

## SERMON AT TRINITY UMC, WILMETTE, ILLINOIS

# “DOWNWARD MOBILITY”

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TEXT: Luke 14:1, 7-14

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The purpose of life, they tell us, is upward mobility. The message is clear: “Get ahead. Do whatever it takes to be recognized and admired.” That was my dream as I was growing up. I told myself: “Do well in high school, so you can attend an excellent college. Do well in college, so you can be accepted at one of the best graduate schools. Do well in graduate school, so you can land a prestigious job.” That was me, until one day I heard a different voice, a voice that left me feeling confused: “When you are invited to a wedding banquet, do not sit at the place of honor . . . But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place . . . For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted (vv. 8, 10-11). It was the voice of Jesus, announcing that downward mobility is the way that leads to life.

Downward mobility. It made no sense to me. But since the words came from Jesus, I felt compelled to listen and to ask “Why?” Why should we sit in the lowest place, when the purpose of life is to get ahead, to be at the top of the ladder of success, not at the bottom?

Nobody wants to be at the bottom! So what is Jesus saying? What does he mean? I want to share with you this morning four things that I have learned from struggling with this question. First, I have learned that all of us need to be loved and appreciated. We’re like the man in the cartoon who picked up a telephone and dialed “O.” “Operator,” he said, “can you connect me with someone who cares?”

We pretend at times to be self-sufficient. Men especially. I know, because I have had years of experience trying to be in control. But in fact, there is in me and in all of us an emptiness that cannot be filled unless someone loves us profoundly and permanently. Beneath our I-don’t-need-anyone façade we are hoping to find someone who cares.

The second thing I have learned through the years is that in spite of my desperate need to be loved and appreciated, I feel unworthy. I don’t know why, but it’s true. I don’t feel adequate or worthy, because I know my flaws and my weaknesses.

I bought a new shirt recently. When I put it on the other day, I noticed a dark blue stain right here in front. I must have touched my new shirt with an ink pen. My wife says, “It may come out,” but it looks like permanent ink to me. As you can imagine, I don’t want to wear that shirt with a stain that is so obvious. But what can we do if we are stained as human beings? We all have character flaws and weaknesses and shortcomings. They are sometimes obvious to others. But my weaknesses are especially obvious to myself. I can’t get rid of them. And so I carry around with me a feeling of unworthiness.

Sometimes other people are less than tactful with us. For example, I heard about a mother who was putting on her makeup. Her little boy was watching. Finally he said, “Mommy, what are

you doing?” She explained: “I’m making myself beautiful.” After a while he said, “Mommy, it didn’t work, did it?” Ouch! We all hear some painful words. But in fact, our negative self-perception cannot be entirely blamed on other people. Most of us have a tendency to focus on our weaknesses. Like Pogo in the comic strip we can truthfully say: “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

What have I learned through the years? First, we need to be loved and appreciated. Second, we don’t feel worthy, because we know that we are flawed human beings. Third, we try to impress people, so that they will love us. We try to be successful in the world, so that perhaps our weaknesses will not be noticed. I’m talking about the dark side of upward mobility.

We might say: “If I can be a sports hero, I’ll be admired and loved.” Or we might say: “If I can be a great mom . . .” Or: “If I can keep advancing in my career . . .” Or: “If I can make a name for myself volunteering in the community . . .” Or: “If I can be more spiritual . . .” We are hoping to make ourselves important. We are doing our best to be admirable. Why? So that we can be profoundly and permanently loved.

Unfortunately, when we puff ourselves up, trying to be lovable, it eventually backfires. A well-known pastor was walking home from church with his wife, after delivering his Easter sermon. “I wonder how many great preachers there are in the world,” he said. His wife replied with a twinkle in her eye: “One less than you think, dear.” In the words of Jesus: “[A]ll who exalt themselves will be humbled.” All of us who pretend to be more than we are will eventually fall flat on our face.

What’s the answer? It’s called grace. Grace that comes from the downward mobility of God, who was willing to be born as a baby in Bethlehem. God came down to us, so that we would not have to climb ladders of self-importance in order to be loved. The fourth and most important thing that I have learned through the years is that grace is the only answer. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved an insecure, struggling, desperate-for-love human being like me. I once was lost, trying to achieve my way into being loved, but now am found, was blind, puffing myself up, pretending to be self-sufficient, but now I see.

I see that downward mobility is simply what the Bible calls humility. To be humble is not to put myself down. It is not to denigrate myself. It is not to settle for less than what God desires. To be humble is to know that I am loved and blessed and that my cup runneth over. There is so much of God’s love available for me – and for you – that we can give it away. If we are honored or admired, we can be grateful, but we are not desperate for honors or admiration. Our purpose in life is not upward mobility. Our purposed is to use whatever influence we have to bless others as we ourselves have been blessed.

Last month I received a gigantic shipment of goodies from the Chicago Blackhawks. Their vice president was coming to my Rotary club, and so because I invited him, he sent me six boxes of caps and programs and articles and schedules. Six boxes of wonderful items for my medium-sized Rotary club. He said to me: “Give it all away.” And so I did. Talk about fun! (By the way, I still have more to give away. If you’re interested, let me know.) God’s love is even more abundant. We can give it away every day of our life, and there is always more to receive and to share. Grace is God’s coming down to us, so that we can reach down to others who are equally desperate for love. “For . . . those who humble themselves will be exalted.”