

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


SULKING THROUGH THE INEVITABLE

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SULKING THROUGH THE INEVITABLE

One of the names to be conjured with in the history of prayer and mysticism is that of Baron Friederich von Hügel. This modern day saint lived from 1852 to 1925. He was born in Florence, Italy but became a British subject and an influential member of the Roman Catholic Church. His books and correspondence have touched the lives of an innumerable company of serious Christians. Henry Pitney Van Dusen, for example, wrote his doctoral thesis on the thought of Baron von Hügel.

The Baron had occasion one time to write a letter to a young girl away at an English boarding school. Her name was Juliet Mansel. She was the granddaughter of one of von Hügel's devoted friends. Juliet apparently lacked the proper attitude toward school. She saw her time there as a necessary evil rather than an unrepeatable opportunity. And so von Hügel wrote in this way: "Yet I am sure that if you take them in the latter way looking at all the best sides of the school and throwing yourself as fully into them as ever you can, the time will not only pass quicker but will pass doing you good: otherwise it will pass but will do you harm; I have now come to feel that there is hardly anything more radically mean and deteriorating than, as it were, sulking through the inevitable, and just simply killing the hours as they pass." 1 "I have come to feel that there is hardly anything more radically mean and deteriorating than sulking through the inevitable."

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Sulking through the inevitable. What an inspired phrase that is! It doesn't require any fancy exegesis or learned interpretation. We all know what it means. We've all done it. Some of us may be doing it now!

Look at the key terms: Sulking and Inevitable. The dictionary says that to sulk means "to remain silent or hold oneself aloof in a sullen, ill-humored

or offended mood." Sulking is associated with children of all ages who do not get their way or feel slighted. In more subtle forms sulking has to do with holding a grudge against life, living angrily, poisoning every circumstance with a steady emission of peevishness!

Psychologically, sulking means wilful detachment from others and a squandering of one's energies on self-pity. Theologically, sulking represents a state of rebellion against God. It is a way of protesting what is taken to be the manifest unfairness of life.

The other critical term is inevitable. This is the more problematic of the two. We can rather easily reach agreement on what it means to sulk, but it is not so simple a matter to concur on what is inevitable. Reinhold Niebuhr wisely urged us to pray for wisdom to distinguish between that which can be changed and that which cannot.

It is fair to say that our fathers and mothers thought too little could be changed. They were more resigned than we. Four of ten children would die before the sixth year no matter what. Cruel kings had to be tolerated -- it was God's will. Poverty was something that its victims had to accept. And on and on.

But we in our time are likely to think that too much can be changed. This comes from a superficial view of evil. It stems from our failure to reckon adequately with what the New Testament calls "the mystery of iniquity." (II Thess. 2:7) As a result, we have in our country unnumbered thousands who are frustrated. They expected life to be more correctable than it is, and are now faced with the need to accept some inevitabilities.

Looking at it from another point of view, it would be true to say that Eastern religions have overly stressed resignation, while Western religions have been excessively optimistic about man's power to control his life.

Sulking through the inevitable. By virtue of our faith, our up-bringing, our life experiences, we may hold differing views as to what is inevitable and what is not. But what we cannot do is successfully deny the element of necessity in our life. No one controls it all. Sulking through the inevitable.

* * *

My main concern today is to drop von Hügel's term into your mind so that it may churn away there to your everlasting edification. I hope that it will come back to haunt you from time to time and snap you out of some self-defeating mood or attitude.

But to help the term on its way into your life, I want to suggest three areas of applicability. Let us call the first area the circumstances of history at large. History is yeasty and uneven. Any nation may say in truth, "Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down." All dynasties terminate eventually. (The Yankees did not go on winning all the pennants forever.) There are relatively easy times and relatively hard times.

If one lives at a busy, noisy junction-point in world history when power is being shifted from one block of nations to another, existence will prove hard for citizens on the losing end! We live in such a period now! It is not a comfortable period for most Americans. We had just begun to catch up with the insurgency of the Third World, when along came the Fourth World -- the thirteen OPEC nations -- who are now kicking up a fuss.

On Thanksgiving Day last a service of worship was held in the Community Church of New York City. It was jointly sponsored by that church and the Metropolitan Synagogue. I was interested in the announced topic of the dialogue sermon that was produced by Donald Harrington and Judah Cahn. The title of the sermon was: "Two Cars, But No Gas." That's about where we are! Who ever thought that we Americans would live to see the

day when an ex-vice-president of the United States would be on the way to becoming a millionaire by helping oil-rich Arabs purchase American land!

We may modify the impact of all of this. We may, and we should, debate whether rationing is not the more honest and equitable way to deal with growing scarcity. In some ways we may direct how it shall come to pass, but it is not ours to say whether it will come to pass.

Our days of living "high on the hog" are over, and some of us are sulking about it. We have allowed our personal relationships to become sour. We can't seem to laugh anymore. We are up-tight and, on occasion, can be seen casting furtive glances toward heaven wondering why God has let us down. This shift in power is one of our contemporary inevitables. When we pray, "Thy kingdom come," we are implying that the kingdom is not yet here. It may very well be that a redistribution of resources on a world scale is a step toward the coming of that kingdom. Sulking through the inevitable.

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Let me call the second area of applicability the day-to-day management of life. We pride ourselves on being able managers. We like to think that we choose the right priorities, that we make good use of our time, that we are good at planning, that we have objectives, that we know how to get there, that our dreams are fundamentally realistic (If that isn't a contradiction in terms). Then, bang! Something happens! We get hit with an inevitable! We reach a snag, a delay, something that we can't do anything about. The timetable of our hopes gets stalled. At such times we are inclined to sulk.

I've lost more religion on golf courses and airports! I have given up golf for the good of my soul, but I can't give up flying. I cannot tell you in how many different airports I have sulked. Having chosen

a lecture or sermon, having prayed my soul clean so that I might deliver it, hopefully, with some power, having talked to my travel agent so that I might be sure to book the right connections, I suddenly find myself, because of fog or engine failure or whatever, sitting there in an airport counting those miserable tiles!! And God help anybody sitting around me. I not only sulk, but I want to develop a chorus of sulkers. I mean, what did Job know about suffering, he never had to fly Allegheny or Eastern!!

But I have learned something in recent years. Whether it is attributable to mounting age or the Holy Spirit or both, I have learned that when you can't make a place, you just can't make it. It is a nice feeling to sit there and pull out a book, having made the necessary covering phone calls, and just enjoy the situation.

Over twenty-seven years in the ministry I have missed only four Sunday preaching assignments in the churches that I have served. God has been good to me. But even those four had a nettling way of driving me to sulking. Here I am with a sermon all prepared and wanting very much to deliver it, but I can't get out. The doctor has said, "No, you stay here today." Then the sulking begins, the fomenting against life and the questions about providence. But of late God has helped me to see that no sermon is indispensable -- no person. (Maybe underneath I was afraid that the substitute would do too well!!)

When our plans fall through and circumstances box us in, we can either sulk through these inevitabilities or ask for faith to see them as belonging to those "all things" that are working for our good.

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Let's call the third area of applicability the process of life itself. There are certain "inevitables" in life. Just to be here is to qualify for these: Getting sick, working, growing old, dying. No life is

free of disease or pain. No life is free of unpleasant drudgery. No life is free of declining powers. And we all, we all, have a date with death.

When we are ill, do we dare ask, why me? Has any of us a certificate of exemption? When we hit the vocational flats and our work is dull, do we dare ask why? Life is not all sunbursts and stars. When death invades the circle of our love can we say honestly that we were altogether unprepared? Even Jesus had to die.

Sometimes I think it is better for us to explode than sulk. That's the wisdom behind the sidewalk advice that it's better to pour than percolate. If you are angry at God or life or circumstance, an explosion could very well clear the air. But to sulk is to withdraw and, in effect, to cut ourselves off from the sources of renewal.

We heard this morning from a man who knew how not to sulk through the inevitable. (Phil. 4:1-13) Thank God that Paul, when he was in a Roman prison, did not sulk, else his prison epistles would never have been written. "Not that I complain of want;" he said, "for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want." Then, as if to let us in on the secret, he adds, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me." (Phil. 4:11-13) And that "Him" is the living Christ.

He knew abasement caused by want. He knew how to be abundantly furnished. He knew how to be abased and not crushed; to be in abundance and not exalted. He could take the fat years and the lean years in stride. He bore the inevitable, as von Hügel put in another letter, "In creative acceptance and by resourceful resignation."

Some of you may not believe this, but there is a lot of good theology in "Mad Magazine." One of its

chief editors is a Jewish writer by the name of David Berg. Berg gives us his views on life and religion in a little book entitled, My Friend God. In it he writes, "In the ghetto (the Jewish ghetto) I constantly heard the mournful cry, 'It's hard to be a Jew!' When I grew up and moved out of the ghetto, and into the world, I found that....It's hard to be anything! Christian, Mohammedan, Buddhist, Lily White, Beautifully Black, Mantan Brown or Communist Red, the whole business of living is a traumatic experience." 2

"There is hardly anything more radically mean and deteriorating than sulking through the inevitable." The Baron was right. And, what's more, we know it!

CLOSING PRAYER

*Lord, help us to cope more creatively
with life;
to pick our fights carefully,
and to know when we are up against
that which must be triumphantly
endured.*

*We pray through Him who with the cross
before Him, radiated joy and peace -
even, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

FOOTNOTES:

1. From Selected Letters, p. 180, and quoted in Mark Gibbard's Twentieth Century Men of Prayer, p. 18, SCM Book Club, Naperville, Illinois, 1974
2. Berg, David, My Friend God, p. 11, New American Library, New York, 1972

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