

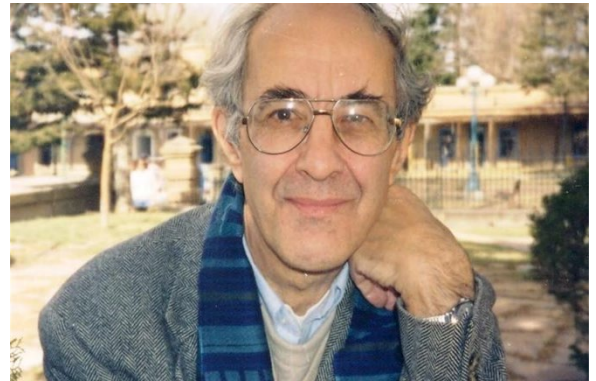
Palm Sunday

Practicing
Downward
Mobility

MARCH 24
9AM | 11AM

Sunday, March 24, 2024 | Palm Sunday | “Practicing Downward Mobility”
Mark 11:1-11, Philippians 2:1-11 | Charlie Berthoud

Henri Nouwen was a Dutch priest, author, and professor. He taught at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard. Among his many books was one called *Gracias: A Latin American Journal*, which was his reflections on his time in Bolivia and Peru, and which was hugely influential on my faith journey.



In his fifties, this wise and humble and deeply Christian man pondered a career change. He could have:

- Continued to teach at a prestigious university,
- Preached at the biggest churches and cathedrals,
- Written more books and appeared on Oprah and shows like that

Instead, he spent the next ten years of his life—until he tragically died at the age of 64—working at a community for mentally and physically disabled people in Canada. Nouwen centered his life in Jesus Christ, the one who served the lost, the least, and the last. The one who we focus on especially this Holy Week.

In Jesus Christ, Nouwen saw what he termed “**downward mobility.**”

Like Nouwen, like anyone, Jesus has options for how to live his life:

- Jesus could have made himself a general and called his followers to fight the Romans.

Downward mobility is “the descending way of Jesus. It is the way toward the poor, the suffering, the marginal, the prisoners, the refugees, the lonely, the hungry, the dying, the tortured, the homeless—toward all who ask for compassion. What do they have to offer? Not success, popularity, or power, but the joy and peace of the children of God.”

--Henri Nouwen

Palm Sunday

- He could have sought a palace, worn ornate jewelry, and declared himself an earthly king.
- He could have consolidated power and influence, and made himself very wealthy.

Instead, as we remember during Holy Week,

- Jesus came to Jerusalem on a humble donkey,
- took the role of a servant and washed his disciples' feet,
- shared a final meal with them telling them again to love and forgive,

Then Jesus was arrested by the political and religious leaders of the day. He was tried, convicted, and killed as a common criminal, an enemy of the state.

Our scripture reading for today comes from the letter that the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians and his words help us make sense of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Paul wrote this letter to encourage to the church at Philippi, and he wrote it from prison, because he also threatened the power of the state. According to Paul, in verse 7, Jesus “emptied himself.” The Greek word is *kenosis*, which means self emptying. The New International Version translates that phrase as: “Jesus made himself nothing.”

Like Henri Nouwen, Paul centered his life around Jesus, and urged the people of Philippi to do the same. Listen for God’s word:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in

heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

During Lent, for the past five weeks, we have pondered five different practices of the Christian faith, encouraging each other to make space for God's word and spirit to reach us, change us, and empower us for new ways of living.



I hope you've found new ways to experience God's presence, to hear God's call, and to live a God's beloved. I hope you've found new pathways for the journey of following Jesus and being his disciple. I hope you'll continue with one or more of these practices.

In case you're looking for another option, I think we could add humility, or "downward mobility" as another way of practicing our faith, following in the footsteps of Jesus.

The central ethical teaching of Jesus sound simple: Love your neighbor. Today's reading says essentially the same thing in different words: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves."

Paul continues, focusing on the way we think. He wrote:

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Being a faithful Christian is about changing our minds, thinking in new ways. Remember that the word "repent" is about changing direction or changing one's mind.

This is why we sometimes need to unplug, as we learned last week, so that we don't fill our minds with too much junk.

Scripture helps us get a sense of the **mind** of Jesus. Central to his life and teaching was the call to the path of humble service and sacrificial love, which we hear in a variety of ways:

- He said that the poor and hungry were blessed. (Luke 6) and he made a point of acknowledging and caring for people who were often forgotten or despised: foreigners, poor people, women and children.
- He called his followers to deny themselves and take up their cross. (Mark 8)

- He said those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for his sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. (Mark 8)
- He taught people to not only love their neighbors but also to love their enemies. (Matt 5)

If we're going to take on the mind of Christ, if we're going actually be faithful followers of Jesus we have to keep hearing and pondering the teachings of Jesus.

As we hear and ponder those words we are changed, with and we grow into authentic humility, which was well understood by author and theologian CS Lewis who wrote:

“Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It is thinking of yourself less.”

When I think about humility, downward mobility and taking on the mind of Christ, I think about former president Jimmy Carter. After his presidency, rather than make millions on the consulting circuit, he built houses with Habitat for Humanity.

Jimmy Carter makes it clear that it's his Christian faith that motivates him. He has spent a life in church, listening to the teaching of Jesus, learning the way of Jesus. When we do that, we are changed.



If only all former politicians could be so gracious, caring, generous, and humble.

I see examples of humble service regularly, and sometimes I wonder about the countless acts of humble service that I don't see, because of people's humility.

Years ago, I did hear about one act of humble service in the church I served in Pittsburgh, before coming to Madison.

One member of the community was struggling with mental health, but he felt welcome at the church, so he came most Sundays. He didn't have stable housing, and he struggled with personal hygiene and health.

One Sunday morning, in the sanctuary with the hard tile floor, he accidentally

urinated. One of the ushers—as I learned later—got paper towels, a mop, and disinfectant, and quickly cleaned up the mess, without saying anything or making a fuss, just doing what needed to be done.

If I had been directly involved in that situation, I would have been tempted to tell anyone who'd listen about what had happened and the demeaning cleanup that was involved.

But this faithful usher, this man who was in church every Sunday, just did the right thing, and didn't make a fuss about it.

On one level, humility is about serving others and doing the things that others don't want to do. Taking the role of a servant. Doing the right thing even though it won't bring your power or wealth.

As we think about humility, a couple of caveats: We know there are plenty of people in the world who are clearly lacking in humility, but our job is not to point fingers at others.

We also need to be mindful of the many people in our world—and quite likely some who are hearing this message—who have been humiliated, demeaned, and disrespected and the last thing they need is a call to be more humble.

We also need to recognize that humility and downward mobility aren't just individual things. We are called as the church, as one body with many parts, and we're part of a complex world.

Our church has made a commitment to the Matthew 25 initiative, which calls communities of faith to work together towards:

- Congregational vitality
- Dismantling structural racism
- Eradicating systemic poverty

For those of us who aren't impacted by racism and poverty, if we're going to take this calling of Matthew 25 seriously, we need a lot of humility, an openness to downward mobility. We need a change of mind, to really take on the mind of Christ, to get to the roots of these problems.

Here at Covenant, we are committed to the calling of Learning God’s Love and Living God’s Love. As we journey through this Holy Week, we learn of the love of God in the person of Jesus, who shows the way of humility, downward mobility, and sacrificial love.



It’s important to remember that humility reflects strength of character. As Mother Teresa said: “If you are humble, nothing can touch you, neither praise nor disgrace, because you know who you are.”

The Christian life is largely about learning who we are and who we are called to be, as beloved children of God.

To help us keep learning, along with whatever else you might be doing this Holy Week as we journey toward Easter, I invite you to consider reading our lesson from Philippians every day.

I’m going to close this message by reading it one more time, from *The Message*, a contemporary paraphrase of the scripture.

If you’ve gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you *care*—then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don’t push your way to the front; don’t sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don’t be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

⁵⁻⁸Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human*! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.

⁹⁻¹¹ Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.

Thanks be to God for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Thanks be to God for the opportunity to grow in humility, and in faith, hope, and love.

Amen.