

One day a little girl asked her mother, ‘How did the human race begin?’ The mother says, “Well God made Adam & Eve and they had children and so that is how all mankind was made.” A few days later, the little girl asked her father the same question. Her father answered, “Many years ago there were monkeys from which the human race evolved.” The confused girl returned to her mother and said, “How is it possible that you told me the human race was created by God and Dad said they were developed from monkeys?” “Well, dear, it is very simple,” replied the mother. “I told you about my side of the family and Dad told you about his.”

First, some gospel background. The story about James’ and John’s request to sit beside Jesus is a familiar account that varies significantly in the synoptics. Matthew and Mark place this incident immediately before Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but Matthew softens the story by attributing the request to the mother of James and John. Luke makes no mention of James’ and John’s request, but both Mark and Luke include another episode when the disciples argue about who will be greatest, but that happens while they are at Capernaum (Mk 9:33-37; Lk 9:46-48).

Although these variations are worth noting, other features seem more significant when the focus is limited to Mark’s gospel. For example, that James and John are bold enough to make this request of Jesus isn’t that startling, given their apparent place in Jesus’ inner circle. Even Jesus’ nickname for them – SONS OF THUNDER (Mk 3:17; 9:38) – implies that they are audacious characters. The anecdote about James’ and John’s request is also compelling because it illustrates Mark’s literary genius. Each time Jesus teaches His disciples about His approaching death, it is followed with a lesson on self-denial and service (Mk 8:31-9:1; 9:30-37; 10:32-45). So, when Mark locates this dispute about who is greatest immediately after Jesus speaks about His death for a third time, it adds to the story’s dramatic tension. Also noteworthy is that the brothers make their request just before Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. This suggests that they hope to secure their seats of honor in His kingdom, pre-empting the other disciples who likely share a similar ambition.

Also of note is that when asked to do them a favor, Jesus responds with a question: “What is it you want me to do for you?” (v. 36). It is the same question that Jesus will ask the blind Bartimaeus (Mk 10:51) in the gospel we will hear next weekend. But in contrast to James and John, all Bartimaeus wants is to see; he doesn’t seek a seat of honor. After Jesus heals him, Bartimaeus gets up and follows, perhaps leaving everything behind, including a very useful garment, his coat (Mk 10:50-52)

Their thinking is so misguided that when Jesus asks, ‘Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’ they foolishly reply, ‘We can.’ Their answer exudes ill-advised confidence, but it also indicates that they haven’t actually understood Jesus.

Ironically, Jesus doesn’t dismiss James’ and John’s bravado. Instead, He affirms their self-assured declarations by telling them they will drink the same cup that He drinks and be baptized with the same baptism (v. 39). But what these 2 disciples don’t realize at this moment is that when Jesus comes in His glory, it won’t be on a royal throne, but on a cross. And those who will eventually sit at His right hand and left will be “two bandits” (Mk 15:27). However, James and John aren’t the only ones who have the wrong idea. The other 10 disciples are just as confused, for when they hear about the brothers’ request, they become “angry with James and John” (v. 41) (adapted from HOMILETICS ONLINE, Oct 17, 2021, p. 6-7) I could go on, but that’s plenty for us to chew on for one homily. But remember, my homily was rather short last weekend. JUST SAYING!

Second, we live in a world wherein most everything over-stimulates our grandiosity, even as we are handed less and less tools to deal with that.

Several years ago, Robert L. Moore wrote a very significant book entitled, *FACING THE DRAGON*. The dragon that most threatens us, he believes, is the dragon of our own grandiosity, that sense inside us that has us believe that we are singularly special and destined for greatness. This condition besets us all. Simply put, each of us, all 7 billion of us on this planet, cannot help but feel that we are the center of the universe. And, given that this is mostly unacknowledged and we are generally ill-equipped to deal with it, this makes for a scary situation. This isn't a recipe for peace and harmony, but for jealousy and conflict.

And yet this condition isn't our fault, nor it is in itself a moral flaw in our nature. Our grandiosity is manufacturer installed. We are made in the image and likeness of GOD. This is the most fundamental truth inside the Judaeo-Christian understanding of the human person. We have a micro-chip of divinity inside us. This constitutes our greatest dignity -- but also creates our biggest problems. The infinite does not sit calmly inside the finite. Because we have divine energy inside us, we do not make easy peace with this world, our longings and our desires.

And so all of us are driven outwards by a divine gene to somehow make a statement with our lives, to somehow create a personal immortality, and to somehow create some artifact of specialness that the whole world has to take note of. This isn't an abstract concept; it's utterly earthy. The evidence for this is seen in every newscast, in every bombing, in every dare-devil stunt, in *THE GUINNESS BOOK OF RECORDS*, and in every situation where someone seeks to stand out. It's seen too in the universal hunger for fame, in the longing to be known, and in the need to be recognized as unique, the best, as special. So this grandiosity, of itself, isn't our fault, nor is it necessarily a moral flaw. It comes from the way we are made, ironically from what is highest and best in us. (adapted from *STRUGGLING WITH GRANDIOSITY*, Ronald Rolheiser, posting of 4 July 2016)

Third, so how do we DEAL with this? What is the gospel way forward? We drink from the cup from which Jesus drank and are baptized into His baptism. When we are ready to die to our own agenda, our own privileges and comforts, and orient our life around the will and the work of God -- and service and care for others -- then we have found our path.

Many of us probably remember the horrible attack on a Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, that housed US Marines and French soldiers. It was October of 1983, and 307 people died in the attack.

A few days after the attack, Marine Corps Commandant Paul X. Kelly visited the hospital in Germany where the surviving soldiers were taken for medical treatment. Among the soldiers he visited was Lance Corporal Jeffrey Lee Nashton. Nashton, only 23 years old, suffered a fractured skull, collapsed lungs, a fractured leg, a broken arm, and concrete splinters in his eyes. Commandant Kelly would comment later that there were so many tubes in Nashton's body that he "looked more like a machine than a man."

When Kelly reached Nashton's bedside, he says Nashton reached up and ran his fingers along the stars on Kelly's military uniform. Due to the tubes in his throat, Nashton was unable to speak. But he reached over and scribbled a couple of words on a piece of paper beside his bed. Kelly leaned over to read it. Corporal Nashton had simply written "Semper Fi" -- the Marine motto which means "Forever faithful." In spite of his suffering, in spite of his wounds, Lance Corporal Nashton was determined to remain "Forever faithful" to his calling.

The truth is that discipleship that costs nothing, accomplishes nothing. It will cost us if we follow Jesus with any kind of seriousness. What has our discipleship ever cost us -- because all of us have been called to

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serve? What does it take to drink from Jesus' cup? The willingness to pay a price – while most others will take the easiest way out.

It also requires making the hard decisions most others are unwilling to make. In the Old Testament, the Book of Deuteronomy chapter 30, God said to the people of Israel, "I have set before you life and death. Therefore, choose life." Many of us have deluded ourselves into believing we can achieve our dreams without making hard decisions. And yet deciding is the most God-like characteristic which the Creator has bestowed upon us. If being created in His image means anything it means we have the ability to choose. Not to choose means giving up that which makes us peculiarly human. Drinking from His cup means making the hard decisions most others are unwilling to make.

British newspaper columnist Oliver Burkeman said he gained new insight on making major life decisions from therapist James Hollis. Most of us weigh a major decision by asking the question "Will this make me happy?" Hollis said to change the question to, "Will this choice enlarge me or diminish me?" Which choice will lead to personal growth or wisdom? Which choice will make a greater positive impact on society? When we look back at the end of our life, which choice will leave a holy legacy? As Burkeman wrote, "....don't worry about burning bridges: irreversible decisions tend to be more satisfying, because now there's only one direction to travel – forward into whatever choice you made."

Jesus is asking us to make an irreversible decision. To burn our bridges so that we can't go back to our old life. Instead, we have to move forward in only one direction – into the will and the good works God is calling us to.

I love what Bob Orr wrote on this subject. He said, "There is a prerequisite for knowing the will of God; and it's this – being willing to do it....God does not say to you, 'I'll show you my will and then I'd like you to decide if you'd like to do it.'" He does not reveal His will so that we can speculate on it, so that we can think about it, or so we can take it to a board meeting and vote on it. God reveals His will to people who are committed to do it -- no matter what it is."

We have to note that in the Bible Jesus never asked anyone to think over a decision and get back to Him. He expects us to make a decision now.

Drinking from His cup means being willing to give more than we expect to get. Calvin Coolidge once put it like this: "No person was ever honored for what he received. Honor has been the reward for what he gave." Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

You know it's fascinating that in a restaurant where we receive poor service, we may still leave a 20% tip. A restaurant where we receive better service may receive a little more. Then there is that which we give to God. For some reason we would be more embarrassed to leave a tip of 1 or 2% in a restaurant than in God's house. The cup from which Jesus and His disciples drank meant giving everything they had. Can we drink from that cup? Are we made of such stuff? Will our contributions to this world live long after we are gone? Will the earth be a better place because we have walked upon it? We have to choose. Amen. (Last section adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, Sept-Dec 2021, p. 28-29)