. Any opponents, especially the poor who spoke up, were arrested or just kidnapped and disappeared by the tens of thousands. Sadly, these were also the days when US economic and political interests in the region at times contributed to the suffering of people in Central America.

Romero indeed did not speak up at the beginning of his ministry. However, when Father Rutilio Grande, his close friend and fellow priest, was gunned down for speaking against oppression, Romero began to face the suffering and injustice playing out right in front of him. He began to listen to the families who had lost loved ones and say things like:

“A church that doesn't provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed — what gospel is that?”

He really got into trouble when he implored soldiers who were Christian to stop participating in the killings of innocents:

“Brothers, you came from our own people. You are killing your own brothers... No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. No one has to obey an immoral law. It is high time you obeyed your consciences rather than sinful orders. The church cannot remain silent before such an abomination. ...In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose cry rises to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you: stop the repression.”

After this challenge, Romero was shot in the heart while saying mass on March 24, 1980. Romero had crossed a threshold. For a long time, he had held on to the “container,” the institution he served and had given him his sense of identity and order. He let go of all that to enter into the messy and tragic suffering of the people around him, many of who had carried their own cross of resistance.

I had the opportunity to travel with a group of Lutherans, including ministers and seminarians, to El Salvador and Nicaragua in 1989. We got to visit the cathedral where Romero is buried. More importantly, we met the real people who knew of the struggle that cost Romero and countless others their lives. We met a Lutheran Bishop in hiding who was trying to promote justice through non-violence. We met guerrillas who were resisting with arms and Jesuits who worked on behalf of the poor. We also spoke with a general and a politician who just kept insisting that their efforts of exerting control were necessary to keep communists from taking over the country. The perspectives we heard could not have been more divergent.

One of the people in my group was the mother of a Lutheran clergy woman. She was in her mid to late seventies. She had come from her safe east-coast community and her country club where she still liked to play cards with her friends. She had been a committed mom who raised several children. She just wanted people to get along and was initially not particularly taken by the structural or political analysis of what was going on. Her heart broke when we met with a group of women called “The mothers of the disappeared.” These women

showed images of their young adult sons or daughters, who had been abducted, tortured or killed outright by government sponsored death squads. Some had been involved in community organizing, agricultural cooperatives, or a union. Some were later found dead, others were still missing. When the grandmother in our group met these mothers who refused to be silent, she just cried with them and held the hand of one of them. As Romero once said: *“There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried.”* That pain was only heightened when we found out that the office of the group was bombed the day after we visited. Four months later, the Jesuit priests and their housekeeper and her daughter were murdered.

All our lives had been changed by these encounters. The people who touched my heart the most were those who could see that even those who were responsible for the atrocities were human beings who needed healing and transformation. Romero would pray for those killed and their killers and urged people to pursue a deeper peace that comes with waking up to our mutual belonging. Growing into this greater awareness and expanding consciousness is key to tasks of the second half of life. We are being asked to let go of what we think is our autonomous separate self we so try to protect but that will die anyway.ⁱⁱ Our perspective necessarily changes about what really matters and is essential to life and what is not. We come to realize that no amount of money, status, or supposed control will bring us real abundant life.

As we tend to the tasks of the second half of life, compassion and love amidst suffering are the dynamos that move us forward. They are the cup from which we are invited to drink right in our own time and place. Romero and the many saints around him are among those who can show us the way by neither denying or avoiding what is tragic in our lives. It is the way of the cross but it is also the way of resurrection, if we but only trust in the power and peace of God which are greater than our understanding. It is a falling upward, of connecting deeper with God through awe, wonder, and suffering. As a famous Hasidic Rabbi named Baal Shem Tov once said: *“Let me fall if I must. The one I will become will catch me.”* May we all be released into such greater freedom. Amen.

ⁱ As quoted by Richard Rohr in *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: JOSSEY-Bass, 2011, 65)

ⁱⁱ *“Anyone who wants to save his life, must lose it. Anyone, who loses her life will find it. What gain is there if you win the whole world and lose your very self? What can you offer in exchange for your own life” (Mt 16:25-26).*