



The Way Up Is Down

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Earlier this year, Tom Brady led the Tampa Bay Buccaneers to their first Super Bowl championship in 20 years and won his seventh NFL championship ring. LeBron James quickly tweeted that Brady was the GOAT.

The G.O.A.T. is an acronym meaning *Greatest of All Time*. It is used in reference to highly skilled individuals—the very best—not just on their team or of their era but every era before and after them.

The term GOAT has its origins in the legendary boxer Mohamed Ali, who was the first to ask, “Who is the greatest?” and to claim the title for himself. The term GOAT may be fairly modern, but the longing to be the greatest is as old as time.

However, I confess it’s surprising to hear Jesus’ disciples talking about who is the greatest. In our call to worship, we heard Jesus predict his passion for the second time. We might expect or even hope the disciples would be a little more curious, or even concerned about the new information revealing Jesus will not just suffer and die. He will be betrayed and actively killed by others.

This second prediction is met with silence. Maybe the disciples are afraid of saying anything because of Jesus’ harsh response to Peter last time. Or maybe they simply

don't want to hear it or prefer to remain in denial about what is ahead.

What is becoming painfully apparent is the disciples' lack of perception. Jesus knows that each of his disciples wants to rule the roost and that they have been arguing about the pecking order.

The disciples are ambitious and not ready to take up a cross and follow a suffering servant or crucified Messiah. Their dispute and competitive spirits open the door for more instruction. Jesus knows his ministry of carrying the gospel to the world will lie in the hands of these few disciples after his death. Clearly, they still have much to learn about the kingdom of God, where the way up is down.

Last week we saw that when Jesus first spoke of his suffering, he presented a paradox: "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8:35). Now he presents another paradox: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35).

This challenging statement is then followed by Jesus' action of taking a child from the household into his arms and then telling the disciples, "Whoever welcomes one such

child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (Mark 9:37).

It’s hard for us to recognize the radical nature of these words because children were not valued then as they are today. Children were considered nonpersons with no power or status and few rights. To treat a child, who was socially invisible, as the stand-in for Jesus is absolutely unbelievable.

Jesus’ words and action are a radical reversal of the world’s values. The world tells us the way up is by gaining position, prestige, prominence, power, possessions. So we are conditioned to achieve, accumulate, try harder, and do more to be appreciated and gain the approval of others as we climb the ladder of success.

Our theme this week is letting go of pride and prestige, to let God give us humility. So let’s define the terms. To be proud is to have an unreasonable sense of self-importance, usually based on talents, beauty, wealth, rank, etc. Because proud people have such exalted views of themselves, they often look down on others and don’t usually care what others think of them.

Prestige is different than pride. Prestige is having respect and admiration from others. People will do all kinds of things to gain prestige—to get others to think well of them

and to value them. I think the disciples are struggling with both. Not only do they want to be the greatest, they want others to believe that they are the greatest.

Jesus' words and actions challenge his followers to a life of humility and service. In her *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Adele Calhoun writes, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less. Humble people let go of image management and self-promotion. They honor others by making the others' needs as real and important as their own. The desire is 'to become like Jesus' in his willingness to choose the hidden way of love rather than the way of power." Humility reveals the nature of the kingdom of God where the way up is down.

The disciples have a lot of letting go to do as they follow Jesus all the way to the cross. But the truth is, so do we.

This week as I was writing this sermon, I remembered a chapter from Parker Palmer's book *Let Your Life Speak* in which he names five monsters that must be confronted in our journey. Like the disciples, we are prone to focus on external circumstances or other people and attempt to control what we can, but it's the inner dynamics of life and relationships that will bite us and bring us down. We have to let go to let God do in and through and for us what only God can do.

What does that really look like? I'm going to give you five ways adapted from Palmer to let go and let God lead us in the way of humility and service.

First, we have to let go of our insecurity about identity and worth. Palmer writes, "When we are insecure about our own identities, we create settings that deprive other people of their identities as a way of buttressing our own." We see how the disciples reflect this mentality in their talk about who is the greatest. But it happens today in families where parents project their low self-esteem on their children. It happens at work where people with titles and status treat others around them as second-class citizens.

We have to let go of the false narrative of the world that tells me my value is found in what I can do, what I can have, and what other people think of me.

The true kingdom narrative is that my value is in who I am in relationship to God. We sang this truth earlier in the service: "I'm a child of God, yes I am." James Bryan Smith says we have to answer two questions: *Who* am I and *where* am I? The answer is "I am a child of God, one in whom Christ dwells and delights, and I am living in the unshakable kingdom of God" (*The Good and Beautiful God*). Knowing our true identity allows us to let go of insecurity and frees us

to live a humble life of service as we love others as Jesus has loved us.

Second, we have to let go of the false belief that the universe is a battleground, hostile to human interests. Most of us have come to believe that if we fail to be fiercely competitive in our marriages, families, schools, work, and so on, we will lose because we see the world in which we live as a kind of field of competition or even a combat zone.

The book of Acts reveals that the disciples do move beyond competing, going on to live cooperatively and communally. As they let go and let God, we see these humble leaders following our Lord Jesus in breaking the barriers of hostility between Jew and Greek, slave and free, and male and female. The early church grew exponentially as it witnessed to the true nature of the kingdom: the way up is down.

I have shared before about having a twin sister, which is one of the greatest blessings of my life, but also one of the greatest challenges. Unconsciously I was comparing, contrasting, and competing with her and everyone else who I perceived as more talented.

When we got into sports, she was by far a better athlete than I, which was hard at first. But I was part of the team,

and in time I came to accept that it wasn't about being the best player but working together to be the best team we could be. I became a point guard in basketball and a setter in volleyball. I was never the star player who scored the most points, but I had a role to play that served the team.

This kind of attitude can translate into ministry not just for clergy but for all of us. I've come to accept that I'm never the best preacher, the best caregiver, the best ... you name it. I have my strengths to share. But as I said last week, I feel called and well suited to be in this new interim head of staff role because one thing I do well is move the ball around and set up other people to do what they do best. That's how I worked with Pete, and now that's my role as we prepare for a new senior leader.

We have to let go of our competitive spirits that drive us to look out for number one and let God draw us into cooperative, communal living. This is where the value of knowing our SHAPE (spiritual gifts, heart, ability, personality, and experience) is helpful. Knowing how God has made us helps us know our part to play in the body of Christ and also helps us discover our vocation or calling in the world. We don't need to compete with others but live in humility, knowing our place as a part of a loving caring, cooperative, community.

Third, we have to let go of functional atheism, the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us. Palmer writes, “This is the unconscious, unexamined conviction that if anything decent is going to happen here, we are the ones who must make it happen—a conviction held even by people who talk a good game about God.... It leads us to impose our will on others, stressing our relationships, sometimes to the point of breaking...and drives collective frenzy as well.”

I can't tell you how many people have advised me to ask for help in this interim time of transition. Believe me, I am. I'm asking Pastors Connie and Charles to preach and lead alongside me. We all have different strengths and can serve better together. I'm thankful for all of our amazing staff and relying on each one to continue to do their part.

But having said that, we can't do everything nor should we. I'm keenly aware that in this time of transition, I have to let go of some of the responsibilities and passions that I have for ministry to do other things. I'm aware that I will bump into my limits, make mistakes, and undoubtedly disappoint people, which I really hate to even admit. I'll do my best, and I'll work with others, but the truth is we simply can't do everything we might like to do. That's certainly true in this transition, but it's always true. But that opens the door to let

go of functional atheism to let God do by His grace and power of God what only He can do.

As individuals and as a church, we are called to participate with Christ in his work in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. We can and must trust God to use us but also accept that some work will not be done or it will be done by others. The good news is that there are many Christ followers and many churches involved in sharing the good news and meeting needs. We are not the only act in town.

Fourth, we have to let go of fear, especially our fear of the messiness and chaos of life. Palmer writes, “Many of us are deeply devoted to eliminating all remnants of chaos from the world. We want to organize and orchestrate things so thoroughly that messiness will never bubble up around us and threaten to overwhelm us.”

I remember a friend telling me years ago that when she feels stress, she cleans closets because it helps her feel she has control. She can clean something up and straighten something out. I thought that was a good way to manage stress, but what was even better is that she was aware of the way she was managing her stress.

Many of aren't aware and so we project our fear on others in ways that are neither healthy nor helpful. We create rigid rules and procedures in order to maintain some semblance of control and order. But the truth is that our fear creates a culture that can be suffocating and toxic in our families and churches and work places. This kind of ethos can be stifling rather than empowering.

A staff member shared a TED talk with the rest of the staff this week that talked about this very issue. The pandemic has caused workplaces to pivot in ways that were previously unimaginable. The speaker challenged listeners not to go back to the way things were but go forward. The chaos of the pandemic has led to innovation, flexibility, and creativity. We now have the opportunity to cultivate thriving cultures of trust that give freedom to employees by measuring results rather than focusing on what people are doing or how much time they are sitting at their desks.

This is just one example, but each of us needs to take responsibility and find helpful ways of letting go of our fear and anxiety. Because here's the thing: A worldwide pandemic is messy. Transition is messy. Life is messy. There is no changing that. But as I said before, it is in times of transition, challenges, and uncertainty when we have to let go of our fear and anxiety about the messiness of life and let God transform our fear to faith—radically trust in Him.

Finally, we have to let go of the denial of death. There is a line from the 1987 movie *Moonstruck* that has stayed with me all these years. When asked why men have affairs, the Olympia Dukakis character replied, “They fear death.”

The truth is, we all fear death, and we do crazy, even sinful things because we fear death. This is the one-year anniversary of the shutdown due to the pandemic, and we can't forget how many have died and how many are grieving the loss of family and friends. Our beautiful time of remembrance today reminds us that one day we will all face our last letting go of the very breath of life to let God usher us into His glorious presence.

But even now, we have to learn to let go of the denial of death. I'm not just talking about our physical death but losses of all kinds. There are always things we have to die to so that the life of Christ might live more fully in us. We have to die to pride and our need for prestige to live a life of humility. We have to die to independence to live interdependently, and die to competition to live cooperatively and communally. We have to die to our compulsive need for order to accept that life is messy. Refusing to accept change and failure to process loss is a denial of death.

As a congregation, we have just let go of longtime pastor Pete James and now we wait to let God bring us a new leader. We participate in the denial of death when we hang on to things that are now done and in the past, refusing to accept change.

We see this in other ways in the church as well when we insist on resuscitating things that are no longer alive. Beloved small groups, projects, or programs that should have been unplugged long ago are kept on life support to accommodate the insecurities of those who do not want to let go or let anything die.

This pandemic has been difficult in many ways. The world has changed in ways that we do not yet see or understand. When we come out of this season, we won't be going back to the way things were. That's true in many ways, even in our church. Not only we will have a new senior leader, other things will be different. To believe otherwise is a denial of death. We need to let go of looking back and let our Lord Jesus lead us forward to the hopeful future he has for us.

We started this sermon with the passage in which Jesus predicts his death and his disciples talking about who is the greatest. The true and only GOAT, the greatest of all time, is our Lord Jesus, who showed us that the way up is down.

Listen to these words from Philippians 2: “Let the same mind be in you 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 ... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

There is a lot of letting go that has to happen to let God transform us so we can follow Jesus in humility and service all the way to the cross. We have to identify the false narratives that are running and ruining our lives. We have to humbly and willingly take up our cross as we become “last of all and servant of all” knowing that in the kingdom of God, the way up is always down.