

can you drink the cup? | Henri Nouwen

A Book Reflection Guide



While traditional book studies often benefit the most from everyone reading the book together, I have designed this study to be more a provoking conversation on the larger themes that Henri Nouwen so wisely unfolds in his book, “Can You Drink the Cup?”

In Ron Hansen’s forward, he outlines the premise of what we are guided through in this book:

“In Luke’s gospel, there is a sequence of actions in the Lord’s Supper:

Jesus takes the cup, gives thanks, then shares the cup with his disciples.

In Henri Nouwen’s introduction to the spiritual life, he meditates on holding,

lifting and drinking the cup. Holding the cup of life is, for Nouwen, a way of

looking critically at who we really are, accepting our various skills, inadequacies

and differences from others, and rejoicing in our radical singularity.”

This a book that invites us all to consider what it entails to be in relationship and follow Jesus. It invites us to look at both the sorrow and joy in our lives and fully take it in - as our one, unique life to live. The invitation from Jesus to his closest friends - is one that he still extends to us today, “can you drink the cup?”, will you drink “to life?”, and will you encourage others to do the same?

paradox | Matthew 20:20-23

20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. **21** And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” **22** But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” **23** He said to them, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”

“Jesus cautions Zebedee’s sons about the cup - the calling, and the association - they have chosen in him, implying that it’s paradoxical, a yes and a no: a cup of wine but also of blood, of freedom but obedience, of happiness and peace in spite of consternation or persecution, of the guarantee of eternal life but only after the usual human lot of anguish, illness and death.” - Ron Hansen, foreword.

Have someone read the scripture aloud and then allow time for everyone to read the scripture quietly to themselves. Then consider the following questions to open conversation:

? It seems as though James and John, the sons of Zebedee were eager to join forces with Jesus. What do you gather as the motivation and values that James and John undergird their desire?

?? On any given day what are the values and motivation that undergird your own desire to join forces with Jesus? What does joining forces with Jesus play out in your life? How can you relate to James and John?

REFLECTION || “We are able”

Have someone read the quote from the book, by Ron Hansen.

“We are able” is the answer James and John give Jesus. It’s a bold and strong answer. The paradox that Hansen details in following Jesus invites us to lift a very full cup - with an ingredient perhaps heavier than others - “the unknown”. We might not know what obedience, or persecution or anguish or illness or death feels like until we are experiencing it.

TO TRY || Take a cup, full of liquid and hold it in your hands. Take a few minutes to sit with the paradoxes in your life - in what areas do you have a sense of boldness and strength? In what other areas do you feel a sense of uncertainty and unknown?

Take time to share with how the response “I am able”, feels in the face of both the areas of perceived strength and unknown in your life. And how does “I am able” versus “I am willing” resonate to you?

holding the cup | alone

“Half of living is reflecting on what is being lived. Is it worth it? Is it good? Is it bad? Is it old? Is it new? What is it all about? The greatest joy as well as the greatest pain of living come not only from what we live but even more from how we think and feel about what we are living?”

? Nouwen says reflection is essential for growth, development and change. Take some time to reflect on what you can recognize in your life as fulfilling and also what is challenging. Take time to connect with the emotions you are you feeling about the fulfilling and the challenging aspects of your life.

Try || Welcoming Prayer

Through welcoming prayer we will notice the feelings, emotions, thoughts and sensations in our bodies and hearts. We are then invited to welcome them and then let them go. The hope of the Welcoming Prayer is to deepen your relationship with God, to REST in God’s healing presence and STORE up all the love and goodness God wants to flood your heart with as you welcome and let go.

Take a moment to be still and silent and follow these steps.

- **Focus**, feel and sink into the feelings, emotions, thoughts, sensations and commentaries in your body.
- **Welcome** God in the feelings, emotions, thoughts, commentaries or sensations in your body by saying, “Welcome.”
- **Let go** by repeating the following sentences (or your own version that is reflective of your heart):
 - “I let go of the hook of fear, aggravation and control.”
 - “I let go of the desire to change this feeling/sensation.”
- **Invite** Jesus into every space that your emotion holds. Ask Jesus for a stretch of the heart to hold both the emotion and the presence of Jesus in comfort, love and care.

“We have to live life, not someone else’s. We have to hold *our own* cup. We have to dare to say: “This is my life, the life that is given to me and it is this life that I have to live, as well as I can. My life is unique. Nobody else will ever live it. I have my own history, my own family, my own body, my own character, my own friends, my own way of thinking, speaking and acting - yes, I have my own life to live. I am alone, because I am unique”.

? Often being alone seems contrary to a life of faith - which is heralded in its meaning as a shared experience with one another. How do you respond to this idea of being alone? In the fold of being unique? Do the two automatically suggest separation? Or is aloneness something different than separation to you?

End with Prayer:

PRAYER || The Welcoming Prayer - Father Thomas Keating:

Welcome, welcome, welcome.

I welcome everything that comes to me today
because I know it's for my healing.

I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, persons,
situations, and conditions.

I let go of my desire for power and control.

I let go of my desire for affection, esteem,
approval and pleasure.

I let go of my desire for survival and security.

I let go of my desire to change any situation,
condition, person or myself.

I open to the love and presence of God and
God's action within. Amen.

holding the cup | the cup of sorrow

“When the moment to drink the cup came for Jesus, he said: “My soul is sorrowful to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38). His agony was so intense that “his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood”, (Luke 22:44). His friends James and John - were there with him, but fast asleep, unable to stay awake with him in his sorrow. “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by” (Matthew 26:39). Jesus couldn’t face it.”

? Our world is filled with sorrow and pain. What has it looked like for you to either stay awake or be asleep to the sorrow in your life? Or the world at large?

?? Share how you have felt marginalized or “othered” in some way? Or share your experience living with or working with people who were marginalized in some way? How did you respond to them? How does this picture of holding the cup, in sorrow expand or contract?

“There was an intimacy beyond all human intimacies that made it possible for Jesus to allow the request to let the cup pass him by - beyond all feelings and thoughts, and it maintained the communion underneath all disruptions. It was that spiritual sinew, that intimate communion with his Father, that made him hold on to his cup. This was a deep spiritual yes.”

? Where does this great “yes” come from? Where have you found this “yes”, in the face of disruptions and challenges in your life?

?? What does this picture of intimacy with God, that Jesus had - stir in you? How is your own communion with Jesus? What makes you keep holding your cup in the face of the realities, the struggles of life?

TRY || Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer, a method of silent prayer, prepares us to receive the gift of contemplative prayer, prayer in which we experience God’s presence with us. Centering prayer is grounded in relationship with God, through Jesus, and is a practice to nurture that relationship.

- Sit comfortably, in an upright, attentive posture in a way that allows for your spine to be straight and for an open heart. You can place your hands in your lap, if you’d like.
- Gently close your eyes. We close our eyes to let go of what is going on around and within us.
- With your eyes closed, bring to mind a sacred word or image as your symbol to connect to the presence and action of God within you.
- Your word or image is intended to be the same each time you pray. It helps ground you in the present moment, choose a name for God or a characteristic for God like, “Love”, or “Peace”.
- Silently, with eyes closed, recall your word or image to begin your prayer. As you notice your thoughts drift, gently return to your word or image. Do this however many times you notice your thoughts.
- When your prayer period is over, transition slowly from your prayer practice to your active life.
- Start with 2-3 minutes.

holding the cup | the cup of joy

“I should be challenged to let go of every distance and just to connect my own vulnerability with the vulnerability of those I live with. And what a joy that is! The joy of belonging, of being part of...” If joys could not be where sorrows are, the cup of life would never be drinkable.”

? How does this idea of sorrow and joy being in the same cup strike you? How do you feel about the notion that sorrow is a prerequisite for finding joy? Have moments in your own life reflected this? If not, what was the other outcome?

?? Where are you experiencing sadness or disappointment? Who might you know that is suffering in some way? How does Jesus’ suffering on the cross and his own question to his Father, “can you take this cup?”, resonate with you today?

REFLECTION || “Angels”

“We need to be angels for each other, to give each other strength and consolation”.

Likely, it is a stretch to refer to ourselves as angels. However, Nouwen talks about the pure joy that it is to connect at a vulnerable level with those he was in community with - as if this joy contained both a human and supernatural quality. Nouwen worked and lived at the L’Arche Daybreak community in Canada with individuals who were physically and mentally challenged, for 10 years until his own death. For Nouwen to be an angel to those that were physically and mentally suffering - not only comforted them, but was a means by which Nouwen staved off his own darkness.

Take some time to ask Jesus to bring to mind people for you in your life that might benefit from an angel among them. Ask Jesus to what level your connection to them is helpful? And ask Jesus for specific ideas in how to do this.

lifting | the cup of blessings

“..those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, **23** and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, **24** while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, **25** so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. **26** If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (I Corinthians 12: 22-27)

Take time to read this scripture through slowly. Have one person read it aloud fully and then allow time for each member to read to themselves.

? In what ways have you suffered a sense of division - whether it was at work, in your personal relationships, family or larger community? As you think of your own situation, which word resonates as the most reflective descriptor of this division as you think of it now: “concern”, “equal”, or “honor”? As best you can, share why this word is rising to the top for you.

?? What could this word hold for you as you enter into new experiences of community?

Henri compares community to a mosaic in which every small piece, no matter how seemingly insignificant by itself, has an essential role to play. Think of someone in your life or church community and describe how they have an important part of the whole.

? Do you find it easy or difficult to live your life in community? In which communities have you found and discovered more of yourself? In which communities have you found that you’ve had to hide parts of yourself?

lifting | to life

Henri Nouwen refers to lifting the cup as an invitation to affirm and celebrate life together. As we lift up the cup of life and look each other in the eye, we say: “Let’s not be anxious or afraid. Let’s hold our cup together and greet each other. Let us not hesitate to acknowledge the reality of our lives and encourage each other to be grateful for the gifts we have received.”

Community often means we get brush along others lives that we feel like we “just can’t connect with”. Sometimes this sense is a protective measure for our own ego. We are afraid of being vulnerable with someone who’s affect, physicality or social demeanor is not familiar to us. Underlying much of this dis-ease, is a sense of fear within ourselves.

? Where can you recognize fear or worry within yourself, as you think of relationships and community? What can you identify as the root cause of this fear?

PARTNER UP || Take some time to sit with Jesus and a partner, ask Jesus to bring to mind any experience in the past or present that was left unresolved, where you might have felt exposed emotionally or where you wondered whether you were “good enough”, to show your whole self to your community.

“We lift the cup to life, to affirm our life together and celebrate it as a gift from God. When each of us can hold firm our own cup, with its many sorrows and joys, claiming it as our unique life, then too, can we lift it up for others to see and encourage them to lift up their lives as well”.

TRY || communion

As a way to end this session on Lifting the Cup, take communion together as a group. Slowly break bread and share wine - taking in all that the shared suffering and joy of Jesus brings to your lives. Thank Jesus for this new way he made for us - for our lives that are promised the opportunity to create out of love and community, where sometimes only death and suffering are seen.

OR

TRY || “to life!”

Each take a glass and say to each other in your own language, “*Cheers*”, in Latin “*Prosit*” (be well), in German, “*Zum Wohl*” (to your well-being), in French “*A votre sante*” (to your health), in Hebrew, “*L’chaim*” (to life!).

drinking | to the bottom

Drinking our cup until it is empty, trusting that God will fill it with everlasting life - is living a complete life according to Henri Nouwen. He offers three disciplines that are helpful in this effort.

DISCIPLINE || silence

“It is in silence that we confront our true selves. At first silence might frighten us. We start hearing voices of darkness: jealousy and anger, our resentment and desire for revenge, our lust and greed, and our pain over losses, abuses and rejections and these voices are often noisy and boisterous. They may even deafen us. These voices though, will lose their strength and recede into the background, creating space for softer, gentler voices of the light”.

- ? What voices have you been deafened by lately?
- ? What is standing in the way of time and silence for you?
- ? What would it take for moments of silence in your life to become more of a reality?

Ask Jesus to whisper his voice to you, with words or a sense of a peace and comfort and light.

DISCIPLINE || the word

“We need to speak about what is in our cup. If we isolate from a community of love, its burden is too heavy to carry. We need loving and caring friends with whom we can speak from the depth of our heart. Such friends can take away the paralysis that secrecy creates.”

- ? Has it been challenging or easy to share the contents of your life with your friends? What factors have played into either of these?
- ? Who do you know that you could share what is in your cup with? And share all of the contents of your cup, not only the lovely bits!
- ? If you are lacking for friends that you would feel safe with, contact one of the pastors at Reservoir for advice, prayer and opportunities for more connection.
- ? Take a moment to thank Jesus for the friends you have in your life. If you have time, name them one by one.

DISCIPLINE || action

“It is not easy to distinguish between doing what we are called to do and doing what we want to do. Drinking our cup involves choosing actions carefully which lead us closer to complete emptying of it. That indeed is the paradox: We fulfill life by emptying it”

- ? What actions are bringing you true joy and peace in your life right now?
- ? What actions are leading to exhaustion and a sense of burnout right now?
- ? We started this study with the paradox of “the cup”. How does this discipline of action help or challenge you as you think of drinking the cup to empty it - in hopes of Jesus filling it?

About Henri Nouwen

The internationally renowned priest and author, respected professor and beloved pastor Henri J.M. Nouwen wrote over 40 books on the spiritual life. He corresponded regularly in English, Dutch, German, French and Spanish with hundreds of friends and reached out to thousands through his Eucharistic celebrations, lectures and retreats. Since his death in 1996, ever-increasing numbers of readers, writers, teachers and seekers have been guided by his literary legacy. Nouwen's books have sold over 2 million copies and been published in over 22 languages.

Born in Nijkerk, Holland, on January 24, 1932, Nouwen felt called to the priesthood at a very young age. He was ordained in 1957 as a diocesan priest and studied psychology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen. In 1964 he moved to the United States to study at the Menninger Clinic. He went on to teach at the University of Notre Dame, and the Divinity Schools of Yale and Harvard. For several months during the 1970s, Nouwen lived and worked with the Trappist monks in the Abbey of the Genesee, and in the early 1980s he lived with the poor in Peru. In 1985 he was called to join L'Arche in Trosly, France, the first of over 100 communities founded by Jean Vanier where people with developmental disabilities live with assistants.

A year later Nouwen came to make his home at L'Arche Daybreak near Toronto, Canada. He died suddenly on September 21st, 1996, in Holland and is buried in King City, Ontario, not far from the Daybreak Community. Nouwen believed that what is most personal is most universal. He wrote, "By giving words to these intimate experiences I can make my life available to others." His spirit lives on in the work of the Henri Nouwen Society, Henri Nouwen Stichting (Holland), the Henri Nouwen Legacy Trust, the Henri J. M. Nouwen Archives and Research Collection, and in all who live the spiritual values of solitude, community and ministry, to which he dedicated his life.

For more information about Henri Nouwen, his writing and the work of the Henri Nouwen Society visit: www.HenriNouwen.org.