

**“JESUS CROSSES THE LINE”**

***John 13:1-17, 31b-35***

Homily by Mack Dennis, Pastor

One of the most endearing—yet deceptive—qualities of American life is that so many of us believe we’re innocent of class prejudices. It’s sometimes just as hard to admit we’re class-prejudiced as it is to admit that we’re racially prejudiced. Our suppression of class-consciousness is endearing in the way it holds up the patriotic ideal that “all men are created equal,” which, according to the Declaration of Independence, is a “truth” we hold to be “self-evident.” But our class-consciousness is also deceptive because all of us carry numerous class prejudices without realizing it, and they hide in plain sight every day, in the ways we speak and dress, the jobs we have (or don’t have), the cars we drive, the ways we decorate our homes.

We commonly assume there are three classes in America: Upper, Middle, and Lower. But in his book, *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System*, Paul Fussell designates *nine* classes: First, the “top out-of-sight” (wealthy people who live in houses you can’t see from the street, like the old money Mellons, Carnegies, Rockefellers, and Vanderbilts). Beneath them are the Upper, then Upper Middle, Middle, High-Working Class, Mid-proletarian, Low proletarian, Destitute, and Bottom out-of-sight. Fussell shows that each class has distinct characteristics. And already I imagine some of us are beginning to twitch because to name classes in America is taboo.

But since my title is “Jesus Crosses the Line,” I’m hoping you might allow me some room to explain. For example, according to Fussell, one of the major differences between an upper-middle class person and a merely middle-class person is that the middle-class is more inclined to buy deodorant and mouthwash, because one of the markers of the middle class is not wanting to offend anyone. (So, you can expect that more middle class your church, the less likely people are to show up for a footwashing service.) Upper middles care about what people think, too, but in a different way, which is why they give their pets clever names like Spinoza and Rousseau, just to let you know in a nice way that they have definitely read harder books than you.

Let’s do an experiment. In the spirit of March Madness, in which class would we put Coach K? Coach K is exceedingly wealthy. And, as one who lived in Durham for seven years, I can tell you that you cannot see Coach K’s house from the road. I tried, but there is a large iron gate at the road that suggests he is upper class. Then again, Coach K clearly dyes his hair, which is a very middle class thing to do. To be fair, Asheville native Roy Williams might also fool people into thinking he is possibly upper-middle, because he has his clothes tailored by Alexander Julian. On the other hand, he is far too emotionally involved in the games, sometimes throwing his tailored clothes on the floor, which appeals more to the frustrations of the working class.

Another experiment: What is higher class, a brand-new Land Rover, or an old beat up Land Rover? The answer is, without a doubt, the old, beat up Land Rover. A Land Rover is a ridiculous vehicle whose functionality you couldn’t possibly ever need. But to have an old

version of such a vehicle is even better, because it shows you have old money, and it displays your ability to afford expensive repairs.

So, now having irredeemably crossed the line with everyone, allow me to go further to say why Asheville—as a city—would have a tough time being considered upper or even upper-middle class. Even though we have the Biltmore House and the Grove Park Inn, we also have hordes of people wearing Patagonia clothes, which are mostly composed of synthetic fibers like polyester. According to Fussell, top, upper, and upper-middle class people disdain synthetic fibers, preferring instead materials that used to be alive, like wool, cotton, leather, fur, and silk. If you want to go up in class, try adding a pastel cotton button-down to your rotation. If you want to go down, try neon polyester.

Before you begin throwing things at me, let me explain that my purpose in emphasizing class difference is to draw this conversation between Peter and Jesus into the present. Jesus approaches Peter with a basin of water and a towel wrapped around his waist. Jesus has just assumed the class of a person deemed lower status, a baffling reversal of what would happen in this situation under normal circumstances. Typically, either the disciples would wash their teacher's feet, or it would be tasked to a servant. But Jesus disrupts the class system. I cannot stress enough how awkward and offensive this is. Jesus has crossed a line. He has made himself "lesser than" in the eyes of everyone in the room. He has breached the boundaries of class not in a joking way, but seriously, even unassumingly. When we hear Peter speak, we must recognize that Peter is not asking nicely, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Rather, the tone of Peter's voice is astonishment: *Lord? Are you going to wash my feet?* Jesus replies, "You don't know what I'm doing, but later you'll understand." Peter says, "You'll never wash my feet."

You simply don't do this kind of thing. But Jesus does. He crosses the line. He blurs the roles of teacher and disciple, master and slave, lord and servant, upper, middle, and lower. He scrambles the structures we convince ourselves are crucial for civic and social order. In so doing, Jesus not only breaks custom, but also exposes the unwritten rules of polite society as barriers to love. By crossing this sacred hidden line, drawn to preserve our estrangement from one another, Jesus teaches us that true love is no respecter of respectability. What is ever beneath a Christian to do? What is ever above a Christian to do? In Christ, has God not deigned to be with us all? In Christ, God has condescended to every class of people.

The Christian gadfly, Will Campbell, who never met a line he didn't cross, was once invited to speak at a very wealthy church. When members asked what they might do to apply their faith, he responded, "Leave the doors open to your church, so the downtown winos will have a place to sleep. They'll use bad language, and mess up your carpet, but it's scriptural."

St. Paul says, "For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all...I have become all things to all people" (1 Cor. 9:19-22). And it is just this lateral movement—not up a class or down a class—but into another category altogether, that we are called to. It is this category that I believe holds the most potential for our church, for we are already very close to it. The author Paul Fussell calls it "X-class." What are X-class people like? They are free, like a "parody aristocracy," he says. Or like Huckleberry Finn, who "came and went, at his own free will." Or like E. M. Forster's "aristocracy of the sensitive." X-class people are sensitive and

considerate, but also plucky, without being fussy. They can take a joke. They're "an invincible army, yet not a victorious one."<sup>1</sup> I am proud of the fact that this could fit well as a description of our church.

What class was Jesus? Being fully God and fully human, Jesus is in a class all his own. Jesus puts class itself in its place. But the Gospel of John does say Jesus had a seamless tunic. That is to say, it was bespoke, which means you didn't buy it off the rack. It was made just for you, according to the contours of your own body. Today we would regard such a commodity available only to celebrities, top out-of-sights, upper class, and only the most discerning upper-middles. Jesus likely had just this one tunic. Later, it was stripped from him, and they cast lots for it. But tonight, he takes it off of his own accord, and becomes all things to us. As well, tonight, he mandates this way of love for all of us.

Allow me to conclude with a final question: What class would you say the city of Asheville really is? Though it includes people from every class, the spirit of the city itself is not upper. It is not prole. It is not even middle, in spite of all the synthetic fiber blends. I believe that, at its best, Asheville is an X-class city, with a curious, eclectic, defiant personality unlike any other city in America. If we would be all things to all people here, we would do well to embrace this truth, recognize where the lines are, that we may cross them with disarming courage, humility, and love.



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<sup>1</sup> This and all other references are from Paul Fussell, *Class: A Guide through the American Status System* (Touchstone, 1983) 186-87.