

**Sermon: Walking Toward Servanthood and Humility****Scripture: John 13:1-17****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: March 17, 2024**

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Psalms 120-134 are all referred to as the Psalms of Ascent, “ma’alot” in Hebrew which means “going up”. There are many theories as to what exactly that meant in the Jewish world at the time and none of them are definitive. Some have said that in the temple courtyard, there was a wide set of stairs leading to the temple that numbered 15 and so the Psalms of Ascent represented each step to the temple. Others say these 15 Psalms were sung in such a way that each Psalm began on low notes and gradually arose to a crescendo of high notes at the end. Another theory is that these Psalms were written and sung by the Jews who ascended from their exile in Babylon to Israel when they returned to their homeland, others say that each Psalm draws the earth-bound human closer to the heights of God.

Psalm 131 is a particularly poignant one **CLICK!** and sets us up for the passage we have this morning of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. “O Lord my head is not lifted up and my eyes are not raised too high.” Interesting isn’t it that in this Psalm of Ascent there is this movement downward, this heaviness of head and heart? “I do not occupy myself with things too great or too marvelous for me.” It sounds something like the experience of depression. “But I have calmed and quieted my soul”, the descent continues, “like a weaned child with its mother, my soul is like the weaned child within me” down to a place of vulnerability and dependency but an experience of separation from our source nonetheless, as a weaned child with its mother. And then the call to the Israel –

“hope in the Lord” – from this time on and forevermore. From that low place, it’s this final turn to hope in God that is the ascent.

This beautiful Psalm is paired with the descent of Jesus onto his knees at his last supper with the disciples, into the dirt, to wash their feet and to call them to do the same for others as well. From the beginning of the biblical story and certainly the Gospel story, the journey OF God and the journey TO God for the human is one of descent. Funny that we think of God symbolically as up, when our journey toward him is mor often a descent.

The upward movements of humans throughout the scripture are time and again examples of human waywardness and sinfulness and the direction of separation from God – the reaching up for the fruit on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the building up of the tower of Babel to reach the heavens, the choosing of a King to ascend the throne of Israel, the disciples arguing who is the highest and the greatest, the raising of the cruciform figure of Jesus on the cross at Golgotha, are all cases of humans separating from God.

Love came down at Christmas, we sing, and throughout his life, Jesus continued his descent until he was lowered into his grave as an executed humiliated heretic of religion and criminal of the state. It doesn’t get any lower than that. The way to God is not up, the way is down.

Peter’s interaction with Jesus so beautifully captures the human struggle with this reality, this desire and drive we have for the raising up of ourselves and the spiritual necessity of humility and descent. Jesus removes his outer garment and gets down on his knees to wash his disciples’ feet, a stunning act of humility on the part of not just a teacher and master but the person of God incarnate who is one with His Father in Heaven as John in particular makes clear. And so Peter, in

what seems like a response of humility says **CLICK TWICE!** “NO! you will never wash my feet, Lord!” And Jesus stops and responds **CLICK!** “then you will have no part of me.”

Sunada Tagaki in our Mondays with Buddha and Jesus speaks of the far enemy and the near enemy of the virtues we seek like loving kindness and compassion. There is the far enemy, **CLICK TWICE!** the quality that is clearly the polar opposite of the virtue we seek, in the case of humility, the far enemy would be **CLICK!** prideful arrogance. We can usually recognize our prideful arrogance and can intentionally work on curbing it. But the near enemy of the virtue of humility **CLICK!** is trickier cause it looks very close to the virtue itself but it is counter to it. So in this instance the greater threat, so to speak, to humility is not our blatant arrogance and pride but our more subtle resistance that mask the pride beneath it. **CLICK!** Peter feels like he is being humble, “I won’t let you wash my feet,” when in fact it’s pride that separates him from Jesus, Peter deciding that Jesus is wrong to ask and needs to be corrected, apparently doesn’t know what he is doing and refuses to accept his need that Jesus is offering to meet.

How hard it can be to allow others to serve us. How good it feels to be there for someone else, to humble ourselves and serve another in their deep need and how hard it can be to swallow our pride so to speak and admit a deep need ourselves and allow others to serve us? Peter found it difficult. **CLICK TWICE!** “You will never wash my feet, Lord!” And Jesus catches it immediately, about to get up and move on with one of the other disciples **CLICK!** – “Ok, then you will have no part of me!” But as often as Peter gets it wrong in his bravado, he’s also humble enough to be corrected and learn – **CLICK!** “wait, ok then, wash my head and hands as well!” I want to be a part of you! And Jesus washes Peter’s feet too.

It's possible that Peter's refusal of Jesus' offer was that he felt ashamed, unworthy to have his feet washed by Jesus and maybe that's more our issue than unbridled pride, shame that we don't feel worthy or deserving of the grace that another much less God Godself has to bestow upon us. And the Christian theological answer to that is **CLICK TWICE!** "you're right! You cannot be worthy enough to DESERVE God's unmitigated outpouring of unconditional love upon you. And that's ok, God wants to give it to you anyway!" Shame itself is a near enemy of the virtue of humility in that one's focus is still on one's self in the merit game that is always measuring oneself over and against others even if you're coming up short in the final analysis. Puts you in mind of CS Lewis' quote **CLICK!** – "humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less often."

When Jesus gets up from the ground and returns to his place at the table having washed the feet of his disciples he commissions them to go forth and do the same for others. Wash others' feet, and be as a servant to them, regardless of their deserving. **CLICK! BLANK**

As we walk this road through Lent and are coming closer to Holy Week, we are asked as we follow Jesus to cultivate within ourselves the virtue of humility. And so let count the ways we might do that and as you might imagine, there at least 7 of them: **CLICK!**

1. If "humility is not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less often," then can we simply notice when our thoughts have turned exclusively to ourselves and what we need and choose to turn toward the other and what they need? Our culture says we cannot love others until we love ourselves. It's not true. We can come to love ourselves in and through our love for others.

2. Cultivating humility in ourselves involves practicing gratitude. **CLICK!** You can't be full of gratitude and full of pride because gratitude acknowledges all that is given as gift while pride sees only that which is our right, our due, our deserving.
3. To cultivate humility in our lives – and here I bow to Paul Rahmeier - is to practice curiosity. **CLICK!** This was a favorite virtue of Paul's and came up throughout his memorial service. Especially in instances where we are convinced of our own righteousness and offended by how wrong the other is and so many of us are feeling that way these days in this political climate, to approach the other, especially the enemy with curiosity to understand them is to cultivate humility in a seriously counter-cultural way.
4. To cultivate humility in our lives is to remember and understand and call to mind especially when we are most offended that we who hold the stone about to pummel the other are not without sin and offense ourselves. **CLICK!** As Gandhi said, "the only devils in the world are those running around in our own hearts – that is where the battle should be fought."
5. To cultivate humility in our lives is to practice forgiveness **CLICK!** knowing that we too are in need of and have in fact been forgiven. There is no more present and recurrent theme in Hollywood than vengeance for wrong done unto us or our tribe. Our Lord and Teacher, Jesus, is explicit about this in his teachings and his example – forgive 70x7 and God forgive them for they know not what they do. While it certainly doesn't mean allowing someone who has hurt us to continue hurting us,

humility does require us to grapple with forgiving of the enemy for their sake and for our own.

6. To cultivate humility in our lives, as I said before, can mean leaning into our own need of others. **CLICK!** It can mean at times allowing others to serve us in our deep need and not always and only being in the seat of the helper. Again the near enemy of humility is the helper who refuses to be helped because of their own pride.
7. And finally, to cultivate humility in our lives is to take the posture of assuming the best in others. **CLICK!** In the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius which you've heard me talk about before, the process I went through in my 30-Day silent retreat, there is what is known as "the Ignatian Presupposition" and although he wrote it 400 years ago, man, is it appropriate for today! **CLICK! BLANK** Not unrelated to the point on curiosity, the presupposition goes like this: **CLICK!**

**"... it should be presupposed that every good Christian ought to be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbor's statement than to condemn it. Further, if one cannot interpret it favorably, one should ask how the other means it. If the meaning is wrong, one should correct the person with love; if this is not enough, one should search out every appropriate means through which, by understanding the statement in a good way, it may be saved."**

And so let us in these ways **CLICK TWICE!** cultivate humility in our days as we walk this road with Jesus and hopefully become more like him with each step along the way, Amen.