# February 23, 2014 Norwalk

**Pastoral Prayer**

These are loud days, O God – so loud that it's hard, sometimes to hear. There is so much shouting, so much angry yelling, so much arguing and condemning and demanding and demeaning that we just pull in our antennae and hunker down inside ourselves. But it can be noisy there, too, what with all the inner questions and conscience and second-guessing and insecurities; what with the echoes of parent voices or religious voices urging this or scolding that; coaxing, disapproving, and every now and then affirming. What do we listen to, if we can't listen to it all?

We can listen to the sounds of joy, and the exquisite music of a smile. Here, then, we take the time to name...

to hear, to celebrate, to give thanks.

And we can also listen to the sounds of ache – of earnest hope and fervent need; to the metal-on-metal grinding of deep concern in the lives of those around us. Here, then, we take the time to listen with solidarity...

God of the still, small voice, we give you thanks for the warmth that envelops us in the company of each other, for the pulse around us that animates our own reminding us that we are not alone. Bless us with the patience to listen to understand, and the initiative to move with that larger understanding, that our time on this earth be not merely spent, but invested as sign and foretaste and instrument of your coming reign.

Teach us anew through the words that Jesus taught us, praying: Our father in heaven...

**Psalm 81:10**

I am the Lord your God,

who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.

Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.

# **The Open Cup**

It is a little embarrassing to talk about, this problem we have at our house. Our coffee maker uses one of those stainless thermal carafes to collect the brewed coffee. You heard me say it is “stainless”, which is also to say you can’t see through it. The problem is that both of us have a tendency in the morning to grind the beans, prepare the filter, add the water and press the power button, and forget to check the pot.

More times than I care to admit, we discover the “hard way” that the pot still held some of the previous day’s fill. It isn’t a matter of taste or temperature; it is simply a matter of mess. What can’t drip into the pot spills over the sides and floods the counter and floor and inside the cabinets below. It is a fairly elementary principle that two occasionally intelligent people should be able to understand, but are still having to rehearse: when the pot is full, it can’t hold anything new.

In her book, *The Cup of Our Life*, Des Moines writer Joyce Rupp reflects on the cup as a symbol of our spiritual life – cups as vessels that are filled and emptied; vessels with the capacity to hold that which warms us and quenches our thirst. But sometimes the same thing happens with our spiritual cup as happens with our coffee pot: nothing new can be added to that which is already full.

Of course sometimes the “fullness” is a matter of perspective. Not long ago I heard sports commentator John Feinstein talk about the increasing number of foreign players from the likes of China and Eastern Europe showing up on NBA teams and All-Star rosters.

"These guys come into college basketball and the pro's so much sounder fundamentally than our kids growing up because they are willing to accept coaching. They don't think they are superstars at 14 & 15 because they aren't told they are superstars. And as a result, you watch the way they shoot, you watch the way they pass -- they are much sounder fundamentally than the American players are." (broadcast 2/18/05).

Because, he says, “they are willing to accept coaching”; willing to operate out of the assumption that they don’t already know it all – that they aren’t already full. We create boxes for ourselves sometimes; airtight little enclosures that we willingly climb into and close above us the lid. We do it not only athletically, but professionally, intellectually, politically, relationally. Inside there, in our fullness, we are secure and protected from anything that might stretch or enlarge us; anything that might threaten our rigidly held conviction.

It is a form of intellectual and spiritual suffocation that provoked one observer to recommend that we should “fear more the unquestioned answer than the unanswered question.” If we have nothing left to learn, no part of us left to grow, the only thing left is to die.

Sometimes, in other words, receiving a fresh infilling requires an intentional emptying of the old; other times it means recognizing and even honoring the emptiness we already have. Sometimes the blockage has to do with ego; other times simple habit.

Several years ago, I worked with an Associate Minister who had recently joined that church staff and was taking his first turn behind the pulpit. I was sitting across the chancel, helping with other parts of the service, but he was “in charge” for the day. The next day, he observed that even when I wasn’t “leading the service,” I was leading the service.

During the unison prayers, for example, he could hear me reading loudly and steadily from my chair across the chancel– leading from the seated position. I appreciated his observation. He wasn’t being critical. What he was calling attention to, looking back on it, was my fullness that didn’t respond well to emptiness. So accustomed to pouring, I wasn’t much practiced in being filled. Since that conversation I have been working on shutting up more often.

Because if we are constantly full, there is no room to add anything new. You probably know folks like that – who suggest by their manner and the tone of their conversation that they needn’t bother with learning anything new; they already know it all. Like placing a hand over your coffee cup to deflect a restaurant waiter’s ministrations, they signal they already have enough. They aren’t interested in any fresh pour.

But I’m reminded that the reason the “Dead Sea” is “dead” is because it enjoys none of this revitalizing circle. It has no outlet to remove the dense saltiness already there, and the fresh water that flows from the Jordan into it is quickly evaporated away.

For an environment in which life can meaningfully be sustained, emptying and receiving are both required. Every now and then it’s worth stepping back – as individuals and as a church – and reflecting on both pieces of that action:

· What lesson do I need to teach? What lesson do I need to learn?

· What word do I need to speak? What word do I need to hear?

· What practice do I need to model? What practice do I need to hone?

Filling, but also emptying. One obstacle is that emptiness has come to have a negative connotation. It feels like poverty; inadequacy; something to be avoided and protected against. And certainly there are experiences of absence – chronic hunger and persistent deprivation – we would not seek.

But emptiness is also readiness. It is a willingness to receive, coupled with an openness that permits its entrance. It wouldn’t be a bad spiritual practice to look through your cabinet and pick out a cup that you can retire from morning coffee duty and relocate to the top of your dresser or bedside table where it can serve as a kind of reminder and teacher. Every now and then pick it up, hold it, trace with your fingers the smooth expanse of its rim. Feel your way completely around the full circumference, noting the wide space between and all the capacity for filling. Imagine what all could be poured into that openness. Imagine, then, that the cup is yourself. And imagine that open and empty bowl reminding you to likewise respect openness, and to *be* open.

The Chinese philosopher Lao-Tsu observed that…

*Clay is molded into vessels,*

*and because of the space where there is nothing,*

*you can carry water.*

*Space is carved out from a wall,*

*And because of the place where there is nothing,*

*you can receive light.*

*Be empty, and you will remain full….*

In about 10 days we will enter into the season of Lent which through the years has often been used as a time of fasting – a protected series of weeks in which the faithful intentionally empty themselves, physically but also spiritually; not simply to feel the pangs of hunger, but also to empty the stagnant waters of the soul, purify the glutted spaces of the body, in order to ready themselves, open themselves, for the infilling of God’s fresh Spirit.

But we don’t have to wait for a special season. This, too, can be a day to greet the fresh dawn of possibilities with trust, moreso than fear – trust that there flows within it the cool water of grace to ease a thirst of which I may not have even been aware; trust that God is in its moments, calling, stretching, pouring that I, in fresh ways, might be filled.

This, too, can be a day to hunger for its nourishment as a baby bird awaits its mother: with an outstretched neck and beak open wide.

This, too, can be a day to long for the words from heaven to which the Psalmist gave witness:

*I am the LORD your God,*

*who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.*

*Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.*

Today my cup was filled with yesterday’s coffee – cold and stale and fetid. If I was to be satisfied, first I would have to empty it, rinse it, and hold it open for the pouring.

Something, it turns out, like myself.