Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

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DOWNWARD MOBILITY Philippians 2:1–13

John 12:20–26

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul uses the words of an ancient Christian hymn to describe the downward journey of 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.* —Philippians 2:6–8

As I reflected upon these words, so familiar and yet so extraordinary, I could not help but think of the exquisite Japanese film “Departures,” which won an Academy Award in 2009 for Best Foreign Film. This film tells yet another story of a downward journey. Daigo Kobayashi, a cellist in Tokyo, loses his job when his orchestra is disbanded. He decides to move back with his wife Mika to his hometown of Sakata, where his family used to run a small coffee shop. When Daigo was very young, his father ran away with the waitress, and his mother raised him by herself. Two years before his return to his hometown, his mother died and left him the house where he grew up.

With no work and no income, Daigo responds to an advertisement in the newspaper for “assisting departures”. He goes for the interview and is asked only one question, “Will you work hard?” He says “yes” and is handed an advance in his pay. Only later does he discover that the work involves the ceremonial preparation of dead bodies for cremation. Hence the title of the film “Departures.” In Japanese culture, such work is considered unclean and those involved in it are treated as outcast. Daigo is so ashamed of his work that he does not tell his wife what he is doing to earn a living. So Daigo takes a downward journey from being a cellist in an orchestra to the outcast work of handling the dead.

After his first day on the job, when he has to prepare the body of someone who died alone at home, he is overcome with nausea, but gradually he takes on more and more assignments and experiences the gratitude of those left behind. He gains a sense of fulfillment. But Mika his wife discovers the nature of his employment and begs him to give up such a “disgusting profession.” She leaves him.

After a few months, she returns, announcing that she is pregnant. At first, she insists that Daigo get a different job, but then she witnesses Daigo preparing a body of an old family friend. She is so moved by the beauty of the ceremony that she is won over to Daigo’s profession. When his own father dies, at first Daigo refuses to go to his father’s town see his body, so angry he is that his father abandoned him as a child. His co-worker, however, persuades him to go and be present for the cremation. At first, when he views the dead body, he cannot recognize his father. But when he sees how carelessly the attendants are handling his father’s body, he insists on taking over and giving his father’s body a proper ceremonial preparation. As he handles the dressing of his father’s body, Daigo finds the stone-letter he had given to his father when he was little, in his father’s hands. The memory of the day when he picked up the river stone and gave it to his father is the one fond remembrance of his father he has held onto throughout the years. As he discovers the stone, he at last recognizes his father. As he finishes the ceremony, he presses the stone to Mika’s pregnant belly.

Daigo’s downward journey leads to a restoration of meaning in his life, his forgiveness of his father, and newness of life. For me, it bears all the marks of “Gospel.” It is when we take the downward journey, the journey from life to death, from pride to humility, from self-importance to our basic humanity, from self-control to self-abandon, from self-protection to self-giving, from self-securing to self-emptying love that we discover the new life God is ready to give.

In a world in which upward mobility is our human desire, any hint of downward mobility is something to be scorned. We want to achieve, to succeed. We want our children to be upwardly mobile and be successful. And yet, in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, we have the poetic picture of a Jesus who is not an achiever and who does not succeed. Jesus is downwardly mobile. He rejects all notions of success and takes a downward journey to his death. Rather than fill himself, he empties himself and takes on the form of a slave. He becomes obedient to the point of death—death on a cross. In a very real way, Daigo in the film “Departures,” takes the same kind of journey.

Jesus, in the Gospel of John, puts it this way:

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat

falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a

single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. —John 12:24

Perhaps even more shocking is the way Paul in his Letter to the Philippians applies the downward journey—the downward mobility—of Jesus to our own lives. We are to have the same mind of Jesus. We are to have the same love as Jesus had. In the context of our life together as a Christian community, this means doing nothing from selfish ambition or conceit. This means taking the path of humility as opposed to the way of pride, which Walter Bruegemann describes as “strutting.” This means regarding others as better than ourselves. This means not looking to our own interests, but instead to the interests of others.

Just imagine a Christian community governed by this path of downward mobility! We can indeed imagine it, because in so many ways we try to live it at NCC, although not perfectly. And just imagine what might happen to us were we to take this path of downward mobility and practice it in our daily lives between Sundays! We can indeed imagine it, because we know people who do indeed practice downward mobility.

I have come to appreciate the columnist David Brooks, regarded by many as a conservative, especially when he reflects on American political and social culture. Yesterday’s column in the Star Advertiser was no exception.[[1]](#footnote-1) In it David Brooks writes about Chance the Rapper who has introduced a new song, which speaks of the perils of stardom. In the song, Chance the Rapper makes a contrast between “celebrity success and the vastness of God.” He speaks of his comfortable position in relationship to the problems faced by the poor. And he speaks of his own life. “I’m a rich excuse for a father. You just can’t tour a toddler. She’s turning 2. She don’t need diapers, she just need a papa . . . My daughter barely recognizes me when I lose the hat.” Such honesty and sincerity in the world of upwardly mobile popular entertainers is rare. But there it is. His song represents a self-emptying in the manner of Jesus. The downward journey is often found in unexpected places.

But we wonder: why is it that Christians and Christian communities do not speak more about the importance of taking the downward journey in the manner of Jesus. Zack Hunt, in a recent article posted in the website “Ministry Matters,” says that Christians do not have to pay attention as to how politicians and others live their lives because Christianity has been reduced to belief. Hunt blames the Protestant mantra, “we are saved by faith alone.” As long as you believe in Jesus, then you are saved and go to heaven, no matter what. As a consequence, living according to the way Jesus lived does not really count for very much. And so it is that we find Christians voting for candidates of questionable morality as long as they support the “hot button” issues dear to their hearts.

But the way we live our lives surely does matter. Indeed, our passage from Philippians says nothing about believing in Jesus. It simply says that we are to have the same mind and have the same love as Jesus. We are to follow in our own lives the pattern of his life. If Daigo in the film “Departures” and Chance the Rapper, who never claim to believe in Jesus, can follow the downward mobility that Jesus lived, can we do anything less?

God grant us the grace so to do. Amen.

1. David Brooks, “Chance the Rapper chooses sincerity over branding,” Star Advertiser, September 30, 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)