

January 12, 2014
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UP THE DOWN STAIRCASE
John 13:1-17

INTRODUCTION

Peggielene Bartels is a naturalized American citizen who came here from the town of Otuaam in Ghana. She works in the Ghanaian embassy in Washington D. C. as a secretary. She is a fairly normal person who drives an old Honda and does her own laundry. But in 2009 her life took an unexpected turn. The king of Otuaam died at the age of 90 that year. The elders of Otuaam then did what they normally do. They poured some alcohol on the ground while reading the names of the king's relatives, all 25 of them. When steam rose from the alcohol the name they were reading at that moment would be named the new king. The name turned out to be that of one of the late king's nieces, none other than Peggielene Bartels.

Peggilene was contacted and told that she was the new king. She informed them that she is a woman. Undeterred the elders informed her that Otuaam has a king, and she was it. So King Peggy as she is called was carried through the streets of the city on a litter to her coronation with the heavy gold crown of the king. She still lives in D. C. but she periodically goes back to Ghana where she has a driver, a chef, a palace and 1000 acres of land.

King Peggy took a very surprising step up in life from humble, normal citizen to king. Today we are going to look at a story in which a king took a shocking step down. His step down was immeasurably farther than was her step up. Oddly this step down that he took turns out to be the same step we need to make, only for us it is a step up. By going down we go up. You'll see what I mean as we look at this familiar story in John 13:1-17.

Today we are starting a series of sermons on John 13-17. These were John's recollections of what I like to think of as Jesus' final briefing for his disciples. In the military units about to go on a mission are given a last briefing. This was kind of like that for the disciples of Jesus. The next day would be the most momentous not only in their lives but in the history of the human race. Jesus had some crucial instruction to give them before those events take place, and the longest record of what he said is found in these chapters. We can learn a lot from paying attention to this most crucial briefing, so let's begin today.

JESUS PICTURED HIS WORK IN AN AMAZING ACT

Verse 1 tells us that Jesus “knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.” He was at the end of his life. The New American Standard Version correctly translates the last part of the verse, “he loved them (meaning his disciples) to the end.” In other words, in what he did here at the very end of his life Jesus was still showing his followers how much he loved them.

In his record of the events of that night Luke tells us something that helps us understand why Jesus took the particular action he did here. Luke 22:24 says, “A dispute among them (the disciples) as to which of them was considered to be greatest.” On more than one occasion Jesus had taught the disciples that to be leaders in his kingdom they needed to humble themselves and become servants. Clearly they hadn’t grasped that message because here they are once again arguing about who is better than whom and who was most popular.

That’s understandable to a degree. How do things work in the world? We continually rank ourselves. We continually compare. We are always finely tuned to where we fit on the social ladder of whatever context we might find ourselves. We are often highly sensitive to any message that we are not as important or as significant as other people.

A few months ago Laurie and I took a trip that involved something that is not listed in that song *My Favorite Things*. Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens, bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens may be on the list but flying out of LAX is not. We were going to park our car up there and leave it during our trip. We found a good deal at a hotel that had underground parking. So we drove up and parked our car then asked where to go to get the shuttle to the airport. We were directed to the entrance to the hotel. We went to the indicated place to wait. We were told the shuttle would be there shortly. But it didn’t come all that quickly. Instead some police showed up, but they just stood around. It turned out that the Emmy awards were happening that night in LA. Some “important” person, I suppose some celebrity, was coming to that hotel and the police were there to provide security. Our shuttle actually had arrived, but it would have been in the way for the celebrity there in front of the hotel so it had been moved to an alley around to the side of the hotel. All of us nonentities, the nobodies who were either guests at the hotel or were just parking there, had to schlep our luggage around to the alley to board the shuttle.

That's how the world works, isn't it? It's better to be important, to be somebody, because people cater to you and notice you. We hate to get that message that we don't matter, that we're unimportant. You aren't anybody, so could you just move and make way for the important person please. Who likes to hear that?

The disciples of Jesus were only human and understood that. They had been nobodies all their lives. It felt good to them to be chosen by Jesus. No one had ever chosen them for anything. But Jesus, the man they knew was more than just a man, the man who had divine power, had selected them to be special. In their minds Jesus was soon going to finally establish his kingdom. He was going to rule, and they were going to be part of his administration. They were going to be the most important somebodies in the entire world. Everyone would know who they were.

But there were 12 of them. Who wanted to be number 12 out of 12? There are secretaries of departments in the President's cabinet. How many of them can you name? We all know Kathleen Sibelius, Secretary of Health and Human Services, because of the Affordable Care Act debacle. But who knows the names of the Secretary of Commerce or of the Interior? The disciples were arguing about where they ranked because they all wanted to "be somebody."

What Jesus did that night is familiar to many of us, and unfortunately its familiarity can sap its impact to some degree. His action would have been astounding in any human society. It was the custom in that day for a host to have a servant wash the feet of his guests. You can imagine how dirty their feet got since they walked around all day through dirt only wearing sandals. It was impossible to keep feet clean. So having a servant wash the dirty feet of guests was a kind gesture. But it was a nasty task, which meant that only the lowest servant was assigned to do it.

At this dinner there was no host. So who was going to wash feet? It was either going to be each one washed his own feet or no one was going to wash feet. No one wanted to do the job for the others because to do so implied that the others were more important. It was to admit that one ought to be the person serving the others. If you've been arguing about who is most important you're not going to be anxious to take on a job that says you're the least important person in the room.

Who was the most important person in the room? Obviously it was Jesus, since he is the Lord of all. He wasn't just the most important person in the room, he is the most important person in all that exists. Who do you think the disciples thought was the most important person in the room? They all knew that it was Jesus. What they were arguing about was who was the second greatest person in the room.

They followed Jesus, called him Teacher and even Lord. They were quite clear that crowds of thousands of people didn't come to see them and hear them speak. Jesus was, far and away, the one who mattered.

Yet Jesus, the Lord of all, took on the servant's job, knelt down and washed the feet of his disciples. He even washed the feet of Judas, knowing full well that Judas was about to betray him. This was appalling. It was totally unexpected and painfully uncomfortable for the disciples. Talk about awkward, this was the very definition of it. The disciples all felt it was just wrong, but how do you tell the Master he shouldn't be doing this? Plus they feared that if they objected he might say, "are you willing to do it?" and they weren't.

This is so opposed to how the world works that it is hard for us to wrap our heads around it. Can you imagine, say, Tom Cruise coming to your house wanting to clean your toilets? Or how about LeBron James or Carrie Underwood or Tom Brady? Do you suppose any of them would ever consider doing such a thing? That would be a smaller reversal than Jesus washing his disciples' feet.

Of course Peter is the one who speaks up. He always was. This scene was jarring for him. This was so wrong and he didn't want any part of Jesus washing his feet. So he objected. In verse 8 he said, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus responded, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." He meant that his action in washing their feet was a living picture of what he came to do. He had come to wash away the guilt of their sin, their rebellion against God, the wrong that we all know is in our souls and in our lives. He had come to give himself up in order to serve them. The only way to have any relation to Jesus is to let him give himself up for us and wash us. We can only accept the service that he is offering us. We cannot earn it and we cannot do it ourselves, it is his kind gift to us.

When Peter hears this he becomes enthusiastic about this washing thing. If it's about being with you, Jesus, then don't just wash my feet, but do my head and my hands too. Good for you Peter. That's his way of saying, "I most of all want to be related to you, Lord, so give me an extra helping of whatever that takes."

Jesus' response in verse 10 is the subject of some debate as well as some misinterpretation. Jesus says, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." The last part is clear. He was referring to Judas, who most definitely was not clean. The problem comes in when people interpret Jesus to mean that in him we are all

clean but that as we go through life we still sin, so that's like our feet getting dirty. So, they say, we need to confess our sin and be forgiven to sort of clean our feet.

But would Jesus have been making that point in that context? That seems highly unlikely to me. Even the grammar suggests that is not what he was saying. The Greek text literally says, "He who has been washed has no need to wash, except his feet, but is totally clean." The point he was making is that if you have been washed by Jesus, you are totally clean so you don't need to wash any other body part.

The debate about this verse has to do with the phrase "except his feet." Many ancient manuscripts did not include it. I believe it might have crept into the text because some scribes copying the text added it to explain why Jesus was washing their feet. Jesus is not saying anything about confessing sin to be cleaned after he has already cleaned us. In fact, that is contrary to the point he intended to make. His point was when he has washed us we are totally, wholly clean before God.

JESUS EXPLAINED THE LESSON TO HIS FOLLOWERS

Jesus made it very easy for his followers and for us to understand the meaning of this object lesson that he acted out for them. He reminded them that they called him Teacher and Lord. What does that imply? If he is your teacher and your Lord, you do what he says.

Would someone be your teacher if you didn't buy what he told you? Suppose you decide that you want to take up the game of golf. You go out and play a round and it is just awful. You boast to your friends that you shot a round one under par. The problem is you think par for this particular course is 120 when it is actually 72. In other words you just about hacked the course to death. So you conclude that you need some help. You find a golf pro and say to him, "teach me how to play this game because I suck." So he starts by showing you how to grip the club and how to swing. You say, "No, that feels awkward to me. I think I'll just do it my way." Is that coach your teacher? Clearly he is not.

Same idea only even stronger with Lord. If someone is your Lord he rules over you. You do what he says. In our modern culture maybe you could draw an analogy with your boss. If he says to you on Friday, "Yeah, uh, I'm going to need you to go ahead and come in on Saturday" and you respond "forget you, dude. I'll tell you where you can stick your 'come in on Saturday'" is he your Lord? Are you doing what he says? No. And if you are not he most certainly is not your Lord.

The point is obvious. Jesus reminds them that he is their Teacher and their Lord, and in so doing is driving home the point that they should understand what he meant by what he just did and then actually apply that lesson in their lives. In other words, they should do it. Then he made it explicit. He said they should wash each other's feet just like he had washed theirs. They would have seen the big message here. Jesus' whole life was like that episode. He did not stand on pride. He refused to insist on his own personal comfort and personal recognition. He instead gave that all up to serve people in the most appallingly humble of ways. He allowed people to think of him as nothing more than an ordinary human. He allowed some people even in his own family to think he was crazy. He allowed the elite of his society to think he was so evil he had to be killed. He allowed people to reject him, to mock him and ultimately execute him so that he might meet our desperate need for grace and love. In this action then he was telling the disciples that they should be humble enough to serve each other just like Jesus was humble enough to serve them in the lowest and hardest ways.

There are some in the church who have taken the command to wash feet like he did literally. So they have a ceremony in which they literally wash each other's feet. Is that what Jesus meant? Having a foot washing ceremony is all right, but if a person participated in a foot washing ceremony and then proceeded to live for himself, pursuing his own interests, paying no attention to the needs of others, is that person obeying Jesus? Clearly he is not. Conversely, if a person lives to serve others without regard to his own status or position while at the same time never once participating in a foot washing ceremony, is that person obeying Jesus? Indeed he is. That tells us the meaning of this instruction has nothing to do with ceremonies and everything to do with actually putting aside our self interest and tending to other people. It is fine if people want to have foot washing ceremonies, but that is what we humans tend to do with difficult commands. Turn them into a religious ceremony that we can perform and minimize or ignore the real intent of the command, which was serve each other.

The point is clear. We are called by Jesus to quit the competition to establish our own dignity, importance, and pride, quit worrying about how you look and what someone else might think, quit being so sensitive to every perceived slight and start thinking only of how we can serve other people.

APPLICATION

WE MUST LOSE OUR OBSESSION WITH SELF

In Philippians 2:3-4 Paul wrote (New American Standard Version), "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as

more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.” Wait, I’m supposed to regard other people as more important than me? Why should they be more important? Why do they matter more than me? Does God think I don’t matter? Am I supposed to think of myself as worthless and of no account? Am I a useless worm? Great, the Christian way is to see myself as equivalent to the animal dung we saw in big patties at Wild Animal Safari. Is that it?

Notice that in verse 5 Paul wrote, “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.” So we’re to have the attitude Jesus had. Did Jesus think he didn’t matter? Did he think he was worthless, of no account, and that everyone on earth was more important than him? Did he think he was the equivalent of a human bison chip? No, Jesus knew exactly who he was. He knew that he was the Lord of all. But he chose to make the needs of others more important than his human need for safety, ease, comfort and recognition. He did not think more highly of others in his estimation, but in his choosing to care for them. And that is what we must do. We must choose to care for others as though their needs mattered more than ours. We must be more concerned about their sense of dignity and worth, about their need for love and grace and affirmation, than for our own.

Romans 12:16 says, “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.” This is all about getting out of the competition to establish our own sense of dignity and importance. When we try to buddy up to the people of influence and power, the “somebodies” in this world, we are often trying to get something for ourselves. We are seeking advantage or importance. So Paul tells us to hang with those of no position, because there we can focus on serving them.

There is a magazine published up in Portland, Oregon, creatively titled *Portland*. Four years ago there was an article in the magazine in which the author described something he had witnessed personally. His church has an outreach to homeless people in that city. On Christmas Eve they have a worship service but then offer a meal of soup for the homeless. There is a big guy they all call Big Ben who is homeless and who frequently shows up at the church to receive the meals they offer. This particular Christmas Eve they had a larger than usual turnout and the soup ran low. It was about 9:30 in the evening and Big Ben got the last bowl of soup. He went to a table to eat his soup, but he noticed a teenaged boy who clearly was also homeless, looking like he’d been sleeping in mud. The teenager had arrived very late. Unfortunately they had run out of soup before he could get any. Obviously hungry he appeared to be disconsolate. Big Ben got up, walked over to

the boy, set his bowl of soup in front of him, tousled his hair affectionately, then began giggling and happily walked out of the church. Big Ben had considered that boy more important than himself. He had washed his feet by meeting his need the way Jesus meets ours.

Brian Buhler is a pastor in the Vancouver B.C. area. He says he was pleasantly surprised when he first went there to find that the pastors in the area take seriously the idea that the body of Christ is one and they support each other and pray for each other. He says shortly after he began his ministry there an Anglican priest showed up at their church facility. He told the secretary that he had come by to encourage Brian and pray with him. She explained that Brian was out. The priest then asked if he could go into their sanctuary and pray for him even though he wasn't there. The secretary said, "Of course." He went into the room knelt down by the pulpit and prayed there for 20 minutes. He considered Brian more important than himself. Brian told his congregation about that and he said that now people in his church pray for the Anglican pastor and church every time they drive by it.

We recently had an example of someone going out of his way to wash out feet in an interesting way. Two years ago my mother gave Laurie and me a home theater sound system that includes a wireless subwoofer and rear speakers. We have really enjoyed that system, but back in November the wireless speakers suddenly stopped working. We called the manufacturer repeatedly in an effort to figure out how to resolve the problem and got exactly zero help. We talked to a salesman at Fry's who essentially told us that such systems were notorious for conking out like that and that we might as well junk it because fixing it is more expensive than just buying a new one. A man in the church said, "Would you mind letting me look at it?" Of course not. He went to a lot of work, calling the manufacturer, tracking down parts, calling their manufacturers, and so on. When we arrived home from our trip to Mississippi the sound system was all set up in our house waiting for us and it all worked! He fixed it! We were amazed. I'm not telling you his name because I fear the poor man will be inundated with appeals to fix electronic devices if I do. But he went out of his way to look out for our interests. He washed our feet. I have other examples. But the point is, this is what we are called to do, to humble ourselves and look for ways to serve others.

WE MUST HAVE THE RIGHT MINDSET

This idea of caring about others instead of ourselves cuts directly against the grain of fallen human nature. How will we be able to do this? We must have some things we see in Jesus in this passage.

We Must Be Secure In Our Identity

Look at verse 3. “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power and that he had come from God.” How did John know what Jesus knew? I suspect he had a conversation with Jesus later in which Jesus told him this is what he was thinking. John likely asked Jesus, “Lord, how could you ever have been so strong as to be able to do something the rest of us were afraid to do because of how it would look?” Jesus probably answered, “Well, John, I knew the Father had put everything under me and that I came from him, so how it looked to other people didn’t matter much.”

We are so obsessed with our position, our worth, our image, our sense of importance and dignity. We struggle with anything that might make us look bad, or say that we have no worth or are not as important as other people. Our sensitivity to slights keeps us from being able to be in tune with the needs of others and from choosing to meet those needs. The solution to this is that we need to become so secure in our position, our worth, our sense of dignity and our identity that it is never threatened by what others think or how we might look.

That sense of dignity, worth and identity needs to be anchored in something solid and unassailable. That something is God’s love for us and our position as his beloved children. Nothing can lessen that position, nothing can threaten it. When we are grounded in the fact that God considers us of infinite worth just as Jesus knew that he was Lord of all, then we can be truly secure.

We Must Know Our Mission

Notice at the end of verse 3 John said Jesus knew he was “returning to God.” Jesus knew that the Father had sent him into this world to accomplish a mission and that he would be returning to the Father. He never lost sight of what he was here to do. Later that evening Jesus prayed some things that are recorded in John 17. In verse 13 he said to the Father, “I am coming to you now.” He was always aware that he would be returning to the Father. In John 17:4 he prayed, “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.” He knew his mission and he completed it. He wasn’t concerned about the opinions of others or about how he looked. He cared about his mission.

Several people have said to me recently that they like Laurie and me but that would never want to travel with us because of our unfortunate history with airlines. I thought our recent trip to Mississippi was going to be another example of that bad

history. Our flight out was ready to go, all the passengers were on board, our time to depart came...and went. Still we sat there. Eventually the pilot addressed the passengers over the intercom. This is not a good sign. When you're sitting at the gate and the pilot starts to talk to you it is never to say something good. They never say something like, "We've been delayed briefly, but I have good news. The reason is as I have been informed this is our airline's one millionth flight. In honor of this occasion we are going to serve a prime rib dinner to everyone on board and the food is being loaded onto the aircraft right now. Furthermore, you are all going to receive lifetime passes for the airlines so you can fly free anywhere we go for the rest of your lives." No, they never say something like that. They always say something like, "Unfortunately we have a little mechanical problem. They put the engines in backwards, so we're going to stay here at the gate until we all die of old age."

I feared it was going to be something like that. Fortunately though it was a mechanical problem it was minor and they got it fixed in a matter of minutes. The rest of our trip went relatively smoothly, but we did have one unusual incident. It happened on the first leg of our return trip, flying from Meridian, Mississippi to Atlanta. Carissa and Michael had given Laurie a bottle of her favorite lotion and she forgot it was in her carryon bag. One of the TSA agents found it and declared that it would have to be confiscated. Laurie objected that it was a present from our daughter and son-in-law, but the agent was unyielding. Laurie appealed. Finally the agent suggested we could put it in our other carryon bag and check it through in the luggage compartment. Laurie agreed to that. So the agent said, "Give me your ID and I will have the airline check the bag through. I'll bring the bag out to the plane and give your ID back." We boarded the plane. We saw her bring the bag out, then go back to the terminal. She didn't bring Laurie's ID. Laurie told the flight attendant that the TSA had her ID and asked them not to leave without it. We waited for a while. Eventually the pilot got up out of his seat, left the aircraft, went to the terminal and retrieved Laurie's ID. That is not in his job description. Retrieving people's ID is below his station as a pilot. But he was focused on the mission. His job was to fly the plane to Atlanta, so if he had to get a passenger's ID to accomplish that mission, then he would go get that ID.

This is a good reminder for us. As we go through our days we need to remember our mission. We are here to glorify God, not to promote, protect or please ourselves. When someone ignores us, rejects us or treats us unkindly our job is to humble ourselves and serve. Our mission is not to prove we matter, to obtain notice and approval, or to get credit for what we do. Our job is not to do something the world considers great, it is to serve others in the name of Christ.

We Must Be Confident In Blessing

We all have some equation in our heads that says something like having a plus b plus c equals the rich and fulfilling life I long for. The rich and fulfilling life is another way of saying happiness, and everybody wants happiness. Since we want that rich and fulfilling life we pursue a, b and c in order to get it. We all have our own ideas about what a, b and c are, and we pursue them fervently.

Jesus said something astounding in verse 17. “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” What things? That we are clean before God because of what Jesus has done for us, in other words, secure in his love, and that in that security we should carry out our mission and humbly serve others not ourselves. He said if we do that we will be blessed.

I think we often change the wording there in our minds. We think Jesus said, “You will be rewarded if you do them.” That’s true, but that’s not what Jesus said. He said you will be blessed. The word translated “blessed” according to *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (vol. IV, p. 362) meant, “the transcendent happiness of a life beyond care.”

Transcendent happiness beyond care. Wow, that sounds good to me. Do you realize Jesus gave us the equation there? Instead of “a plus b plus c equals the fulfilling life” it is “Do these things equals transcendent happiness.” You are going to find the life you are looking for not in trying to please yourself, protect yourself, promote yourself, but in serving God by serving others.

Everybody in this world is trying to climb some ladder because if they can just get up there to that rung a little higher, then they will be happy. Jesus said we are all going the wrong direction. The way up to the life we desire is actually down. It is to humble ourselves and to serve, for that is the mission God has given us all.