

## **“GOD’S DOWNWARD MOBILITY”**

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Of all Sundays, the mood of Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday, is most paradoxical. It starts with cheering crowds, the acclaim of palm branches waving Jesus into Jerusalem. “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” They hailed a conquering Messiah to galvanize them politically, to mobilize them militarily, to remove an enslaving empire’s cruel yoke. But they got Jesus, with no interest in beating Rome at their own game. Jesus, with his whole new game for this world.

I remember Ilie Nastase, the Romanian-born tennis professional, commenting on the great Bjorn Borg at his peak, how he said, “The rest of us are playing tennis. I have no idea what he is doing.” That, friends, is how we should perceive Jesus.

If you’re like me, part of you cries out about the downturn of events this week as a terrible mistake, some great big misunderstanding. Surely, if it happened today, we would clear everything up. Jesus would not have to struggle, suffer, and die. We’d protect Jesus and put his life back on an upward gradient, where it belongs.

We idolize success or upward mobility. But God’s downward mobility in Jesus is no mistake, no misunderstanding. It’s God at work in his new revelation of love. What feels out of place, just plain sad, and linked to failure is eternal victory. This week is the holiest time of year, friends, because it is when we glimpse the God who empties Godself out of love for us, even in the face of suffering and death. This is no anomaly or mistake. This emptying of Godself is who God is through and through. This self-giving love isn’t some exception to how God works; it’s the rule. In these days we learn why the cross is at the center of everything we are. For whenever we get too far away from the tragic side of life, we veer off course.

“Let the same mind be in you,” Paul charged the Philippians, “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 and gave him the name that is above every name.”

Paul brings this bold and beautiful message about the God of downward mobility. This is God’s strategy to redeem the earth. These are God’s plans for rescuing humankind. To follow Jesus, is to buy in, to invest ourselves in his life and death. Are we willing to partner in this project or movement? That is what discipleship is.

Of course, upward mobility is an easier sell than downward mobility. I recall the story of a physician driving her four-year old daughter to pre-school. The little girl noticed her mom’s stethoscope on the car seat. She picked it up and began playing with it. “Be still, my heart,” thought the mother physician. “Will she rise to chief

of surgery at Johns Hopkins? Head of research at Sloane-Kettering?” The girl put the stethoscope in her ears and spoke into it. “Welcome to McDonald’s. May I take your order?” Let’s face it. Downward mobility is not the stuff of our dreams.

Let’s face it, this cuts against our grain. It contrasts with the American dream. No “trickledown economics” here. Just gentle Jesus sinking way deep into the darkest recesses imaginable then taking us up with him into the divine realm of light. Downward mobility runs the opposite direction of *human* dreams of success that celebrate the self-made, conquering, heroic individual at the center of all things. Downward mobility is at the heart of *God’s* dream, what Jesus called God’s reign.

Here the God of the cross looms large at the center of things. The beauty of this plan is how it propels us toward loving exaltation, new vindication and our rightful elevation. Yet it refuses to deny the tragic. How the power of the cross promises long-awaited deliverance, but at the expense of no one and with no one left behind. How could this happen? Not by any human plan or dream. “(Jesus) humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--even death on a cross.”

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross tells of the first time she made up her mind to talk to a dying man in order to learn what he was experiencing. She found an excuse to put it off until the next day, as most of us very naturally might. He died before she could speak to him. In all of the essential work Kubler-Ross did with the dying, she never got over that. Her honesty reveals our deep unwillingness to face life’s tragic side, to go down into it with Jesus. So where do we find courage to do so?

In the 1930’s, a young Jewish woman named Simone Weil applied for a one-year leave of absence from her teaching job in England to work in unskilled labor, first in a French electrical plant, and then as a machine operator at Renault Motors. Over the objections of her family, she changed her name, rented a room near the factory, and set about living a life no different from that of other factory workers. She was not a strong woman. She soon grew frail working long days for low pay.

When Hitler occupied France in 1940, she worked in the Resistance. Then Weil immigrated to England where she joined the Resistance in exile. As a Jew, she could not officially join the battle for France. So she took part in it vicariously by limiting herself to the same rations the occupied French had with their food cards. It was all quite unnecessary. She was safe in England. She was an educated person of means. But she refused to assert her privilege. In 1943, malnourished and ill, Simone Weil was admitted to a hospital. She died months later, at age 34.

Why would she do something like that? we want to protest. It makes no sense. The answer was Christ had encountered her and she took him at his word. Although Weil was never baptized, thinking it would make her an insider instead of an outsider like Jesus, she believed it was possible for us to take on the suffering of others. She invested herself—in this world, and in the world to come. It might seem crazy to us, useless, illogical. For her it was an act of compassion.

We despair of the cross's power because we believe it solves nothing. But what if the cross wasn't meant as a *solution* to fix our struggles? What if it was meant as a *sign* to point us toward life's beautiful fullness despite life's tragedies? What if our faith—with the cross smack dab in the middle—has less to do with the prospect of *removing* all suffering? What if the cross means to *transform* all suffering? To witness to everyone that God does understand our life at its worst. To signal everyone that God has not forgotten or abandoned us. Our sufferings can then become like those of Jesus, redeeming and reclaiming dark places for good, at worst; aglow with holiness, at best. Yes, the cross is less a solution, more a sign.

Few have Simone Weil's spiritual imagination and uncompromising commitment. But we all know what compassion is, how it works, and that everyone deserves it. We've all known deeply gifted people who were seemingly indifferent to honors. That is Christ's downward way. We've all seen pure in heart who refuse to peg their station in life to their own merit, but attribute all blessing to God's goodness. That is Christ's downward way. We've all known those who find solidarity not in the sheen of triumph, but by humbling themselves. That is Christ's downward way. We've all walked alongside persons with an unflinching eye for the lonely, the outcast, the infirmed, the marginal, the refugee, the agonized, and the homeless. That is Christ's downward way. Where do we begin following Jesus into his loving descent? By searching our lives for conspicuous places where we lack love and compassion. The cold places in us. And praying God to fill them with Jesus.

This is intimidating, right. I could describe no more demanding destiny. Where do we begin? The answer is start small. A legend from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* reminds us that we might begin with something so small as an onion.

Once upon a time there lived a nasty, horrible old woman. When she died, she didn't leave behind one single good deed. So the devils got a hold of her and threw her into the flaming lake. Meantime, her guardian angel stood there, trying to remember one good deed that he could mention to God in order to save her. Then he remembered and told God: 'Once she pulled an onion from her garden and gave it to the beggar woman.' So God said to the angel, 'Take that onion, hold it out to her over the lake, let her hold on to it, and try to pull herself out. If she does, let her enter heaven; if the onion breaks, she will remain where she is.'

So the angel hurried to the woman, held out the onion to her, and told her to take hold of it, and to pull for all she was worth. Then he himself began to pull her out carefully. And she was almost entirely out of the lake. Then the other sinners saw she was being pulled out, and grabbed her feet, so they would be pulled out of the flames as well. But when she saw them, that wicked, horrible woman started kicking them, saying, 'I'm being pulled out, not you. It's *my* onion, not yours!' Wouldn't you know it, as soon as she uttered those words, the onion snapped, and she fell back into the lake of fire. Her guardian angel wept and walked away.

Dostoyevsky understood God's downward mobility. So what is your onion, your spiritual gift? It need not be massive or impressive. But don't cling to it or hoard it. Share it with the struggling, the suffering, even the dying, rather than recoil and retreat. That's what it means to follow Christ upward through the downward way. Amen.