



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

December 1987

ON NOT GETTING OUR OWN WAY

Not getting our own way is a terribly common (if unpleasant) experience. It happens to us all the time. At home, the kitchen is arranged to suit someone else (not the way I would do it), dinner time is not what I would choose, I have to do the cleaning when I would rather have some other household chore. At church, the hymns are not always to my liking, there are liturgical peculiarities that really should not be there, and the vestry has made some mistakes in its budget priorities. At work, things are set up by some idiot with the express purpose of making my job harder. There are always drivers doing stupid things which keep me from getting along as quickly as I would like. The things in which we do not get our way range from the way the Federal government spends our taxes to the Christmas presents that I didn't really want.

There are many situations in which we do not get what we want; the question is how we deal with them. This is where getting our own way becomes a Christian concern. Do we get angry, impatient, indignant, resentful? Is there a real edge in my voice when I condemn the latest government waste of money? Am I quick to cuss out the stupid driver for getting ahead of me? In the little household things, do I take it out on my family?

No doubt we all do this to some extent, often without thinking. For some of us, it is a deeply ingrained habit, which we are quick to justify by an appeal to justice or reason. This enables us to sustain our anger or indignation, and give it the appearance of being reasonable, when it is in fact mere self-indulgence. We need to look at the implications of such anger and indignation. What does it tell us about the way we are looking at ourselves and the world?

First, when I get angry at not getting my own way, I am saying that this ought not to be. Rather I deserve to get my own way. There is some imperative which should yield this happy result: I am never to be disappointed in what I want.

This means that I (probably unconsciously) regard myself as the center of the universe. The world is supposed to revolve around me. It is supposed to fulfill my desires, to give me what I want from it. Other people are supposed to cooperate with this, so that I get my way. Admittedly, we think that our way is always the best way: the most rational and efficient and so on. But if this is our only reason for wanting things our way, then we would not get angry when things did not work out our way. We would be sorry, but not indignant. More often, we just use the appeal to reason and efficiency as a justification for our selfishness.

Put in such bald terms, the error of our ways becomes apparent. As Christians, we believe that God alone is the Center of the universe: and that I am not. This is why the attachment to getting our own way is a spiritual problem for us as Christians, and not merely a bit of inconvenience to be endured. Our attachment belies our claim that God is the Center of our lives.

At root is our fallenness, which leads us to regard ourselves as center of the world. "Ye shall be as gods," Satan told Adam and Eve. This self-centeredness is the common perspective of fallen humanity. We recognize that this is where we all start out in life. We also recognize that the people who are most attached to getting their own way are the most tiresome people to be around -- the least admirable humans. This indicates to us that there must be a better way.

The alternative to this attachment is renunciation, an idea much out of favor in our age which glorifies self-fulfillment. The aim of Christian renunciation is always to place God at the center in place of self. Renunciation gives up our attachment to getting what we want. No longer will we stake our happiness on getting our way. Even when things do not work out as we would like, we will be ready to make the best of it, even to the point of seeing God's hand in what does happen.

This is not easy. We want what we want. To put some distance between ourselves and our desires, we need first of all to recognize that we don't have to get angry when things don't go our way. The situation may be painful, stupid, wasteful, even humiliating. But even with all that, there is nothing that requires that I get upset. So often, we get so angry that we make ourselves miserable, being so preoccupied with our hurt that we cannot enjoy (or even pay attention to) anything else. In such a state, we are a pain not only to ourselves but to everyone around us. Needless to say, this will also disrupt our prayer. We can hardly attend to God when we are unable to think about anything except the wrong done to us. At best our prayer is sharing our anger with God -- but not getting beyond it.

Many people have never faced the fact that anger is not necessary in this situation. Having always reacted that way, they have not given the matter much thought. To them it seems natural, although they may not be inclined to extend the principle to others who may get mad at them for the same reason. The point is that this consuming anger is not necessary. It is possible to take it all in stride and get on with things. It does not make us any less human or manly. We do not have to show everyone how distressed we are. Life will go on perfectly well in any event.

Jesus is our example of what human life ought to be like. On earth, He did not always get His way. People did not always do as He told them they ought. Certainly, He would rather have avoided the Cross, had there been another way for Him to fulfill His mission. Yet we do not find Him angry or indignant on His way to Calvary. Even there, we find compassion: for the women of Jerusalem ("Weep not for me ..."), for the penitent thief, for His tormentors ("Father, forgive them ..."). His actions are ruled always by love and not by self-interest. He shows us that perfect humanity omits the anger and indignation at not getting its way, and is ruled instead by the recognition that all people are equally centers, with God as the one true Center.

In striving to imitate Christ's example, we must first admit our fault in the matter. Self-examination will reveal to us by the light of grace the extent of the bad habit in us. We may find that there are certain particular situations in which we cannot abide not getting our own way -- they may be domestic, or political, or in a relationship, or even in sports. In any event, we must acknowledge our fault, and commit ourselves to amendment of life.

This requires that we seek God's grace. First, we are not likely to have much success on our own. Habitual selfishness is resistant to all quick fixes, and we are likely to give up in frustration after a few failures. More difficult still, trying to become less self-centered (which is what this is about) is not something which can be done by the self. That will only make us more self-centered. We must ask God to give us the grace to deal more constructively with those instances of not getting our own way, instances that formerly made us angry or indignant. Day by day, we must work at this, asking for the needed grace specifically, especially when we know we are likely to be facing a tempting situation.

That is the negative side of the task. We must also try to replace our self-centered response to not getting our way with a more Christlike one. Several things will help us with this. The first is Jesus' example, which we ought to keep ever before us: especially the way He endured suffering. This will help us to replace our

anger with love. And it will help us to understand the relationship between love and suffering. The sort of response we are aiming for is a costly one. We will lose the opportunity to indulge ourselves in retribution (even if it is only verbal) for not getting our way. As when we forgive others, we ourselves must bear the cost of loving. Love refuses to inflict the pain on others, but swallows it up, loving still -- just as Jesus does with our sin on the Cross. He is not only our example. The compassionate Jesus we know in our prayer can bear this burden with us.

Second, we need to remind ourselves of what is truly important to us: the love of God. As Christians we value nothing more than this, for this is the key to heaven. If we desire heaven, it is because that is where God is. Under the pressure of daily life, we sometimes lose sight of the big picture. But if we are to triumph against our attachment to getting our own way, we must know in our hearts that getting our way is ultimately a matter of indifference. Having the kitchen arranged my way is not terribly important to the kingdom of heaven. Heaven comes to us by God getting His way, and not by our getting ours. This will help us to let go of our attachment, since we must recognize that in the cosmic sense, it doesn't matter. What matters is God's will, and not our desires.

Thus we will aspire not just to not getting angry, but to something much more splendid. We will aspire to the complete conformity of our wills to God's. We want what God wants for us. In fact, knowing His perfection and His love for us, we will want what God wants for us even more than we will want what we think is best. For God is infallible and cannot be wrong about what is best for us, while we make many mistakes in the matter. This is preparation for heaven, where we will not abide unless we can will God's will. To will His will is to love with His love. It is therefore sacrificial. We must admit that it is bound to be costly for us as it was for Jesus. But it will cost us nothing but our sin and selfishness: nothing that is essential to us.

If we can learn to imitate Christ in the face of not getting our own way, we will be more attractive to ourselves and to others, easier to live with all around. But more importantly, we will be making the most of our opportunities in this life to get ready for the next. We will be learning to imitate the One in whose image we are made. We will be loving as He loves, and willing what He wills. So will we be acting as the subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven to which God in His mercy has called us.

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