

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Downward Mobility”

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“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45).

We’ve all become accustomed to the concept of upward mobility. We pursue it and we understand when others pursue it too.

Recently, a colleague of my son used his material at work. The boss praised *her* for Jonathan’s work. On the one hand, it angered him that she did not give him credit. On the other hand, he understands her ambition. It got her a degree of separation from the other first year employees of a large corporation.

Another example: A young professional coaches your son’s soccer team. He’s an elder at church and is thoroughly invested in the community. But suddenly, he just disappears. You learn he has packed up his family and moved to Brookfield. He got a better job. While you are saddened by the loss to the church and community, you understand. It was a step up for him.

A husband and wife live in nice home in Johnson Creek. One commutes to Madison for work, the other to Milwaukee. They have good jobs, but because of their careers, they hardly see one another. Publicly, they joke about the arrangement. Privately, they know it puts a strain on their marriage. In the end, however, they decide it’s necessary to advance their careers. And everyone understands. They are doing what it takes to move on up.

In some ways, our world is not much different from what we see happening in our gospel reading. James and John come before Jesus with a big request. “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Their boldness surprises us. But we also understand. They are pursuing upward mobility, just like everyone else.

Remember, they had been fishermen working in the family business with their father Zebedee. Now they are disciples of Jesus, a rising star in Israel. But they’re looking ahead, and they see a potential opportunity to be something much greater. Jesus has called them to follow Him. Why not follow Him all the way to the top? He’s always talking about His Kingdom. Why not ask Him for positions of honor in His Kingdom.

Verse 41, “When the ten heard it, they were indignant at James and John.” Presumably it’s not because they thought what James and John did was all that uncommon or crass, but because they didn’t think of it first. They know first-hand the ambition for upward mobility.

Upward mobility changes the way we think. It can become our organizing principle and shape the decisions we make. We may think the request of James and John was in poor taste, particularly just after he foretells his death. But we also understand their ambitions. It doesn’t surprise us. It’s not foreign to us. Upward mobility is what most of us want. Which is why it’s important to keep our eyes focused on Jesus. “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus . . . who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame” (Heb. 12:2).

This is the third time now in Mark when Jesus predicts His suffering, death and resurrection. Each time He mentions it, the disciples just don’t get it. In chapter 8, Peter rebukes him for saying it. “Lord, this will never happen to you.” In chapter 9, right after He tells them He’s going to be killed and then rise again, His disciples start arguing about who is the greatest! And here in chapter 10, after he foretells His death a third time, here come James and John asking Him for positions of honor. The world, then and now, has always been filled with grand visions of upward mobility. We’re not really interested in humility and self-denial, in suffering and dying. We’re interested in honor and wealth and prestige. We’re interested in the accumulation

of high-quality stuff. We're interested in living in a place that reflects our prosperity, surrounded by other people of equal or greater status and prosperity.

Jesus did not come to play this game. He did not come to mimic the world. He came to change the world. Jesus brings about a different way of living, with different goals. He brings a kingdom that works by grace. He introduces to us what we might think of as "downward mobility." In order to save us, He was born into a family that couldn't provide Him any better cradle than a feed trough. He was a refugee as a child in Egypt, was homeless as an adult. He ate with the outcasts. He touched and healed those with disgusting diseases. He cast out demons and is himself cast out of towns and villages. When He suffered and died on our behalf, even His clothes were taken from Him. And they laid Him in a borrowed tomb. Downward mobility for us and for our salvation. In our text, He wants us to know this is no accident. It is the Father's plan for the salvation of the world. In our text, Jesus says, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many" (10:45).

So, Jesus has put Himself on a downward trajectory, which takes Him to the very bottom, to the depths of Hell itself. He will drink the cup of His Father's wrath against sin. He will be baptized with the waters of judgment. He will feel the pains of death. And He will do all of this for you and me: That He might gather all who have sinned, all who have suffered, all who have been separated from the love of God, in order to bring us back to His Father and give us life in His Kingdom. Jesus has come to be a Suffering Servant, to die for the sinful, and gather the lost. His downward mobility reveals God's love for us and flows out of God's love for us.

Today, as His baptized people, Jesus changes our own goals and values. He calls us to follow Him in the strange and alien ways of downward mobility. "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all" (v. 43). Eventually, the disciples take this lesson to heart. Formerly they argued about greatness and lobbied for position and power. In the future, they will serve humbly in His Kingdom until they lay down their own lives as martyrs.

Our deaths may not be so dramatic. For us it may be a much slower, more subtle way of dying, as each day we put to death the Old Adam in us, with all its selfish ambitions. We renounce the idols we worship, one of which can be ambitions of upward mobility. Instead, we seek to participate in God's work down below.

An example: A woman has an opportunity for a promotion. It is a great job with excellent benefits, but it means moving away from her aging mother in the early stages of dementia. Rather than leave to live her dreams, she stays to walk in God's ways, caring for her mother. She follows Christ into what our world would see as foolishness. Yet, for her, this is simply a part of being faithful. She is following Jesus in downward mobility.

A doctor serving a rural community has opportunity to move to the suburbs and work in a prestigious hospital. He chooses, instead, to remain behind and serve an under-served population. It's his Christian faith driving this decision.

A gifted young woman is offered impressive scholarships from numerous universities. Instead, she takes out impressive loans to study at Concordia for training as a Lutheran School Teacher. She is following Jesus in downward mobility.

A recently retired man has the time and resources now to do nothing but travel and golf and eat at nice restaurants and be entertained by the fine arts. But he curbs those appetites to make time for delivering meals on wheels and doing the dishes at the soup kitchen.

Such actions are not demanded of us. We don't have to do them. No, we choose them freely. Jesus calls us to follow, and the Spirit guides us in His ways. He leads us to unfamiliar places to do humble but necessary work. He leads us into the suffering and chaos of others, calling us to sacrifice our own selfish ambitions and to give ourselves away.

As God's holy and redeemed people, we don't shrink from suffering or service. We know the Christian life isn't always driven by the pursuit of upward mobility. It's driven by the delight in serving others as Christ has served us. Amen.