

“She Stoops to Conquer”

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Charles Marlow is a wealthy, sophisticated, well-educated man who has traveled the world over many times. There isn't anything culturally or materially that he lacks. But he has a serious problem. When it comes to women of his social class, he becomes a bumbling idiot, unable to carry on an interesting or prolonged conversation. The result is that he is single, and lonely, and totally frustrated by his lack of social grace. With women who are of a lower social class, servants and barmaids and the like, he is the epitome of charm and elegance, almost to the point of being roguish. He is, in fact, a chick-magnate, to women of the lower classes. But marriage to one of them would be unthinkable. And unless he can find some way to overcome his discomfort with women who are his social equal, he is destined to die heirless, and a lonely old man.

Enter Kate Hardcastle, a modest but attractive young woman whose aristocratic father arranges a potential marriage with Mr. Marlow. On their initial encounter, Marlow shows his awkwardness and shyness to such a degree that one would think Kate would never want anything to do with him. Yet she

sees something in the man that sparks her interest and that causes her to discover some way to bring out the best in her potential mate. Hearing about his reputation with women of the lower classes, Kate disguises herself as a barmaid. Their next encounter proceeds extremely well, with Marlow falling hopelessly in love with the disguised Kate. Eventually her true identity is revealed, they wed, and everyone lives happily ever after.

There you have the main plot of one of the classics of the stage, *She Stoops to Conquer*, written by Oliver Goldsmith and first performed in London in 1773. The play is a great favorite for study in theatre classes, is still regularly performed on the stage, has been adapted into a film several times, and has been produced for television on the BBC.

Though the play seems very dated to me, both in terms of its class structure and its humor, it nevertheless illustrates a truth that Jesus always impressed upon his disciples – *the way to greatness in the kingdom of God is by taking on the role of a servant.*

When was the last time that you stooped down for any amount of time? Maybe it was because of an injury or an illness that kept you from being on your feet. If you've ever had to sit in a wheelchair, or lay

prone in bed for a while, you know that the world is a very different place. You see things from an entirely different perspective when you are low in the world, either physically or socially or economically. If you don't believe me, visit with Barbara Brown or Darrel Wilson sometime and they'll tell you how their world has changed since they've been literally knocked off their feet. Have you ever been somewhere where you didn't know the language of the majority, and even though you were college educated and working on an advanced degree felt like everyone was staring at you and laughing at you and looking at you like you were stupid? If you haven't, ask Levi how his trip to Italy this summer changed his view of the world. Have you ever stood in a line, waiting sometimes for hours to speak to someone who might be able to find a safe place for you to stay for the night, or help find the money so you can stay in your home, or provide some cash so you can buy diapers for your baby or toilet paper for the bathroom, things that you can't buy with food stamps? If you haven't, talk to some of the people who come to our church for help through our compassionate care fund. These are all stooping places and times – experiences where the world we thought we know and take so much for granted suddenly change as we see things from a different perspective.

In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus' provides his disciples with a stooping time. There are the disciples, all standing tall as they walk the road toward Jerusalem, all caught up in arguing about who was going to get the corner office in the heavenly court, who was going to be seated in the place of honor at the messianic banquet, debating about whose title was going to reflect how respected they were by God and their community. James, in our reading for today describes their attitude perfectly: envy, ambition, boasting, conflicts, disputes. And we know their routine quite well too from corporate America ... from academia ... sometimes even from the church. You know the picture.

Jesus calls the disciples aside and tells them to stoop. Maybe they bend a little at the knees, but Jesus says, "Lower." And when he sees they are still having trouble, Jesus stoops all the way to the ground, low enough to be at the level of a small child, someone so invisible in the world that the disciples had not even been aware of her presence. Actually Mark doesn't reveal the gender of the child that Jesus takes into his arms, but Jesus' point would be made even stronger if it was a girl child since girls at that time were even less important and more invisible than boys. I can imagine that Jesus saw the world so clearly from her perspective, saw the long legs

around her and the loud voices and the hard work she was expected to do as the lowest person on the rung of her family, her society. And Jesus saw her not as a category or a label or a commodity. He saw *her* as someone of worth ... as a person with value ... as an equal human being. Which would have been something new for her, outside her own immediate family anyway. Then he lifted her up, not to get her out of the way, but to put her right in the middle of the conversation ... to give her a gift of welcome ... to let her know she was loved. Jesus stooped down ... he put his arms around her ... he lifted her up ... he modeled love for all who would be his disciples.

In another place in Mark's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples they need to be like children, but here he tells them they need to be the servant of children. Even in our society, whose economy seems inordinately focused on children, those who serve the youngest children: day-care workers, pre-school teachers, nannies, foster-parents are often the lowest paid and the lowest status workers. Even though children have a different place in our world, we still value those who serve our children less than those who do other more "useful" jobs, like playing football or golf, for instance, or running the government, or making movies and entertaining. But the model Jesus presents for his disciples as a way of

determining greatness is the one who not only welcomes, but the one who serves the lowest of the low, the “least of these”. Jesus calls us to stoop, not just to see the world from the perspective of those on the bottom and to adjust our priorities and our society’s priorities, but also to be their servants, to be, in James’ language. “willing to yield” a bit of our race for success and greatness in the world. When we do, we often discover, in the immortal words of William Sloane Coffin, that even if you win the rat race, you are still a rat, and that maybe the richest life after all is found by stepping outside the race.

Stoop. There was a story in the Bulletin just a few days ago about a woman who is probably one of the greatest people I could ever hope to know. Her name is Cindy Locke. When she was a little girl, she saw a movie about a skier who became a quadriplegic in a skiing accident. At the time she thought to herself, “I hope one day I can take care of a quadriplegic.” Cindy eventually became a registered nurse. She worked in the rehabilitation unit of a hospital and often found herself wanting to take home children who had been abused, neglected, or abandoned by their families because of the intensity of their medical needs. Over and over again she was told she couldn’t because that would blur the line between personal and professional ethics. Still, she felt called by God

to open her home to children with chronic medical conditions who had no place or family to call home. In the article she says she began to realize that “everything society said is important is not important – your profession, your education, your looks. But loving people, having a deep connection to people, taking care of people, that’s what’s important.” Locke became a licensed foster-care provider and had her home remodeled to accommodate wheelchairs, ventilators, and hospital beds.

The first person to come live at her home was 18 year old Bertha, burned over 60% of her body. Next came Dwain, 15 years old, paralyzed by a bullet. Then came a four year old , ventilator dependent after having her neck broken in a highly publicized child abuse incident. Since opening her home, Locke has gotten married, had three biological children, raised three adopted children, and has proved a loving and caring home for dozens of foster children. The article also featured her latest foster child to come into her home, 17 year old Mykal Cochran who recently received his 2nd heart transplant, an operation that wouldn’t have happened without Locke opening her home to him.

I cannot begin to imagine the hours this woman puts in, stooping to take care of the needs of her children, some of whom are with her for years, others of whom she knows she will not parent into adulthood. But I know that her faith in God and her love for Jesus is strong and that she never hesitates about stooping to serve the needs of the children and youth who come to her. And I know that when she finds her place at the heavenly banquet, none other than Jesus will be stooping to serve her.

Stoop. One of the men who has had, perhaps, the most profound influence in shaping the last two American generations for the better, was a Presbyterian minister, not known for his preaching or for his multimembered megachurch, but for his quiet, gentle manner on a little television program for children called Mr. Rogers's Neighborhood. In great demand as a speaker at conferences and other gatherings of important people, Rogers was legendary for ignoring the adults at those gatherings until all the children in the audience had been greeted and spoken to first. A tall man, he regularly stooped down to see the world at the same level as children did. Certainly his willingness to stoop down is part of what made him the great interpreter of the world to children that he was.

Stoop. We stoop to conquer. We serve for love of Jesus. Sometimes it's hard to get down low. But we have a secret lubricant that unlocks our inner knees and that helps us to bend low even when our service runs counter to the values of the world around us. We bathed young Micah Spencer King today in the waters of baptism, our secret lubricant. These waters can cleanse the lens of our eyes so that we can see the low ones around us whom we need to receive, to welcome, to serve. These waters can sometimes be the cold splash in our faces, to wake us up from the illusions of greatness we might buy into, either thinking ourselves great or thinking we can never be great because we don't meet the criteria for greatness that we see in our media or institutions. These waters make our bodies lighter so that it is easier to yield the heaviness of the race in order to step out and serve.

Remember, beloved friends and fellow disciples, you are baptized, and stoop. Stoop and conquer with love. Amen.