

“DOWNWARD MOBILITY”
Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22:24-27
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
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Each morning, it seems we awaken to new revelations about the abuse of power in high places – on Wall Street and Main Street, in Hollywood, the Vatican, and Washington, D.C. Each bombshell raises for us what we call the “character issue.” We’re concerned about the character of people who hold public office and manage our money. We’re concerned about the character of athletes and entertainers who serve as role models for our young people. We’re concerned about the character of religious leaders who are charged to protect the innocent and the vulnerable.

The character of these individuals is, in many ways, a reflection of the culture in which they live. If you and I want to judge accurately the character of a culture, we have to be familiar with the type of person it holds up for its ideal. The ideal of the Greeks was the balanced personality – the individual who had achieved a rounded completeness of body, mind, and soul. The ideal of the Romans was the soldier, one who embodied the Stoic virtues of discipline and courage. Coming closer to our own time, the ideal of Hitler and his henchmen was the superperson, one who could dominate and regiment supposedly lesser breeds.

What type of person does our culture hold up for its ideal? How about the successful person, the person who out-competes his or her peers and becomes wealthy, prominent, and powerful. In America and the West generally, we think of life as a pyramid, with the successful at the peak and the ambitious striving to achieve a position where there are fewer equals and more subordinates. In my first Methodist appointment I served as a minister to college students. Most of them told me that they left home with one message ringing in their ears. They were encouraged by their parents and elders to make “upward mobility” their motto and to remember that there is plenty of room at the top.

The late James Reston was a long-time columnist for the New York Times and a keen observer of our common life. He once noted that America’s “[young people] have been asked, often in the name of religion, to confuse selfishness with self-reliance . . . and to concentrate on their own material well-being. My kingdom come . . . my will be done . . . hallowed be my name.

Ours is a status-seeking culture. Think of the titles that people seek and scatter about: Doctor, President, Chairperson, Boss, Manager, Chief, Bishop, Reverend. Think of how so many people today clamor for places of honor, for positions of authority, for promotions and perks. Don Quixote’s sidekick, Sancho Panza, once admitted: “So sweet a thing it is to command, though it be only a flock of sheep.”

You can dip down almost anywhere in the Bible, and you’ll discover that religious people can be status seekers, too. In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday being hailed as a king. In the next scene, his disciples start arguing about which of them will be Prime Minister and Secretary of State in Jesus’ kingdom. They’re asking, “What’s in it for me?” In our Epistle lesson, the apostle Paul is addressing this same kind of behavior in the church at Philippi. Paul absolutely adores the Philippians, but he’s alarmed because that church is divided by petty jealousies. Apparently, some people are on an ego trip. They’re consumed with self-interest, jockeying for position, playing one-upsmanship with fellow Christians, trying to gain a foothold of power and keep it at all costs. In the church at Philippi, as in a lot of churches today, there are too

many chiefs and not enough Indians. “So sweet a thing it is to command, though it be only a flock of sheep.”

At the beginning of Philippians 2, Paul has something to say about status-seeking which is nothing short of revolutionary. “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look, not only his own interests, but to the interests of others” (2:3-4). Amazing, isn’t it? In just those two sentences, Paul reverses universally accepted standards and values, challenges what you and I take for granted, cuts across pride of place and race and power. Instead of upward mobility, it’s downward mobility that he urges upon us! This is in stark contrast to the spirit of our age. What’s needed to get to the top, we’re told, is an aggressive quality, a clever, calculating mind, feelings not too sensitive to the misfortunes of others, plenty of self-confidence, and something of a flair for self-advertisement.

No!, says Paul. Empty yourself of any claim to superiority. Don’t place yourself above others; place yourself alongside others – even beneath others – as a servant. In the kingdom of God, the way up is down! And then Paul offers as model of servanthood the One whom he also confesses as Lord: “Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus” (v. 5).

When you stop and think about it, the character of Jesus is a polar opposite to the character of his culture and ours. He is utterly indifferent to any person’s economic standing. He treats rich and poor alike. He attaches no importance to social status. He isn’t born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He grows up in a modest home, is a carpenter by trade, then becomes an itinerant preacher with no place to lay his head. He washes the feet of his disciples, rides on a donkey, and dies at last on a cross. His life is a study in downward mobility. As Paul says in one of his other letters: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). This is the mark of Jesus’ character that leaves those who know him best so awestruck. He was “in the form of God – “equal” to God – yet “he emptied himself [or as one translation puts it, “made himself of no reputation”], taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of humans. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:7-8). The great Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Kung, once commented that Jesus life is characterized by a “downward bent.” We keep wanting to go up, up, up; but Jesus goes down, down, down.

And yet, all through his life he dwarfs everyone around him, so that if we know anything about Caesar Augustus and the high priest Caiaphas, Herod the Great and Pontius Pilate, it’s because of their association with him. It’s no wonder that God “bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (2:9b-11).

Now, in all this there is one thing you and I need to keep in mind. We should never suppose that following Jesus requires us to belittle ourselves, to play down our value and potential as human beings. Yes, Paul reminds us of our need for humility; but of all the Christian virtues, humility is the most misunderstood. Some people think humility means being unimportant or mediocre. “How could little old me ever amount to anything?”

But what impresses us is that Jesus never stresses human littleness; rather, he calls attention to human greatness. “You are the salt of the earth . . . you are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:13a, 14a). “You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Remember that these saying are addressed to fishermen and homemakers and small-town merchants.

To their Roman overlords, they are a bunch of nobodies. But to Jesus they are children of God, persons of infinite worth. They have gifts and talents that God wants to use to the fullest.

And this is the value that Christ attaches to each of us. He doesn't want us to hide our light under a bushel; he wants us to let our light shine (as our youth reminded us two Sundays ago!). Christ wants us to excel, to make the most of our abilities, to win friends and influence people. But we have to be sure about one thing: the nature of our ambition, the type of success we seek, what we're really after. According to Jesus, the only truly worthy ambition in life is the ambition to serve, not to be served. Over and over again his counsel to his hearers is: Don't let your life revolve around your own interests and ambitions; escape from the prison of self; lose yourself in a cause bigger than yourself. If you really want to get to the head of the line, go to the end of the line.

It's never easy to make this transition. It's hard to come down once you've been up there. A minister I know interceded once for a man who was a store manager in a nationwide chain. His salary was around the \$100,000 a year mark. He had been evaluated by top management and found wanting and was summarily fired. When the pastor got to the president of the company, he asked if his parishioner might be given another store to manage. The answer was, "No, he doesn't have it." Could he not then be made a department manager in some other store? The answer was, "No. We've learned that psychologically this never works. Once you've been a manager you can't come down."

Friends, is there no power in the gospel? Is there no compulsion in the grace of God? Is there no illumination in the model of Jesus himself that could make us willing to come down if perchance it would help others to come up?

My daughters, Kate and Beth, spent much of their growing up years attending the Wells United Methodist Church in Jackson, Mississippi. It's a medium-sized congregation of perhaps three hundred members, considerably smaller than several other Methodist churches in that area. Now, what would you guess is the average tenure of a pastor in a United Methodist church of that size? Three years? Four years? Five years at the most? Would you believe, a man named Keith Tonkel remained the pastor of Wells United Methodist Church for over forty years! Knowing the Methodist system, you might wonder if this guy just got stuck, if he was so poor at what he did that he couldn't earn a promotion. Well, as a matter of fact, Keith Tonkel had a tremendously effective ministry at that church. He was one of the most acclaimed Methodist preachers in the Deep South. He once told me that he had at least two good opportunities to leave Wells each year. But he chose to stay, and a succession of bishops allowed him to stay.

Why? Because Wells was and continues to be such a unique place to do ministry. It's located in the inner city of Jackson. A half-century ago, the neighborhood surrounding the church was all-white; now it's almost entirely black. Yet the congregation chose to stay in that location, and Keith Tonkel chose to stay with them. Today that church is still a fascinating mixture of black and white, rich and poor, professional and blue collar. It provides food and clothing to needy people in the neighborhood. It serves as a half-way house for men and women on their way out of prison. It provides a home to people recovering from alcohol and drug addiction. It has a reputation in the community for being a place where sinners are welcome and hurting people can get help.

Let me be perfectly honest: in the Methodist appointment system, the name of the game for many ministers is "upward mobility." Pastors of small churches typically want to go to larger churches. Pastors of struggling inner city churches often yearn to move to affluent suburban churches. And yet, Keith Tonkel turned down a number of so-called "promotions" because he

wanted to stay at Wells and be a servant to his community. As much as any minister I've ever known, he had the mind of Christ; he followed the self-emptying pattern of Christ. Keith Tonkel was a model to me of "downward mobility."

In one of my Baptist pastorates, a woman came to me one day as mad as a hornet's nest. It seems that the Nominating Committee of that church had just published a list of people whose names would appear on a ballot for election to the church board that year. She was angry because her husband's name was left off the list. She reminded me that he had been a charter member of the congregation, that he was a prominent, successful doctor in the community, and that this kind of recognition from the church was long overdue. The board was a decision-making body that controlled the church's purse strings. A lot of status and prestige was involved in being elected to the board. A list of board members in any given year read like a "Who's Who" of civic and business leaders in the community. Well, it was obvious to me why this woman wanted her husband to be named to this position. It had nothing to do with a desire to serve the church. She wanted another credential to be added to her spouse's resume'. She wanted to see another feather in his cap.

In that same church, there was another layperson whose story was quite different from the one I've just told. Each year, when the Nominating Committee compiled their list of names to go on the board ballot, a man named Guy Parker was invited to be a candidate. He fit the profile of a board member in that church to a T. He was successful in business; he was a good family man; and he had paid his dues serving the church behind the scenes. Everyone thought he deserved the recognition and honor of being on the board. But Guy Parker always declined. Not once while I was there did he allow his name to go on the ballot. His reason for declining was always the same. He felt that his gifts were better suited to other forms of service, even if they were less visible. He was active in a men's prayer group that met on a weekday morning at the church. He shared teaching responsibilities in a Sunday School class. He was also part of a group of laypersons designated to offer pastoral care to church members who were ill or otherwise hurting. In short, Guy Parker was always too occupied serving others to care about tooting his own horn. People kept wanting Guy to take the step up to board member; but for Guy, the way up was down.

Friends, how are we to reverse in ourselves the stream of interest in self and status? By keeping before us morning and evening the example of Christ, who "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant," who "humbled himself and became obedient unto death." As you and I pursue our careers or enjoy our retirements, do we ever pause to ponder Christ's cross? Holy Week strikes me as the perfect time to do so.

And now, as sort of a tailpiece, this story. A man dreamed he visited a museum up in heaven. No crowns or scepters were there, no miters or thrones, no Pope's rings nor even John Wesley's inkpot. A handful of thorns was there, a seamless robe, a cup of cold water. The man asked the guardian angel: "Have you a towel and a basin?" "No," the angel replied. "You see, they are in perpetual use." The man knew then that he was in the Holy City.