

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
13 March 2022

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Second Sunday In Lent

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“You Gotta Get Up to Get Down”

Second Sermon in the Lenten Series: *Turning the Tables*

John 13:1-17

New Revised Standard Version

A few years ago, Damon and I were at a concert with some friends of his who always fly out to Denver to see Widespread Panic when they are playing at Red Rocks Amphitheater. This is a group of guys who has seen this band in venues all across the country, but Red Rocks is their favorite. Except for the stairs.

Sitting at 6,000 feet high, Red Rocks has two staircases on either side of the amphitheater that rise from the lower parking lot to the upper concession level, each with about 380 steps. There are two interior stairways on either side of the bleachers each with 138 steps from the stage to the top. Along the 69 rows of seats in the venue, there are side stairways with about 83 steps that climb from the stage to the upper parking lot, which then connect by way of an ascending quarter-mile ramp to

62 more steps straight up to the upper concession area.¹ You get the idea; it's a LOT of up and down just to get in and out of the concert, not even counting all the stair you climb and descend on your trips to the concession stand or restroom.

So this one night a couple years ago with Damon's friends, as we were all trying to make our way back to the car, we went UP the stairway out of our seats at the venue, then DOWN the stairs to the first parking lot, to UP a few stairs to get to a different landing, that then led us DOWN other stairways back to the parking lot where we were parked, *or so we thought*. We got turned around, so let's just say there was a lot of up and down that night.

At one point as we were disagreeing about which way our car was parked and where

¹ Kathy Smith, "Take Your Endurance Training to the Stairs," *Active.com*, accessed on March 13, 2022 at

<https://www.active.com/fitness/articles/take-your-endurance-training-to-the-stairs>.

we needed to go, someone said it didn't feel right that we were going UP stairs again when clearly our car was parked DOWN below. It's at this point that our friend Pete just turned around and said, "look, you gotta go up to go down." Boom. Of course. *"You gotta go up to go down."* Sometimes things don't make sense on the surface, but that doesn't mean they're not true. Thanks Pete.

Somehow in the midst of all the confusion about who Jesus was and what was about to happen to him, Jesus knew that he had "to get up to get down" with his disciples. That is, he had to get up from his seat at the table, in order to get down onto his knees to wash their feet. He got up from his position as master and teacher to get down in the position of servant and student. He got up from his seat of privilege at the table to get down to his position of serving. He got up from Power to get down to Love. In what is one of his most enduring lessons in John's Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples about love by saying, *"You gotta get up to get down."*

And by the way Jesus' friend Peter reacted (no formal relation to Damon's friend Pete, by the way – at least not that we know of), we can tell that this single act of "getting up to get down" was turning the table of their lives upside down, overturning the seating chart and social convention of the day. It made no sense to them; but this wasn't about logic – it was about love.

So let's back up just a bit to get some context. John's gospel is essentially divided in half. The first twelve chapters of John cover three years of Jesus' public ministry. The second half, chapters 13-21, cover 24 hours! The last hours of his life. The "hour" to which everything has been building is now here – the "hour" of Jesus' death, his passion. To John, this "hour" is everything. Or at least, it's worth half of his whole gospel. So let's slow down and pay attention because we don't want this hour to be the one that we just spring forward² over – that'll just leave us tired, but not taught. And there are lessons to be learned here.

² Daylight Saving Time began today, March 13, 2022 in Denver, CO.

Something important to note is that this foot washing scene takes place BEFORE Passover, not during it, so it is quite different than what we read in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.³ At this supper, there is no mention of bread or wine or any institution of the Last Supper.⁴ That thing that we think of as most central to the meal – the bread and the cup – is missing in John’s Gospel. While the Bread and the Cup is central in remembering Jesus’ life, John reminds us that Love is most central in following Jesus’ Way of life. John turns the table on our idea of the “last supper” – showing us that it is not merely what we eat that matters, it’s what we DO that matters most.

And nothing turns the table of our comfort levels more upside down than foot washing. I know this not just from our text today, but from the attendance and participation at our foot washing service on Maundy Thursday. We don’t even have dirty feet because this time of year we walk around in the world in shoes not sandals and most of us have showered in the last day

or two – but never mind how sanitary our feet are or aren’t – having someone we potentially know touch our feet is vulnerable, exposing, and uncomfortable. Our arthritic bent hammer toes, our corns and callouses, our chipped nails and swollen ankles – it’s all a little much. To be honest, we don’t pay much attention to our feet do we – except when they are hurt enough – blistered or broken (or when we splurge to get a massage or pedicure).

But in Jesus’ day, foot washing as a rite of hospitality was very common. First of all, people were walking on dusty roads all day wearing sandals. Dirty feet was a daily thing. Because of this, most houses had basins of water at the entrance. The normal practice was for people to just wash their own feet when they entered a house. In Genesis 18, we see Abraham offering the strangers who come down the road a chance to wash their feet with a basin of water under a tree while dinner is being made. This is the normal practice – self foot washing. A variation on this practice is that if you could

³ Matthew 26:17 and following, Mark 14:12 and following, Luke 22:7 and following.

⁴ Ginger Barfield, “Commentary on John 13:1-17,” *Working Preacher* (13 March 2022), accessed on March

13, 2022 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/jesus-washes-feet/commentary-on-john-131-17-3>.

afford servants, you would have a servant wash the feet of your guests. I'm saying servant here, but the reality is – slave is probably a better term. There is no indication that these individuals were being paid for their services or that they had a choice in the matter. But the point is - no free person would wash the feet of another free person. It just wasn't done.⁵

So this is an extraordinary gesture on Jesus' part. For Jesus to get up from his seat at the table – during supper, not before it! – just further reinforces the attention he wants to give to this moment. Jesus, as the teacher and master of his friends and disciples, takes on the role of a servant or slave. He offers this gesture of humility, but without the brutal conditions of forced labor or dehumanization attached to it. He gets up from his seat at the Table to get down on his knees to show us that the seat we need to be taking most often in life – is the one of serving others in Love. Doing something that makes us uncomfortable for the sake of lifting someone else up.

Jesus took a task that people normally did for themselves, and said, “let me do this for you.” Let me show you my Love. And sure, the act of washing the dirt off of feet is an act of Love quite literally – but metaphorically – it's an act of Love too, because to hold and wash feet, to tend to feet is to acknowledge where someone has been, where they stand now, and where they are going. How often do we have an opportunity to bless the journeys of one another? To acknowledge and honor the path they've been on, the forks in the road they've pondered, and the trail they are forging ahead now?

And here's the kicker that makes this story even more powerful. Jesus washing his disciples' feet wasn't his idea! Just one chapter earlier, in John 12, his beloved friend Mary does an extravagant, outlandish act. She takes costly perfume made of pure nard (read: expensive), anoints Jesus' feet with it, and wipes his feet with her hair (John 12:3).

⁵ Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, & Karoline Lewis, “NL Podcast 308 - Mar. 13, 2022 - NL432: Jesus Washes Feet,” *Working Preacher* (Feb. 17, 2018), accessed on

March 13, 2022 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/308-jesus-washes-feet-mar-13-2022>.

The way John tells the story, Jesus decides to wash the feet of his disciples because of the feeling of love and respect and devotion he felt from Mary anointing and washing his feet first. He takes an extravagant act of love done to him personally, and makes it simpler in terms of the supplies and materials, but even *more* extravagant and outlandish in terms of the recipients. Mary loved Jesus and was devoted to him. Of course she would be willing to wash his feet.

But Jesus was in a room of people who knew him probably better than most people knew him, and yet we know at least two of them would hurt him deeply. Peter would deny him. Judas would betray him. Neither understood him.

And yet Jesus washed their feet too. Apparently, knowing people will hurt us is not a reason not to Love them or serve them. Apparently, the kind of Love Jesus came to teach us about is a Love that is for all – for those who love us with devotion and those who will hurt us with deception, those who listen to us and those who ignore us, those who understand us and those who misunderstand us.

Whew. This kind of love is hard to wrap our heads around, let alone our hearts.

Peter, of course, is the one who plays the role of all of us in these narratives. Saying out loud the things that the rest of us think to ourselves in our head: *“Lord, you can’t wash my feet! You’re the teacher!”* And Jesus responds in so many words: *“Exactly! I’m the teacher. So look at me. Listen to me. See what I’m doing. This IS the lesson for today. I serve you, and you must do the same for others. There is no special seat at the table for some and not for all. If you find yourself in a seat of power or privilege, consider getting up out of that seat and kneeling on the floor – seeing how you can privilege someone else in that moment. How you can bless them on their path, not boast of your own place or position in their presence?”*

“You gotta get up to get down.” You can’t serve and love others from the place where you always sit, from the position where you always are, from the perspective from which you always see. You have to get up from where you

are to get down to discover something new.

To Love in this kind of way has nothing to do with elevating or demeaning ourselves, but everything to do with seeing another as equal. Because you see, the thing about washing feet is that as one person is sitting in a chair, the person kneeling in front of them is at their eye level. You would have to work hard NOT to have eye contact with someone whose feet you are washing.

So this is not about just demoting yourself in order to promote someone else, further playing into the false dichotomy of a hierarchy of power – that says some people are on top and others are on the bottom. No, this is about knocking that ladder down altogether and seeing us all as equal. And loving one another equally – even when the behavior we are exhibiting (or someone else is exhibiting) doesn't deserve our love.

Deep breath here.

Do you know what this text has made me think about all week?

Washing Vladimir Putin's feet.

I know. It's a disturbing and disarming thought. Serving and loving one who is not just betraying and denying one person as Peter and Judas did, but who is betraying, denying, attacking, and murdering whole groups of innocent people? What does it mean to look into the eyes of one who seems to personify evil and *humanize* him? Or show him tenderness and care?

Just imagining it is *very* uncomfortable. Just thinking of holding the feet of someone who is trampling on women, children, civilians, cities, and soldiers alike...is more than I can handle. But it made wonder: what if more people had shown Putin this kind of self-giving love in his life...would he be the way he is now? I don't know. Maybe. But maybe not. Who am I to limit God's love with my judgement of who deserves it or how it works?

The thing is Putin is an extreme. Most of us will not be in the position where we have to worry about whether we have it in us to kneel before a person like Putin and wash his feet. No, our task, is perhaps far more mundane, but more

deeply personal, than that – and harder because of it. We have to think about what it means to kneel at the feet of someone we love who has betrayed us or denied us, hurt us or ignored us. Someone who annoys us or angers us. Sometimes we have to think about what it means to draw boundaries and be safe from someone who is harming us, without demonizing them or demoralizing them in the process. We have to condemn the actions of people, without canceling out their humanity or dignity or worth as a fellow human. This is hard work. Radical Love kind of work. Following Jesus kind of work. Christian work.

Getting up from our seat to get down on the floor with those we view as “below us” is not easy. If we think this, may we remember that Jesus is about to be beaten, betrayed, crucified, and buried. No act of Love that Jesus shows is sugar-coated. It’s all grit, even if we label it grace today...I bet Judas’ feet felt pretty gritty to Jesus in that moment!

As Jesus gets up from his place at the table in order to get down on his knees to wash the

feet of his betrayer and denier, he reveals that no act of love is “off the table” when it comes to how we are to live and love in the world. Including how we let ourselves be loved.

One of my favorite books is *Let Your Life Speak*, by writer, teacher, and Quaker activist, Parker Palmer. Chapter four in this book is about how he was being pressed debilitatingly to the ground by depression, and only then from that place and through that experience was he able to rise again to life. In other words, he had “to get DOWN to get up,” not the other way around. But he couldn’t do it on his own. After sharing about the unhelpful advice or words of “comfort” people tried to give him to be “helpful” in his depression (which only made him feel worse), he writes:

“One of the hardest things we must do sometimes is to be present to another person’s pain without trying to ‘fix’ it, to simply stand respectfully at the edge of that person’s mystery and misery. Standing there, we feel useless and

powerless, which is exactly how a depressed person feels.”⁶

“Blessedly, there were several people [in my life], family and friends, who had the courage to stand with me in a simple and healing way. One of them was a friend named Bill who, having asked my permission to do so, stopped by my home every afternoon, sat me down in a chair, knelt in front of me, removed my shoes and socks, and for half an hour simply massaged my feet. He found the one place in my body where I could still experience feeling – and feel somewhat reconnected with the human race.”⁷

“Bill rarely spoke a word. When he did, he never gave advice but simply mirrored my condition. He would say, ‘I can sense your struggle today,’ or ‘It feels like you are getting stronger.’ I could not always respond, but his words were deeply helpful: they reassured me that I could still be seen by someone – [which was] life-giving knowledge in the midst of an experience that makes one feel [disconnected] and invisible. It is impossible to put

into words what my friend’s ministry meant to me. Perhaps it is enough to say that I now have a deep appreciation for the biblical stories of Jesus and the washing of feet.”⁸

“The poet Rainer Maria Rilke says, ‘love...consists in this, that two solitudes protect and border and salute each other.’ That is the kind of love my friend Bill offered. He never tried to invade my [depression] with false comfort or advice; he simply stood on its boundaries, modeling the respect for me and my journey – and the courage to let it be – that I myself needed if I were to endure.”⁹

“This kind of love does not reflect the ‘functional atheism’ we sometimes practice – saying pious words about God’s presence in our lives but believing, on the contrary, that nothing good is going to happen unless WE make it happen. Rilke describes a kind of love that neither avoids nor invades the soul’s suffering. It is a love in which we represent God’s love to a suffering person, a God who does not ‘fix’ us but [sees us and] gives

⁶ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers: San Francisco, CA) 2000, pg 63.

⁷ Palmer, pg 63.

⁸ Palmer, pgs 63-64.

⁹ Palmer, pg 64.

us strength by suffering with us. By standing respectfully and faithfully at the borders of another's solitude, we may mediate the love of God to a person who needs something deeper than any human being can give."¹⁰

Parker Palmer reminds us that it's not about which posture we are in, as much as it is about ensuring that we are connecting with the person in the position across from us. Humanizing them in humility, and allowing ourselves to be humanized too.

Jesus turns the table of our lives by inviting us to "get up to get down" and to "get down to get up." He allowed his feet to be washed and anointed by Mary and then he turned around and washed his disciples' feet. Jesus gives us *both* models of extravagant love. Giving and receiving.

Getting up to get down.
Getting down to get up.
Both postures embody the love of Christ, and both will lead us to fuller presence with ourselves and others.

Amen.

¹⁰ Palmer, pg 64.