

## “Downward Mobility”

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First Presbyterian Church  
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New Testament Lesson: John 13:1-17

Old Testament lesson: Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19

What does the well-dressed Christian wear today? That is not an invitation to check out the clothes of those around you. It is, however, an invitation to check out what Jesus is up to in today's New Testament Lesson.

But first, go ahead, take a look at the clothing of those around you. You, David Melton, what are you wearing today? (“A suit.”) Well, it suites you. It says something about who you are in the world. But do me a favor. Take off your suit coat and put it up here on the Table.

How about you, Mary Smith, that's a nice jacket you're wearing today; it really makes you look like high society. But you know Mary, we love you and respect you no matter what you're wearing. How about putting your jacket up here with David's.

Doesn't that make you feel a bit more humble here in church – taking off your jackets, taking off those symbols of your identity as a community leader who has it so together in life?

In fact, this robe I'm wearing – what if I just took it off and spent the rest of the morning in my shirtsleeves? Or better yet, this tie-dye from my college days. Did you know your pastor used to wear tie-dyes – and still does, very rarely, like on vacation or to a Reggae concert? Does that change your image of me as your pastor? As a person? For better? Or for worse?

The day our outward appearance gets in the way of our ability to serve one another in Christ is the day we need to strip off our jackets and roll up our sleeves and rededicate ourselves to the business of loving and serving the people in our lives.

And Jesus gives us the best example of this imaginable. In today's New Testament lesson, John tells us that “the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray (Jesus). And during supper Jesus ... got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.

Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.” Jesus did this, John tells us, because “he loved his own who were in the world” – God loves humanity – and, says John, “he loved them to the end.”

“He loved them to the end” – when we hear this phrase, what event in the life of Christ do we think of? **The cross.** But the cross is five chapters away. John is painting this foot-washing event as loving them to the end. There must be something more than dirty feet here.

Let’s look at the details, in verses 4 and 5:

Jesus “got up from the table.” The biblical view of Heaven includes the image of the banquet table. Jesus gets up from it and leaves it. Jesus came from Heaven to be with us.

He “took off his outer robe.” Just like our suit coats and ladies’ jackets and preachers’ robes are symbols of our place in society – and for me, the robe always symbolizes my prayer to be guided by the Holy Spirit when I preaching – just like jackets and pulpit robes are symbols for us, Jesus taking off his outer robe symbolizes him setting aside the glory that is due him as the Son of God. Having left the banquet table, having come down from heaven, he then removes the garment that symbolizes his rightful place in Heaven. And in doing so, Jesus humbles himself to fully embrace his human character, his human nature, setting aside his divine nature.

Why would he do this? Well let’s continue in verses 4 and 5.

Jesus “tied a towel around himself.” Jesus takes on the dress of a servant – as God incarnate, God fully human, in the flesh. Next, he wipes the disciples feet with “the towel that was tied around him.” Here, Jesus brings his own humanity to bear upon the filth of the world around him.

God does not look upon our sin-stained humanity and criticize us or push us around or force us to do his bidding – to do God’s will – though he has every right to do so. No, instead he looks upon the filthy stains of this world, and cleanses us. God loves us **from top to bottom and everything in between.** And God loves us so much that, God makes it possible for us to participate in God’s work. When we accept Christ in our lives, we are empowered to overcome the brokenness of this sin-stained world, despite our own humanity, limitations and our own blemishes and brokenness.

But how, exactly, can we in our current state do anything to overcome the brokenness of the world? How can we help to wipe clean any filth, if you will, that we get ourselves into?

I’m glad you asked. We do that by doing for others what Jesus did for us. “For I,” says Jesus, “have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” Jesus is calling us to downward mobility, bidding us to leave our higher places of safety and comfort and status for the lower, more broken places of this world.

And in Jesus doing this – even at the cost of his own life – in asking us to do as he has done, Jesus is calling us to enter into the sorrow and the blessing that is the incarnation, Jesus the Christ, fully human and fully divine. Jesus, by stripping off his glory as God incarnate and lovingly washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus brings the Kingdom of Heaven – the power of God Almighty – down to earth, down to our places of brokenness and filth.

For Jesus, foot washing isn't about feet. It's about life. It has nothing to do with dirty feet and everything to do with living our lives in Christ.

To help you visualize this, remember that our feet are the part of us that stay in contact with the earth. So Jesus cleanses us by wiping clean that part of our humanity that is tainted by the world. Jesus cleanses the part of us that will continue to remain in contact with a soiled and sin-stained world.

Through that cleansing, we are empowered to be in the world without having it corrupt our whole being. And in fact, by us participating in a religious community such as this one here at First Presbyterian Church, God empowers us to do as Jesus has done.

Just as Jesus set aside his divine rights in order to take on human flesh and enter into and overcome suffering and pain, we are called to set aside our pride, our station in life, our rightful power and authority over others in order to humbly serve them in their need. This is how we do a little something to overcome the brokenness of the world. This is how we can help God **to wipe clean any filth** that we get ourselves into or find others stuck in?

When was the last time you laid down your rightful place in society to assume a subservient role – the role of a servant – for the benefit and blessing of another person? Come on, now; you're a church member! And as a church member or as someone who otherwise participates in the life of this community of faith, you are serving in one way or another just as Jesus served by washing the feet of his disciples.

Serving on a committee or on the Session at church – that's a foot-washing thing to do, that's a humble way to give of yourself in serves to others and in building up of the Kingdom of Heaven. Serving as a Deacon or Trustee is a foot-washing thing to do. Participating in choir, handbells, or the Praise Team – that's foot washing. Teaching Sunday school, volunteering in the nursery or as a Parlour host, taking meals to families in need or those who are grieving, visiting people in the hospital and at nursing homes are all foot-washing activities. Tithing to the church – giving 10 percent of your income or some other sacrificial giving of your time, talents and treasures – and even coming to worship are foot washing things to do.

These are all examples of doing as Jesus has done for us, because in each of these things that you do as a member or friends of this church, you are embracing – not your upward mobility – but a Christ-like downward mobility. None of these ways that we serve through the church are going to make you rich. They're not going to get you any more power or influence in society.

In fact, just coming to church on Sunday, GenOn on Wednesday night, Bible study or Presbyterian Women or the men's workgroup – these are all countercultural things to do. It used to be that being a church member was a thing of status, but not anymore. Now most people think we are crazy for giving of ourselves here at church.

Don't let them talk you into that! You are not crazy. You're just Christian. And being a Christian means setting aside our place in society, setting aside what society thinks makes sense and has value, and instead stooping down alongside Jesus and getting our hands dirty **washing the feet of another human being.**

If you're not involved in a foot-washing activity here at First Presbyterian Church – or service elsewhere in the community, with a family member, or out in our world – if you're not doing something like that or stretching yourself in what you already do, then ultimately, you are the one who is missing out.

You're not only missing out on contributing to the work Jesus is accomplishing in this world, but you are also missing out on the work Jesus wants to be accomplishing in you, in your life – in my life.

By stooping down to wash feet in this world – whatever that might represent for you, for me – by stooping down alongside Jesus, we not only help to cleanse the world, we too receive cleansing and renewal for ourselves. This, Jesus showed us in his final act of earthly ministry, the final act we move toward in Lent.

Jesus, by stooping to wash the feet of the disciples, provides us with a private, intimate example of selfless giving in service to others, and to the benefit of the world, and to our own personal benefit, as well. Because it is a private, intimate example that foreshadows Jesus' ultimate self-sacrifice. The sacrifice he embraces when he is publicly nailed to the cross. But as we'll see with Easter unfolds before our eyes once again this year, the cross is not the end. It's not the end for Jesus and it's not the end for us.

As we journey through Lent together as a church – and individually as Christians – let us seek out how God would have us serve, confident that any sacrifice we make is not the end of the story, but only the beginning. For just as Jesus was glorified and raised up in the fullness of time, we too, will be glorified and raised up in Christ – both as a church and for you – for me – as a Christian. Amen.

## Pastoral prayer

O God, how quickly we walk into Lent with enthusiasm and vigor. We are determined to reach Easter as a true Easter people, full of hope and intent on charity, and kindness, and love.

But, somewhere along the way, our steps falter. Our pace slackens. We trudge along with slumped shoulders, and our steps become uneven. Soon we are only plodding along, one foot in front of the other, and our hearts become as heavy as our feet.

Forgive us, God. Stir us with a rushing wind that we might look up from the ground to the majesty of the trees dancing in the wind.

Let the breeze carry with it a whispered reminder that you walk with us, even to the end of time.

Force us to step more lively and breathe deeply, that we might reawaken the gift of the Holy Spirit within us.

Help us to move forward as we walk toward Jerusalem ... and beyond.

So let us live, and so let us give, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive  
our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**