



THE COMMUNION CUP  
Psalm 116: 12-14; I Corinthians 11:23-26

First Baptist Church, Raleigh, NC

William Powell Tuck

**March 16, 2008**

Cups play a prominent part in our lives. We use them to drink coffee, tea, juice, milk, or other liquids. Many of us still have the cup we had as a child, or we have our own children's cups, or our grandchildren's cups. We hang on to them as a way of remembering a special time in the past. I went into a former church member's home, and noticed that a whole wall was covered with shelves displaying various kinds of cups in multicolor. Some people collect cups or mugs that have pictures of various states, countries, colleges or universities, or clubs to which they belong. The Rotary Club, of which I was a member, used to give a cup to its speakers. It was a way of saying thank you to them, and was also a continuous reminder to that individual about Rotary.

I had a friend in seminary that always drank his coffee out of the same green cup. I often wondered if he ever washed that cup, because it always seemed to be in use. Many of us have a favorite cup, or mug, that we use for our special beverage.

### **The Importance of the Cup**

The Gospels tell us that Jesus took a cup in the Last Supper, and he blessed it. This cup was a part of Jesus' last supper as he celebrated the Passover with his disciples. Some early Christians claimed to have possessed the cup that Jesus used at the Last Supper. They called it the Holy Grail. Stories and miracles were centered on this particular cup for many years. A contemporary writer, Thomas B. Costain, wrote a novel which I read as a teenager, entitled *The Silver Chalice*. This novel was built around the cup of Jesus, how it made its way to Antioch, and the lives that it touched.

### **The Cup in the Bible**

In the Bible, the cup is a reference to the common drinking utensil which often played an uncommon role in the lives of people. For example, there is a cup in the dream of Pharaoh's butler. Joseph interpreted this dream for the butler. Joseph had a cup hidden in his brother, Benjamin's, grain sack as he and his family left to go back home. Through this entrapment, Joseph later revealed to his brothers who he really was. At the Last Supper, Jesus took a cup, and blessed it as a part of the Passover

Feast. That cup has continued to be a part of the tradition of the Lord's Supper to this day.

The cup in the Bible also is symbolic in many ways. In some places in the Bible will refer to "The cup of bitterness," "The cup of agony," and, "The cup that overflows," which the writer of the twenty third Psalm noted. Think with me about some of these symbolic cups to which the scriptures refer.

### **The Cup of Salvation**

There is, first of all, the *cup of salvation*. The Psalmist wrote about this cup in Psalm 116. The Psalmist says that, "I will lift up a cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord." Through the death of Jesus Christ, this cup is offered to all persons. It overflows with the bounty of God's love, grace, and abundance. The salvation from this cup has overflowed and run down through the centuries until you and I can drink of that cup today.

Emily and I had the privilege of attending the Baptist World Alliance meeting in South Africa in 1998. The Africans have many dialects. It is often difficult to translate the Biblical images into the African dialect. I heard how the word "salvation" was translated in an interesting way. They translated the word "salvation" with a phrase, "He took our necks out." This phrase had a special meaning to people in South Africa. Captured slaves would be marched enroute to the coast to get on slave ships. The slaves had iron collars around their necks, with a chain binding the slave in front of a person to the one behind him, and on down the line. If a person saw a friend or relative among the slaves as they were being marched to the ship, that person could pay the price for the slave and the master would unlock the iron collar, then take the man's neck out and set him free.

"He took their necks out" was a symbolic expression to the African people about God's redeeming grace. They remembered well what it was like to be a slave set free. This image helped them to see that they were set free from the shackles of sin which had bound them. God's grace had freed them and given them new opportunities to live.

Annie Dillard, in her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, reminds us of the vastness and wonder of God's grace and love when she exclaims, "Experiencing the present, truly, is being emptied and hollowed; you catch grace as a man fills his cup under a waterfall." God's grace is so marvelous and abundant that it is impossible to contain it. Like a person standing with a cup under a waterfall, there is no way that the cup can contain all of the wonder that comes from God's love. God's salvation is beyond our understanding. It is abundant and free.

### **The Cup of the New Covenant**

Second, as we come to the communion table, let us also be reminded of the *cup of the new covenant*. Jesus shared the Passover meal with his disciples, and then lifted his cup to proclaim the beginning of a new era. The cup of blessing was traditionally the last thing at this sacred meal. With his cup raised high, Jesus declared that this “cup was a sign of the new covenant.” He had established a new relationship with his disciples. The old Sinai covenant, which was built on the sacrifice of animals, was over.

The covenant was one of the great Old Testament images. It appears two hundred eighty-six times, from Genesis 17 to Revelation 21. A covenant was made with Abraham, and with Moses at Mount Sinai. The covenant God made with Israel was often broken by them, and reaffirmed by God. Jeremiah promised that a new covenant would come, and this covenant would be a law written within their hearts.

Jesus declared that he had established a new covenant by his blood. The disciples, who were Jewish, would not literally want to drink blood. Jesus was saying that his death was a sign, a symbol of the outpouring of life and the creating of a new relationship with God.

Today, we can relate to God differently, because Jesus Christ has made this way to God possible for us. His new covenant was the one which Jeremiah said would be written on our hearts. The cup is a sign of the new covenant, a new relationship with God, brought about by Jesus Christ.

Recently, a young couple stood before me in the sacred place of our church, and they pledged a covenant to each other. This covenant was based on faith, hope, and love—faith in each other, and faith in God; hope in the dreams that they had for their married life, and hope in the presence of God; in the love that they shared for each other, the love of their parents for them, and, most of all, the love of God. It was a covenant in which they bound themselves to each other and God. Today, we reaffirm, each time we drink the cup of the Lord’s Supper, that we are part of the New Covenant which Jesus Christ created by his love and sacrifice.

### **The Cup of Suffering**

Third, there is also the *cup of suffering*. As Jesus bowed in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed, “Oh Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” What cup? Was it the cup of suffering, the cup of agony, and the cup of death? The mother of two of Jesus’ disciples said to him, “Lord, let my sons have the chief seats in your kingdom.” Jesus asked them, “Are you able to drink of the cup that I must drink?” They said, “Yes, Lord.” But, they really did not know what it was. “Are you able to drink the cup of suffering and agony that I must bear?” Jesus asks us. It is easy to say yes when we really do not know if we can.

The Lord's Supper was instituted within a context of suffering. Jesus knew that he was soon to be betrayed, and that he faced the agony of the cross. Are we able to share in his suffering, to be his instruments to reach out in love to others and touch them? We are challenged by Paul to be ministers of reconciliation—to share the suffering of Christ. Are we able to do that?

I heard about an elderly preacher who was addicted to alcohol, obviously not a Baptist minister. He would do fine for awhile, but then, he would begin to drink again. When he did, he lost favor with his family, church, and his bishop. When he was sober, he was always a very pious and upright minister. There was always one individual, a young pastor, who came to his assistance whenever he was in trouble. This young pastor had the reputation of not giving up on people. After a short period of success, and many second chances, the old minister began to drink again. This time, the church would take it no longer, and he was forced to surrender his ordination certificates.

The young minister did not hear about it for some time. When he learned about it, he remembered that the old preacher had a little family farm he would normally go to in times like this. He got in his car and went searching for the farm. When he arrived, he was greeted by the grateful wife of the minister. She told him that the old preacher saw him driving up, and, went and hid in the barn. The young minister walked out to the barn and found the old preacher huddled in a corner.

The old preacher cursed him, and said, "I can't stand you, but I knew you would be the only one to come. Thank God, you never let me go." This young minister understood the Gospel message that you should never let anybody go. The Good News is that God cares about every single person, no matter what his or her sin is and pursues us like a "hound from heaven" with unconditional love. The young minister suffered with his brother, and brought to him the ministry of reconciliation. As Christians we are called to reach out with love and concern to others.

### **The Cup of Service**

Finally, the cup is also symbolic of the *cup of service*. Do you remember that Jesus told his disciples that, "As often as you give a cup of cold water in my name, you minister to me"? All the other cups, the cup of salvation, the cup of suffering, and the cup of the new covenant, lead us to the awareness that, having received such great love, we now are challenged to manifest compassion, mercy, and love, through our lives. Our Lord reached out to the needy and hurting, and he has commissioned us to share the cup of compassion with them. We, who have been reconciled by God, reach out to bring reconciliation to others through God's love and grace.

We are now offered Jesus' cup each time we come to the Communion Table.

As we drink of that cup, our challenge is now to go into the world and to share the love of God with others, so they, too, might drink from his cup. His cup is one of service—self giving love. To drink of Jesus’ cup challenges us to be a part of the redemptive force in the world. We share Christ’s cup only as we are his instruments in ministry in the world. Whenever we give “a cup of cold water” to someone in need, we serve our Lord.

When I visited an elderly woman in the hospital in my last church, I embraced her as I was leaving. She said, “Thank you for doing that, nobody ever hugs me anymore.” There are a lot of people who are waiting for somebody to reach out and embrace them—to share love, to share a touch, to share hope, or to share opportunities. May you and I be God’s instruments to others as we lift up the cup of service.

Zollene Reissner, the church organist in one of the churches where I was pastor, was on a European concert tour with the St. Alban’s Choir several years ago. One of the numbers they sang was composed by Petr Eben, a world-renowned Czech composer. He drew his music from the setting of a poem by Delores Dufner, OSB, a member of the Benedictine Community in St. Joseph, Minnesota. It is entitled *From Life to Life*.

O wheat whose crushing was for bread,  
O bread whose breaking is for life,  
O life, your seeming end is seed,  
a seed for wheat, or bread and life.

O fruit whose crushing was for wine,  
O wine whose flowing is for blood,  
O blood, your pouring out is life,  
our life in you, O fruitful vine.

O life whose crushing was for love,  
O love whose spending was to death,  
O death, your mourning is our joy,  
full joy and birth to lasting life.

As you eat the bread at the Communion Table, reflect on the fact that Christ is

the bread of life. As you drink the cup, remember that Jesus Christ is the one in whom you have life. As you drink, remember the cup of salvation. Remember the Christ, who has suffered, died and has given us salvation. Reflect on the cup of suffering. Remember that you are united to Christ through the cup of the new covenant. When you have finished eating his bread, and sharing his cup, remember you now go to bear the cup of service, in His name, into the world.

Holy God, we cannot fully express our thanksgiving for Your great love, which we have seen through the death of Your son, Jesus Christ. We come, now, to commune at Your table. May we sense Your presence as we approach this moment, in the name of Christ. Amen.

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

O loving God, we gather this day to worship You. Our presence here in this place affirms our dependence upon You. Our journey through life is often difficult and hard unless we are fed by Your spirit, so we come to Your Table to experience the power of Your Presence pulsating through our veins. As we drink this cup, may we feel the strength of Your grace sustaining us so that we will thirst no more. As we eat this bread, may we be fed by the Bread of Heaven. Nourish us until our will, desire, hope, and dreams become Your will and goals as we eat at Your Table. We offer You our mind, heart, soul and strength. O Bread of Life, feed us until we are fully nourished to live for You.

We bring before You our burdens, sorrows, illnesses, hurts, needs, and pains and pray for the assurance of Your abiding presence. Thank You, Lord, that nothing separates us from Your love. In times of difficulty this knowledge comforts us. We come to Your Table with our joys and happiness to express our thanksgiving for the wonder of living. O Bread of Heaven, we come to Your Table that we may hunger and thirst no more. Feed us with Your abundant grace. Through Christ, whose death revealed Your sacrificial love to us. Amen.