



On Hallowing One's Diminishments

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
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Not long ago, in Jesus' life, there was so much anticipation, so much to look forward to; the future lay before them, full of promise. Jesus' energy, spirit and zeal: so powerful, clear, committed, determined, incisive. He spoke with authority, stood tall without flinching, cast a vision broader and deeper than many a person could ever fathom.

His companions, too, seemed so much younger not long ago. Peter was determined to stand by Jesus' side, but he caved, betrayed him at a moment of need. Mary Magdalene would have followed Jesus anywhere, and now she has only the memories, the tears.

Good Friday is a day marked by loss: the loss of what might have been; the loss of great dreams of a new world order for the future; the loss of our own best intentions that fall to betrayal and succumb to self-preservation, or fear, or wimp-iness; the loss of innocence as we acknowledge complicity in the systems that prefer security and we stone the prophets; the loss of a friend, a lover, who inspired us and had so much still to teach us about the world and ourselves.

It was foretold, this hour of loss. Wrote Isaiah: "He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity."

However old—or young—you and I may be, we are old enough to know loss in our lives.

My father will be seventy-eight this spring; his health is pretty good considering all his life he favored deserts over exercise; his memory is dicey these days, sometimes elusive. Dad recently shared a pamphlet with me that comes from Pendle Hill, the Quaker community in Wallingford, Pennsylvania (Pendle Hill Pamphlet 292, 1990). He has found it profoundly helpful. Written by John Youngblut, an Episcopal priest with Parkinson's disease, and based upon the Teilhard de Chardin's writings in *The Divine Milieu*, it is titled "On Hallowing One's Diminishments." de Chardin observes that the first half of our lives are given to "divinizing one's activities," while the second half is a matter of "hallowing one's diminishments." There's not a clean chronological break between the two for many of us experience hardship, loss and diminishment from an early age.

"To divinize one's activities," writes Youngblut, "would be to grow in consciousness that one's gifts are just that, they have been given one by the giver of all good things, God" (p. 5). Even if we don't name them as such, we tend to associate gifts, good fortune, happiness, opportunity—all with the presence and blessing of God. God is with us as we discern and employ our gifts and our vitality; rightly do we divinize our activities.

What of our diminishments? Youngblut found "that for the word "hallowing" the following definitions are offered: "make holy or set apart for holy use, consecrate; to respect greatly; venerate." "It was a new and most encouraging idea to me," Youngblut writes, "that one's diminishments could be 'made holy,' 'consecrated,' 'respected greatly,' even 'venerated.'"

"I saw that the first step for me in learning to "hallow" the progressive diminishments in store for me was a deep-going acceptance. But the acceptance would have to be a positive, not a negative one, if it were to be a real hallowing. I must learn to do something creative with it" (p. 6).

Hallowing one's diminishments is an invitation to recognize the ways in which our losses are as sacred as our gains, that God is present as fully in our brokenness, loss or pain, as God is present in our strength and ascendance.

As a society and even as people of faith we're not very practiced in or inclined toward discussing illness, weakness or loss. Avoidance and denial are the norm. There are exceptions to this: I think of Alcoholics Anonymous and of Hospice Care—there may well be others—each of which take as a starting place and fundamental given, our human weakness; the one to combat addiction, the other to resist the inevitability of death. In AA, one acknowledges that one is powerless to fight alcohol alone, thus one is joined by others who will assist in the recovery. In hospice, one acknowledges that death is imminent; thus one is offered physical comfort and dignity for the remaining journey.

It is worth noting that when people eventually find their way to the company and care of either AA or hospice, usually after much protest and resistance, most experience extraordinary relief and gratitude, as do their families. "Here, at last, it is safe to acknowledge my failings and diminishments; here, I am in the company of those who know that we are weak and love us still, love us in our weakness, and who treat us with appreciation, dignity and grace."

It makes me wonder if there are ways as individuals, families or congregations in which we might treat ourselves with a similar measure of grace. I am not just my accomplishments; I am also my failings. I am not just my strength and my dreams; I am also my weakness and my blindness. I am not just the bonds of love and relationship; I am also the bonds broken and relationships fractured. Jesus does not love the one me, and despise or ignore the other me. Jesus sees and knows the whole me. Jesus loves all of me. Jesus loves all of who you are. So are there ways in which you and I might perceive, acknowledge and even celebrate God's presence, God's love in the brokenness that is so intimately a part of each one of us?

On this day of loss, Jesus suffers unto death, as we too shall suffer unto death. Jesus resisted and then succumbed. We, too, resist and shall succumb. Through the suffering of God's beloved child, our suffering is beloved of God. Through Jesus' death, our death shall not be final. Teilhard de Chardin wrote of hallowing the many diminishments we encounter along life's way: sickness, bereavement, dreams too long deferred, friendships lost, the diminishment of aging. In each of these, he sought God's blessing and God's grace. Finally we anticipate the great diminishment, death.

"According to Teilhard the final hallowing of all diminishments, including the great diminishment [of] death, is to seek to make them a means of communion with God." I conclude with Teilhard's words in which "he moves . . . into the poetry of prayer," as he confronts his own advancing death:

"Grant that I may willingly consent to this last phase of communion in the course of which I shall possess You by diminishing in You.

"After having perceived You as He who is a greater myself; grant, when my hour comes, that I may recognize You under the species of each alien or hostile force that seems bent upon destroying or supplanting me. When the signs of age begin to mark my body (and still more when they touch my mind), when the ill that is to diminish me or carry me off strikes from without or is born within me; when the painful moment comes in which I suddenly awaken to the fact that I am ill or growing old; and above all at that last moment when I feel I am losing hold of myself and am absolutely passive within the hands of the great unknown forces that have formed me, in all these dark moments, O God, grant that I may understand that it is You (provided only my faith is strong enough) who is painfully parting the fibers of my being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear me away within yourself." (pp. 22–23):