

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14  
Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

1 Corinthians 11:23-26  
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

One of my favorite television shows has been Downton Abbey, a historical period drama television series produced by a British television production company that aired on PBS. It is set in a fictional English Yorkshire country estate between 1912 and 1926, and depicts the lives of the aristocratic Crawley family and their domestic servants in the post-Edwardian era. The final shows hint toward the eventual decline of the British aristocracy. It was a great life for the aristocratic Crawley family. Perhaps a question asked by the dowager, Violet Crawley, describes the aristocratic life the best, "What's a weekend?" Pretty soon I'm going to find out the answer to that question when I retire. It was a great life for the aristocracy, but life was hard for the working class. The average life expectancy was about 35 or 40. The class system decreed that one woman, born to privilege, should never have to cook, or wash her clothes, or look after her own children; and another woman, because she was born poor, should be forced to do all these things for her mistress. Your entire life was dictated by the class into which you were born. There was no mobility, no movement, out of one's socio-economic class, particularly upward mobility.

Upward mobility is the capacity or facility for rising to a higher social or economic position. Many of our ancestors came to the United States with the dream of upward mobility, of experiencing a better life than they had back in their homeland. They came here to escape the classism of aristocracy that held them down. For example, Andrew Carnegie was born in Scotland. When his parents came upon hard times and were struggling to make ends meet, they immigrated to the United States for the prospect of a better life. He arrived in the United States as a poor immigrant, rose to become a steel

tycoon, perhaps the wealthiest man in America, and its leading philanthropist. This upward mobility is one of the fundamental features of the “American Dream.” If one works hard, one can achieve financial success, and a better life for one’s self and one’s family. A fundamental aspect of the American Dream has always been the expectation that the next generation should do better than the previous generation. In other words, that our children will have it better than we had. Parents make sacrifices so that they can save for their children’s college education, giving their children an opportunity for upward mobility. Upward mobility, the American dream.

Of course, there also is the possibility of downward mobility, of going down in economic and social status. If one experiences financial ruin, or job loss; if one makes a serious social or moral indiscretion, one may experience downward mobility. O.J. Simpson experienced downward mobility having lost social status when he was accused of murder. Bernie Madoff, who founded one of the top market maker businesses on Wall Street. In the end he confessed to being the operator of the largest Ponzi scheme in world history, and the largest financial fraud in U.S. history, with losses to his investors of \$18 billion. Social and economic mobility can be upward; it can be downward.

What Jesus did on this night was an act of downward mobility. The focus of this Maundy Thursday story is that of loving servanthood, expressed in Jesus’ washing the feet of his disciples. In ancient Israel, paths were of dirt, foot ware were sandals, so a guest, upon arrival, would enter the home of a host with dirty feet. Today, we wipe our shoes off on a welcome mat or carpet, or we take our shoes off at the door. In ancient Israel, one washed one’s feet. A servant or slave of the host would wash the guest’s

feet. If there were no slave or servant, the guest would wash their own feet with water provided by the host. The important thing to remember is that superiors did not wash the feet of inferiors. Those of a higher status did not wash the feet of someone of a lower status. That was downward mobility. That is why when Jesus came to Simon Peter, Simon Peter objected: “Lord, are YOU going to wash MY feet?” Simon Peter was a follower, and Jesus was the leader, the teacher, his lord. Simon Peter and the disciples now look down upon the man they had looked up to for three years. It would be like the Crawleys washing the feet of their servants at Downton Abbey. This act of downward mobility was a social taboo for centuries. As a good disciple, Simon Peter objected. It was the downward mobility of Jesus washing the feet of his followers, his disciples, his willingness to serve his followers, to which Simon Peter objected.

By washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus set the example for servanthood. Servanthood is downward mobility. One author wrote, “These days the whole idea of ‘service’ seems to have taken on a tinge of inequality; those who ‘serve’ tend to be viewed as lesser beings, while those who lead achieve far more respect. We tend to respect the armchair evangelist, the pundit and the expert witness far more than the community servant who spends hours behind a counter in a homeless shelter, dishing out food.” Acts of downward mobility, of serving others, may not be a social taboo in our society, but many avoid it. In a capitalist society such as ours, that compels so many to be consumed with issues of status—*influence, money, and power*—serving others usually is not included in our list of things to do for the week.

Reverend Martha Overall, an Episcopal priest, left a career as a successful Manhattan attorney for a ministry to abandoned and forgotten children. We may not be

able to make such a drastic change in our lives to serve others, but are we willing even to make the smallest of sacrifices. Are we willing to sacrifice one Saturday a month to work at a homeless shelter, or a few hours one afternoon at a food pantry or a few hours each week to deliver meals on wheels? Are we willing to sacrifice a week of vacation to help rebuild peoples' lives at a Presbyterian Disaster Assistance sight?

Are we willing to give up our self-interest or pride? Years ago, some of the pastors of the largest churches in one part of a city were challenged to work together to get a grocery store into a neighborhood. Large segments of the city were food deserts. People who did not have cars had to ride public transportation over great distances to access nutritious food at grocery stores. However, rather than use their tremendous influence and social capital on behalf of the people to try to get a grocery store in one of their neighborhoods, the pastors abandoned initial talks—because they could not decide who would ultimately get credit if their goal was accomplished. these pastors did not want to experience that kind of downward mobility. Egos prevented social progress. Egos prevented serving, helping, a whole community of people. The needs of the people were lost in an abyss of self-interest and pride. Are we willing to sacrifice anything to follow Jesus Christ example, to follow Jesus Christ, in serving others?

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ  
we bend our knees and lift up our hearts,  
giving glory to God forever. Amen.