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## Epiphany 3 • 1 Corinthians 7:29–31 (32–35) • January 25, 2015

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At the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, there is an installation called *Cup* by Thomas Skomski. It's basically a shelf extending out of the wall with a cup at the very end. The shelf is about the height of a countertop, making the cup perfectly within reach. Suspended there, this cup promises water for the weary. There is a problem, however. The shelf is actually a wire cage, surrounding the cup. So, you have a cup perfectly positioned . . . but ultimately inaccessible. Desire and denial—that's what the artist is playing with. You desire to take the cup and drink. Yet, you are denied.

If you read the artist's reflections, however, you notice that he pushes this experience deeper. He pushes it to the point where it strikes a spiritual nerve.

All who would follow Jesus and drink from his cup are caught in the difficulties of discipleship. To follow Christ involves both denial and discovery. When you enter the discipleship and drink from the cup, you suddenly discover life in denial. Cup and cage are joined together. To be joined to Christ is to be brought into a different relationship with the things of this world. The joy of hanging out with friends is rich and rewarding but pales in comparison to the joy of an answered prayer. The sorrow of losing your job is painful and distressing but pales in comparison to the sorrow of your child walking away from the faith. To be a disciple is difficult because you are always living at the intersection of this world and the kingdom of God. Baptized into Christ Jesus, you experience life differently.

The apostle Paul knew the difficulties of discipleship. Blinded on the Damascus road, he was baptized and, when he opened his eyes, he suddenly saw things differently. He discovered grace and nothing was ever the same. The wisdom of the world was foolishness to him. The strength of the world was weakness. God, the Father, took that which was low and despised, the crucified Christ, and raised him to rule over all. That one act changed how Paul saw the world. The foolishness of a crucified God was Paul's wisdom. The weakness of a dying Savior was Paul's strength. Paul lived at the intersection of this world and God's kingdom, and that is a difficult place to be.

This difficult discipleship is what lies at the heart of Paul's words in our epistle this Sunday. Paul is writing to the Corinthians about marital relations. His words offer guidance to those who are married and to those who are single. You need to be careful, however, for Paul is not really writing about marriage or the single life. He is writing about your relationship with Christ.

Paul affirms the married life (7:1–5, 9–16) and Paul affirms the single life (7:6–8, 32–35). Being married or being single is not the issue. The question is “how is your relationship with the Lord?” You see, there are married couples who served the Lord, like Priscilla and Aquila. And, there are married couples who fell away from the Lord, like Ananias and Sapphira. There are single individuals who served the Lord, like Paul, and there are single individuals who fell away from the Lord. It is not a matter of being married or being single. Paul is not writing a law to “lay any restraint upon you” but rather seeking “to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord” (7:35).

If you read this text to establish a law about being single or being married, you miss the larger picture. Paul wants to foster your relationship with Christ . . . whether you are single or married. Paul wants to know, “how does your life support your relationship with the Lord?”

Discipleship is difficult. Our relationship with Christ changes our relations with this world. Listen to how Paul describes this. “Let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it” (7:29–31). We are to experience the things of this world but not in an all-consuming way. Whether we are married or single, mourning or rejoicing, buying or selling . . . the most important thing is that we are in Christ. Since Christ is our life and Christ has given us life, we seek to live all of life in him.

In looking at the exhibit *Cup* one could discuss all sorts of things. How foolish it is for an artist to stick a cup in a cage and put it on the wall. But, the artist is seeking to bring you into a conversation that leads you closer to the Lord and to the difficulty of discipleship in him. In the same way, Paul’s letter raises all sorts of questions for people today. “Is Paul advocating the single life?” “What does Paul have against marriage?” But, Paul is not seeking to bring about that kind of a conversation. Instead, what Paul wants to foster among us today is a conversation about life in Christ and how our joys and our sorrows, our buying and our selling, yes even our marriages and our singleness lead us closer to him.

Preaching on this text involves engaging in that conversation. Using a central image sermon structure,<sup>1</sup> the preacher could (1) begin with the art installation of Cup and the strange conversations that would occur in front of it; (2) move to this text and the strange conversations that arise because of Paul’s words about marriage and the single life; (3) return to the image and discover the deeper truth about difficult discipleship revealed there; (4) return to the text and proclaim the deeper truth about difficult discipleship that is guiding Paul’s words; and (5) lead the hearers in contemplating their lives in Christ, articulating how God works in their experiences of this world (joy, sorrow, buying, selling, marriage, the single life, etc.) to lead them closer to Christ.

David Schmitt

<sup>1</sup> For the theory of this sermon structure, see description at <http://concordiatheology.org/sermon-structs/dynamic-image-sermon-structure/central-image/>.  
<http://scholar.csa.edu/~vol40/iss4/17>