

"SULKING THROUGH THE INEVITABLE

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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"SULKING THROUGH THE INEVITABLE"

TEXT: "Not that I complain of want, 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. I can do all things in Him who strengthens me."

(Philippians 4: 11-13)

INTRODUCTION

One of the names to be conjured with in the history of prayer and mysticism is that of Baron Friederich von Hugel. This modern day saint lived from 1852 to 1925. He was born in Florence, Italy but became a British subject and was an influential member of the Roman Catholic Church. His books and correspondence have touched the lives of many serious Christians.

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 Hugel'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 Hugel wrote to her in this fashion:

"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".

Let me repeat that line that serves as the springboard for today's sermon, "I have now come to feel that there is hardly anything more radically mean and deteriorating than sulking through the inevitable."

DEVELOPMENT

"Sulking through the inevitable". What an inspired phrase that is! It doesn't require any fancy exegesis or scholarly interpretation. We all know what it means. We've all done it. We've been doing a lot of it in recent weeks..."sulking through the inevitable"...killing the hours, waiting for this cold Winter weather to pass. We may be doing it now. ...sitting here, sulking!

Look at the 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 stream of peevishness! Sulking spoils!

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's a way of protesting what is taken to be the unfairness of life. So much for the word sulking.

The other term is inevitable. It's easy to reach agreement on what it means to sulk, but it's a bit more difficult to agree on what is inevitable.

Reinhold Niebuhr in that little prayer we all know and cherish wisely urged us to pray for the wisdom to distinguish between that which can be changed and that which cannot.

It's 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 6th year no matter what. Cruel kings had to be tolerated - God's will, they may have said. Poverty was something that its victims had to accept. And so 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 Thessalonians 2: 7). As a result, we have in our country unnumbered thousands who today are deeply frustrated. Expecting life to be more correctable than it is, they are now faced with the need to accept some inevitables. And it's not easy!

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, to shape and mold his environment.

THE ELEMENT OF NECESSITY

"Sulking through the inevitable". By virtue of our faith, our upbringing, 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.

Remember Jack Benny and how tightfisted he was with his money and how he made America laugh and forget its depression blues back in the thirties. When reminded one time that "Mr. Benny, you can't take it with you", he folded his arms, paused as if in deep thought, and announced, "Then I've decided not to go! I'll stay".

Or, maybe you remember the story of the college girl who one morning with great exuberance remarked to her professor, "I've decided after much thought to accept the universe". To which he replied, "Egads, my dear, you better!"

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

HISTORY AT LARGE

But to help the term on its way into your life, I want to put before you 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. Even the Yankees did not go on winning pennants for ever. 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's 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 13 OPEC nations - who have been kicking up a fuss in recent years and causing us problems here at home.

remember the gas lines of two or three years ago. It reminds me of a sermon title that was in the papers about that time which seemed to describe just about where we were and are: "Two Cars, But No Gas".

It may be that our days of living "high on the hog" are coming to an end. We may not like it. We may be sulking about it...having to do without. We've allowed some of our personal relationships to sour. We can't seem to laugh any more. We're ill-tempered and without humor. On occasion, we 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. Who knows, it may very well be that a redistribution of resources on a world scale is a step toward the coming of that Kingdom. But we don't want to hear that...

DAY TO DAY MANAGEMENT OF LIFE

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're 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. The timetable of our hopes gets stalled or sidetracked. At such times we're inclined to do some sulking.

I've lost more religion on golf courses or sitting in a car caught in a traffic jam on some highway leading in or out of this city. You know the feeling. And I've done my share of sulking. Having committed myself to be some place for an appointment or meeting, to share in whatever was going on, I suddenly find myself, because of engine failure in some one else's car or perhaps an accident, sitting there in a car that's creeping and crawling along. And God help anybody sitting around me. I can be moody, nasty and have a short fuse, as they say.

But I'm learning more and more how to cope...and relax...and accept. Back on December 24th I was to conduct a funeral service at Ferncliff cemetery north of the city in Ardsley off the Thruway. I was to hitch a ride with the hearse, meeting my ride at 2:15 at 81st and Madison. The only trouble was that the hearse departed at 2 pm. He wanted to finish early and get home for Christmas Eve.

Knowing that the family was to meet me at the chapel at the cemetery at 3 pm, the undertaker in charge said, "jump into our station wagon and we'll have Bob Lewis run you up." I said... "Fine". The only trouble was that we ran into a traffic jam on the Deegan north of the stadium that extended for about three miles. I sat back and let Bob Lewis do the driving. I figured I was covered. Nobody was going any place until I got there. So I sat back...relaxed...thought about our Christmas Eve Service. Then I got Bob Lewis to open up about some of his experiences at funerals. I heard about Judy Garland, Bobby Kennedy, John Lennon - all of which he helped to arrange. Fascinating. Finally we got there. We were late, of course, but all worked out well. And I got back to the city in time to do some last minute Christmas shopping and get things pulled together for our Christmas Eve service.

When our plans fall through and circumstances box us in, we can either sulk and stew over and through these inevitables, or ask for a bit of faith, a bit of patience and perspective to see them as belonging to those "things that are working together for our good". Let's try that approach and not grumble and sulk.

Did you happen to see the article in Thursday's NY Times entitled, "The Pressures and Politics of Waiting In Line?" It pointed out that we spend up to five years of our lives in that tedious, stressful but unavoidable process known as waiting "in or on" line. Sulking Through the Inevitable. We can do better.

PROCESS OF LIFE ITSELF

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 them: getting sick, working, growing older, dying. No life is free from pain or disease. No life is free of unpleasant drudgery. No life is free of declining powers. And we all, sooner or later, 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 and without any kicks, do we dare ask why? Life is not all sunbursts and stars. When death invades the circle of our love can we honestly say that we were altogether unprepared? Even Jesus, our Lord, had to die.

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

We heard this morning from a man who knew how not to sulk through the inevitable. Thank God that Paul, when he was in prison, did not sulk, else his prison epistles would never have been written:

"Not that I complain of want" said he, "for I have learned in whatever state I am to be content! I know how to be abased; 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 of his success, he adds, "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me" And that "Him" is Jesus Christ - the living spirit of Christ at work in our lives.

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 Hugel put it in another letter, "in creative acceptance and by resourceful resignation."

CLOSING

Some of you may not believe this, but there is a bit of theology in Mad Magazine. One of its chief editors is a Jewish writer by the name of David Berg. Berg gives us his view on life and on religion in a little book entitled, My Friend God. In it, he wrote,

"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, Beautiful Black, Mantan Brown, Communist Red. The whole business of living is a traumatic experience."

"There is hardly anything more radically mean and deteriorating than sulking

through the inevitable". The Baron was right. And, what's more...I think we know it. All of us are guilty at times of doing it.

How much better for us and for the world if we were to greet each day with the words of the psalmist:

"This is the day which the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it."

PRAYER Lord, forgive us for the sulking we do. It's wonderful just to be alive and together here in your house this morning. Yes, some of us have headaches and heartaches, problems with which to wrestle...but we know where to go and how to find the answers.

So, give us the patience and perspective of unanswered prayers....and the strength and vision to see life always from higher ground...to follow you and to learn to live and let live....to let go and let You.

Help us to see the glory of each day, to remember that is the first day of the rest of our lives. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen