Pass the Cup
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 4/6/25

The summer before my last year of seminary, I did a 10-week internship at Thomas Jefferson University hospital in Center City – what's known as Clinical Pastoral Education, or CPE. Students in CPE spend the summer learning best practices for pastoral care and then applying what they've learned by serving as volunteer chaplains in the hospital. Most presbyteries now require candidates for ordained ministry to do a unit of CPE – there's no better way to get comfortable visiting people in all kinds of situations than to spend a summer weaving in and out of the hospital rooms of strangers.

I had lots of memorable conversations that summer at Jefferson, including one with a patient whose name and condition I can no longer recall – but I remember talking with him about his overall attitude. Lots of people that summer told me they were trying to "stay positive" because they thought it would help them heal; they were convinced that if they spent too much time thinking about their fears or anxieties their bodies would somehow never get better. I spent a lot of time trying to convince people that attempting to block their quote-unquote negative emotions would not make those emotions go away, only harder to manage.

But when I asked this particular patient about his outlook, he put it this way: "I was talking to a friend on the phone this morning about why her glass always seems half empty. She said, it's not half empty, it's half full – it's just that it's half full of urine. I told her my glass is half empty, but that's because I've already had half a glass of champagne today."

How full is your glass these days, and what's your liquid of choice? Our two Scripture readings today are linked by their references to "the cup." In both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, the cup is "a metaphor for that which is allotted by God, whether blessing or judgment." On the night of his betrayal and arrest, Jesus withdraws to the Mount of Olives with his disciples to pray; with deep anguish he pleads, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." Jesus knows what he has to do – he knows the cross awaits him – and yet he still wonders aloud if there is any way for the cup to pass from him, if it is possible to avoid the coming suffering.

Psalm 16, on the other hand, strikes a more hopeful tone: "The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage." The author of Psalm 16 considers himself blessed by God – if champagne had been invented then, maybe his cup would be full of it.

But underneath the psalmist's confident, even joyful, tone, we can hear a note of distress, and perhaps the threat of danger. "Protect me, O Lord, you are my only good!" he begins – the psalmist needs protection; is someone after him? He is worried about the unfaithful, those who stray away to other gods besides God – are they threatening him or trying to tempt him? He is worried about dying – he sees God as the only thing between himself and Sheol, the place of the dead. And he struggles to sleep at night – when he's lying awake, he asks his heart to remind him of God's wisdom. Perhaps the psalmist is not so different from those patients I visited in my chaplaincy days, distressed but trying to talk himself into a more positive outlook.

That said, I think the psalmist has a better strategy than simply trying to avoid or block out his negative emotions: he asks God for help while remembering with thanksgiving all the blessings he has from God. A couple months back when we hosted our congregational conversation and art project about managing our anxiety in troubled times, several of you offered that making a list of things you're grateful for is one of the strategies you deploy to help calm your racing mind. Science tells us that gratitude is a powerful force in our bodies, though we're not quite sure how it works. One study asked a group of patients being treated for heart failure to make a quick list of things they were grateful for each day – at the end of the study, the patients who adopted a daily practice of giving thanks had healthier hearts than the patients who did not. Something happens within us when we take intentional time to give thanks – in our case, to God – for all the blessings in our lives.

And remembering God's blessings, all the ways we've rested secure in the goodness of God throughout our lifetimes, can give us courage to face whatever we're called to face. When the author of Psalm 16 is awake and anxious in the middle of the night, he remembers the way God has guided him throughout his life, the counsel God has given him. He tries to keep the knowledge of God's steadfastness in mind as a source of strength. He doesn't have to handle his negative emotions or face his fears alone – God is with him as partner and guide. God will continue to be there, no matter what dangers he must confront.

In her book "Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week," Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine frames the story of Holy Week in terms of risk: the danger Jesus was willing to confront for us, and the danger he may call us to confront as we take up our crosses to follow him. When Jesus took the time to go to the Mount of Olives and

pray for the cup to pass from him, he was taking a risk, Levine argues. Jesus could have spent that time calling together his supporters to protect him, or appealing to God to send a legion of angels to his aid. "The risk," Levine says, "is knowing that he *can* save himself and *choosing* not to do so."

God also takes a risk when God chooses not to let the cup pass from Jesus. "Removing the cup is, of course, in God's power to do," Levine writes. "God has to refrain from using that heavenly power to stop the arrest, stop the trials, stop the suffering, and stop the death of his son. Jesus will suffer, and God will suffer as well." Jesus calls his disciples into risk too: on the Mount of Olives, Jesus challenges them to stay awake with him, and he challenges Simon Peter to take the risk of being associated with him.

And of course, we as Jesus's modern-day disciples are called to risk, to follow Jesus even when it brings us to uncomfortable, unhappy, or even dangerous places. Levine uses the simple example of getting a call from a friend on hospice to come for a visit. What happens when we get that call "and we just can't do it?" she wonders. "We fear the hospice, we fear death, we fear failing our friend. And then we feel guilt. What now? How can we make up our failures, when our friend is dead?" Levine continues: "[Our journey through the season of] Lent asks us: What do we need to do? Not *should* or *could* but *need?* Who might be depending on us?"

Earlier this week, a church member shared with me that their house cleaner sent a text at 6 am saying she wouldn't be coming to work that day, because ICE was outside her apartment building just up the road from here. She's a citizen, but she did not want to have an encounter with the officers, and she did not want to be asked for information about her neighbors. She told our church member she was worried about all the other people in the building who would not be leaving their apartments that day – people who needed to go to work to provide for their families. And she was also worried about kids who would not be going to school, where they not only learn but receive meals that help to keep their bellies full. We may not agree on the politics of immigration, but I hope we can all agree that children should have enough to eat.

The church member wondered what they could do – they felt powerless to help. Speaking up feels so fraught right now. The consequences for exercising our freedom of speech feel suddenly unknown. And my guess is most of us would not want to have our own encounter with ICE. We want to protect ourselves and our families. And yet Lent asks us: what do we need to do? Who might be depending on us? What holy risks is Jesus calling us to as we seek to follow him?

The good news is that we do not have to risk alone. We gather courage from the God who is always with us to guide and protect us. We gather courage from one another in community, sharing ideas, pooling resources and building one another up. And we gather courage from Jesus, our example, who risked suffering and death as an expression of his care for the whole human family.

It strikes me that when faced with the cross, even Jesus – who we believe was somehow fully divine as well as fully human – when faced with the cross even Jesus was scared. On the Mount of Olives he prayed for God to remove the cup from him, that he would not have to do this terrible thing. Luke tells us that in his anguish Jesus prayed so earnestly that sweat fell from his body like drops of blood falling to the ground. Even the competent, confident, Holy Spirit-filled Jesus asked not to have to do this thing he had been called to do. But instead of blocking his negative emotions or running away from his call, he followed the example of the author of Psalm 16, offering up his pain to God in prayer and finding confidence in God's goodness.

The cross reminds us that suffering and death do not have the final word – God does. God may call us to risk our settled ideas about the world, or the way we've always done things, or our polite avoidance of controversial topics, or our reputations, or our comfort, or our safety, or our very lives, to follow Jesus's way of loving our neighbors. There is no promise that doing so will not be painful. Like Simon denying Jesus, we may fail. Or we may lose exactly what we feared we might. But the cross – Jesus's suffering and sacrifice – is not the end of the story. Resurrection is. Redemption is. New life is. May we too move through our fear and pain and anxiety, that the abundant resurrection life God promises may be born in us.