

**Sermon Series: “An Unraveling Hope”**

**Sermon Title: “The Downward Path”**

**Scripture: John 13:1-17, 31b-35**

**March 29, 2018**

**Scripture Reading:** John 13:1-17, 31b-35 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> *It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*

<sup>2</sup> *The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. <sup>3</sup> Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God;<sup>4</sup> so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. <sup>5</sup> After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.*

<sup>6</sup> *He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?”*

<sup>7</sup> *Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”*

<sup>8</sup> *“No,” said Peter, “you shall never wash my feet.”*

*Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.”*

<sup>9</sup> *“Then, Lord,” Simon Peter replied, “not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!”*

<sup>10</sup> *Jesus answered, “Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.” <sup>11</sup> For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not everyone was clean.*

<sup>12</sup> *When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. <sup>13</sup> “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. <sup>14</sup> Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. <sup>15</sup> I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. <sup>16</sup> Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. <sup>17</sup> Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.*

*<sup>31</sup> When he was gone, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. <sup>32</sup> If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.*

*<sup>33</sup> “My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.*

*<sup>34</sup> “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

### **Sermon:**

There was a time in my life where I either heard or spoke on this passage of scripture every week of the summer while leading teenagers on youth mission trips. At the end of every week in over 70 communities across North America, we'd gather all of the students, sing a few songs, and then tell this story of Jesus getting up from the table at that last supper, tying a towel around his waist, and bending down to wash his disciples feet. And then, we'd bring out basins of water and wash the feet of the youth group leaders, who would in turn go around and wash the feet of their students.

It was almost always emotional, not surprisingly, at the end of a week of little sleep and long days of serving together, but there was a simple beauty to that act that I always appreciated, a tangibility and vulnerability that seemed very appropriate to the experiences that our groups had shared together.

All that to say, this is a fairly familiar text to me, given that I've likely either preached it or heard it preached 100 times or more. And yet, in all of those years of both sharing and receiving these words, it strikes me that until this week, I've never really reflected on the part of the passage in verse 31 where Jesus talks about being “glorified” and God being “glorified in him”. It's kind of a strange word to use, “glorified”, given what has just happened, and what is about to happen to Jesus. Just to refresh our memory, the text says that;

*<sup>31</sup> When he was gone, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. <sup>32</sup> If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.*

John 13:31-32 (NIV)

So, part of what caught me off guard here was the statement, “when he was gone” which, when I read it I was like, wait a minute, when who was gone?

You see, the lectionary selection for Maundy Thursday, which, by the way, the term “lectionary” refers to a selection of scriptures that many different Christian traditions use to guide their reflections through an entire liturgical year. We use it on occasion, mostly for the seasons of Advent and Lent. Nonetheless, the lectionary selection for this Maundy Thursday text always excludes a big chunk of the text, it goes from the story of Jesus washing the disciples feet (vs. 1-17) straight to the glorified part (vs. 31-34), and skips an entire 13 verses in between.

Now, I’d like to give the lectionary folks the benefit of the doubt and NOT presume they were just avoiding the uncomfortable stuff, but then, I’m reminded that I tend to avoid the uncomfortable stuff. Well, regardless of the intent, I think those 13 missing verses are important here for our reflection tonight. So, I’d like to read them for you. Again, the passage begins with Jesus, getting up from the meal and washing his disciples feet, and then encouraging them to follow his example saying, “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” And then this happens. Jesus goes on to say;

*<sup>18</sup> “I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfill this passage of Scripture: ‘He who shared my bread has turned against me.’*

*<sup>19</sup> “I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am who I am. <sup>20</sup> Very truly I tell you, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me.”*

*<sup>21</sup> After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, “Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me.”*

*<sup>22</sup> His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant.*

*<sup>23</sup> One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. <sup>24</sup> Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, “Ask him which one he means.”*

*<sup>25</sup> Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, “Lord, who is it?”*

*<sup>26</sup> Jesus answered, “It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.<sup>27</sup> As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.*

*So Jesus told him, “What you are about to do, do quickly.” <sup>28</sup> But no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. <sup>29</sup> Since Judas had charge of the*

*money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor.<sup>30</sup> As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.*

John 13:18-30 (NIV)

And it's at that point that the story tells us;

*<sup>31</sup> When he was gone, (he being Judas) Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him.<sup>32</sup> If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.*

So, back to my initial curiosity around this word "glorified". How exactly is Jesus "glorified" in what just happened? And why is God "glorified through him"?

I must confess, I've never really liked this word "glorified". In my experience, I've heard "God's glory" used to promulgate a lot of really bad theology. I can't count the number of times I've heard God's glory employed to diminish people's very real pain or grief. Like, "I know it doesn't make sense now, but God will be glorified in it." Which, even if in the grand scheme of things is true, it's certainly not helpful to the person grieving. It seems more often a tool to distance or assuage one's own discomfort than any real attempt to comfort the other in their time of grief.

I've also seen God's glory employed to pacify or maintain unjust power dynamics. This is the, "It's not about you, it's about God's glory" argument, which almost always works in favor of the one saying it. Or, and this is probably my favorite, when God's glory is used to spiritualize or justify people's own self-interest. Heck, I've done this myself! The unhealthy side of evangelicalism taught me that I'm not supposed to have desires, and so everything somehow needed to be veiled in God's glory or God's will. You couldn't just say, I want a promotion, or, I want to buy a house. It had to be, "I just want God to be glorified, and I think God could really use this new house to do some great ministry." Which again, may be true, but it also feels a little dishonest.

Okay enough of my rant on the misuse of God's glory. But it does beg the question, what's going on here in this story of Jesus's last night with his disciples. I mean, why does Jesus say "Now, the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in him"? That feels pretty particular. Is it the serving, is that the glorious part? Is it that Jesus, knowing he is headed to a dark place, gets up and washes his disciples feet, taking on an almost scandalous posture of humility to show his disciples by example what it looks like to serve one another? Is that when he's glorified?

Nope. Not yet. Not according to the story. Because, after washing their feet, he goes on to call out the betrayer among them. And in this moment, it seems that Jesus' composure shifts dramatically, the text says that he is "troubled in spirit. I can imagine it like a wave of emotion hitting him all at once. And you get the sense that the whole temperature of the room shifts. One moment the disciples are enjoying this incredibly tender and intimate moment with their teacher as he washes their feet, and in the very next moment, they're confused and looking at one another with suspicion. And while they do not understand what is happening, the interaction between Jesus and Judas is pointed and terse. "What you are about to do, do quickly," Jesus says. "And as soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night."

That's when Jesus makes this proclamation about being glorified.

So, if I'm following the story correctly, it's not so much that Jesus sets a good example in washing the disciples feet that he is glorified, rather, it is in the fact that he is deeply troubled and about to be betrayed by one of his own.

How is that glorifying? That sounds rather the opposite of glorified. Isn't to be glorified to be "lifted up"?

Merriam-Webster defines glorify as:

- to make glorious by bestowing honor, praise, or admiration,
- to elevate,
- to light up brilliantly.
- to cause to be or seem to be better than the actual condition.<sup>1</sup>

So Jesus is being elevated by being handed over to those who want to kill him? And this is bestowing honor, praise or admiration upon God? Is anything here being caused to be better than the actual condition?

Glorified is supposed to be *up*, but what Jesus is handed here is clearly *down*. Are you telling me *down* is the new *up*? Well that sucks. Who wants to sign up for that?!

But what if it's both? What if it's up, and down? What if the Jesus' glorification here in this dizzying interaction with his disciples, on the last night he will spend with them before he is turned over to his executioners, what if it has something to do with the coming together of two trajectories that always coexist, that hold the fullness of our

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/glorified>

human experience, that actually work together toward our wholeness? And yet, quite understandably, we tend to prefer the *up*, and see the *down* as the problem.

I think what is so striking about this portrait that the Gospel writer John paints for us here is how both the intimacy of touch, and the loneliness of betrayal, how this tender compassion and powerful violence, how all of Jesus' hopes for his disciples, and all of their misdirected hopes, all meet in this one moment. It is a radical coming together of *up* and *down*.

Franciscan Brother David Steindl-Rast speaks of this convergence as a necessary component of hope. He says;

“The trajectory of hope is not an unbroken line ‘from glory to glory.’ It leads through the paradox of the cross. The cross itself is a sign of contradiction. It’s two lines meet in conflict, like clashing hopes. The cross stands for that collision in which our hopes must go down so that on the third day hope may rise. The risen Lord says to his discouraged disciples: ‘Was is not necessary for the Christ to suffer all this, and so to enter God’s glory?’”<sup>2</sup>

Maybe that’s why Jesus says, “Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in him.” Perhaps it’s because, in all of the tension and paradox, it’s all coming together, the hope and despair, the darkness and light. And what is perhaps most remarkable about Jesus in the midst of it all is how he is able to hold it, all of it, how he receives the up and the down, without excluding any of it, neither seeking to eliminate the darkness or the light. THAT is what strikes me as glorious, elevated, beyond what we might imagine we are capable of as human beings, but which Jesus so fully embodies.

Upon reflecting on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, Franciscan author and priest Richard Rohr says that;

“The divine pattern revealed in the Trinity is loss and renewal, self-emptying and living on an expanded level, surrender and receptivity, “death and resurrection,” darkness and light. Life has no real opposite; death is merely a transitioning, which takes trust every time we walk through it. I can probably say that Jesus is often roundly rejected as a serious model because few people want to believe in this pattern, and yet it is the big and redemptive pattern of everything. By and

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<sup>2</sup> David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness the Heart of Prayer*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1894), p. 159

large, what human beings want is resurrection without death, answers without doubt, light without darkness, the conclusion without the process.”<sup>3</sup>

And yet, in this moment in the upper room, Jesus shows us that it is possible to open one’s self to both, to participate fully in the up and the down, to hold the tensions and paradox and be transformed. Jesus isn’t superhuman here, he’s just revealing what it looks like to be human in the fullest sense. Which is why the Apostle Paul offers us this invitation to imitate Christ in his letter to the Philippians, which, to be reminded, he wrote from prison;

*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...*

Philippians 2:6-9a (NRSV)

Exalted, glorified, lifted up, elevated... It’s certainly not all *up*, but neither is it all *down*. More often, it’s at the intersection of the two, where the pain of loss and the hope of new possibility meet, where love and rejection, betrayal and intimacy collide. These are the spaces where we are invited to follow Jesus on his seemingly downward path, to participate in the fullness of our humanity, only to find that the down and the up are working together to make us whole.

In a moment I will be inviting you, if you’d like, to participate in the elements of communion and foot washing. But before I do, I want us to spend a moment reflecting on this paradoxical way of Jesus. Bethany is going to come up and read a poem entitled *Kindness* by Naomi Shihab Nye that reflects some of the truths that we’ve explored in tonight’s text. After she reads, I’ll give us a minute or two of silent reflection before coming back to administer the elements.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Rohr and Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance*, (New Kensington: Whitaker House, 2016), p. 145-146.

Poem: **Kindness by Naomi Shihab Nye**

*Before you know what kindness really is  
you must lose things,  
feel the future dissolve in a moment  
like salt in a weakened broth.  
What you held in your hand,  
what you counted and carefully saved,  
all this must go so you know  
how desolate the landscape can be  
between the regions of kindness.  
How you ride and ride  
thinking the bus will never stop,  
the passengers eating maize and chicken  
will stare out the window forever.*

*Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness  
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho  
lies dead by the side of the road.  
You must see how this could be you,  
how he too was someone  
who journeyed through the night with plans  
and the simple breath that kept  
him alive.*

*Before you know kindness as  
the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow as  
the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.  
Then it is only kindness that  
makes sense anymore,  
only kindness that ties your shoes  
and sends you out into the day  
to gaze at bread,*

*only kindness that raises its head  
from the crowd of the world to say  
It is I you have been looking for,  
and then goes with you  
everywhere  
like a shadow or a friend.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Naomi Shihab Nye, from *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems*, (Portland: The Eighth Mountain Press, 1994).