

Life in a Paper Cup

By Linda Rex

September 4, 2022, PROPER 18—I know I will show my age by asking this question, but do you remember back when going to a water cooler, you would find a holder full of little paper cups in the shape of a cone? They might hold one small serving of cold water, but then they could not be reused more than once or twice because the water would soak the cup, causing it to leak.

Early this morning I woke up from a weird dream in which I was being sung a song about a paper cup. It was beautiful and I wish I could have written down the lyrics, because they were profound. But the point of the song was that I and every other human in this world are like paper cups—fragile and yet containing a valuable substance which is life-giving. Like the clay vessels which the apostle Paul talks about in 2 Cor. 4:7, we are fragile containers filled with the Holy Spirit, God's real presence in us and with us.

So often, we minimize our worth and value as human beings, not realizing how absolutely precious we are. All we see is a little paper cup, plain, easily squashed, and short-lived. If we look solely at our usefulness, we may find that we have a small something to offer others—a life-giving drink that may do a little good when a person is thirsty. But we are in no way able to supply the real need of a person who has just wandered in off the desert, not having had a drink for hours.

I suppose we could begin to look at ourselves from the point of view of what we contain, rather than who we are as a container. Often, we want to focus on the presence of God within. But in Psalm 139 we read how God created each of us very carefully and he knows everything about us. He knows when we awaken and what we will say before it even comes out our mouths. And he knew us before we were born, and knew what we would become and planned for us to share life with him now and forever.

Like the potter the prophet Jeremiah was sent by God to learn from, our Lord has carefully fashioned each one of us, making us vessels who are able carry his very presence and power. (See Jeremiah 18:1–11.) And even though, like the potter's flawed vessel, none of us have taken the shape God originally intended, Christ took our human flesh and reformed it into the shape needed to be true reflections of our Triune God, able to participate in a real way in all he is doing right now and in the world to come.

The thing is, many of us have a tendency to argue with God about his creative efforts. We tell God, "I have no interest whatsoever in being a paper cup. Why did you make me like this? Why was I even born?" (See Rom. 9:20.) I can understand how someone may feel this way when all of the experiences in their life up that time have told them they are somehow worthless or unlovable. But our everyday experience of life does not determine our value or worth—God has already declared our value and worth and lovability in Jesus Christ.

In the gospel passage for this Sunday, Jesus was walking along, being followed by large crowds of people. Significantly, he turned around to face them and began to talk with them about seriously considering the cost of following him. He knew many of them did not realize the price that would be asked of him—crucifixion, and his followers—persecution. They were looking at him as the one who would deliver them from Roman oppression and make their life abundant and blessed again, where he was seeking to free them from an even greater oppressor—sin, evil, and death. They did not even see how they were being held in bondage by their flesh and how desperately they needed to set free, free to be who God always meant for them to be—those who loved him with their whole beings and who loved one another as themselves.

Can you see the connection? How often we get swept away into false view of ourselves and of why we are even alive! We get pulled way from the simplicity of what God meant for us to be all along—paper cups that would hold his life-giving water providing refreshment for others. We were never meant to be the Savior or Redeemer—that is why Jesus came. Our participation in God's life is precious and of great

value to him. And he will not stop until we are all gathered around his table—his very own adopted children in Christ the Father’s Son. Paper cups—adopted children. Isn’t that enough for us?

Jesus didn’t pull any punches that day—he told the people the stark and painful truth. He told the people following him that no one in our lives, not even ourselves, should be of greater importance to us than him. If there is anyone else who is of greater importance to us than Christ, then are we truly his followers or disciples?

He also said that we each have our own cross to bear—some place in which we ourselves must be willing to lay down our lives as Jesus laid his down. What needs to be put to death in us that Christ may live? Too often we make the profession of faith in Jesus, but then we want him around just to make sure we are successful, wealthy, popular or blessed in some way. We certainly don’t want him to ask anything of us. We don’t want to have to give up things we may be attached to, such as unhealthy relationships or habits. Why should we have to give up a good paying job just because what we are doing is unethical or destructive?

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us of the difference between following our Lord Jesus Christ and simply professing our faith in him. We need to take seriously Jesus’ words about considering the cost. When we plan to build a new home, often we don’t realize the extent of the details involved and all of the decisions which have to be made in order to complete the project. Imagine multiplying that by the thousands of decisions and millions of dollars needed to complete the construction of a modern-day skyscraper? The leaders and generals of Ukraine and Russia, we’d like to hope, are taking into account the cost of their war against one another—are they prepared to finish what they have begun?

In the same way, we need to take seriously our commitment to Christ. Why? Because Christ is the one, as God in human flesh, who took our little paper cup humanity and transformed it. He’s the One who did all that was needed for us to live the life we need to live, die the death we deserve to die, and to bring us into his own relationship with the Father in the Spirit. When we follow Jesus, we lay down all our possessions—our own effort to find life in this world, our own expectations, our own will, our own solutions to life’s problems—and we receive gratefully everything from him. Jesus is our life. He is our hope. He is our past, present, and future—the One in whom we live, move, and have our being. We gratefully follow him wherever he goes, no matter the cost to ourselves, because by the Spirit, he has included us in his life and love, now and forever, as beloved children of the Father.

Lord, thank you for inviting every one of us to follow you. Grant us the grace to count the cost of discipleship, but even so, to choose to follow you wherever you lead. Thank you for including us in your love and life. By your Spirit, make us true reflections of you, for the Father’s glory. Amen.

“Now large crowds were going along with Him; and He turned and said to them, ‘If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, “This man began to build and was not able to finish.” Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.’ ”
Luke 14:25–33 NASB

[If you are interested in participating in a discussion group in the Nashville, TN area, or participating in a Zoom group, drop me a line at ourlifeinthetrinity@gmail.com]