

COMING FULL CIRCLE: ON THE VALUE OF LIFE

Recently in preparing for a December worship service at Drum Hill, I came across a piece written by Klaus Hemmerle (Bishop of Aachen, Germany) that really resonated with my soul. It was in [A Way to the Heart of Christmas](#), a collection of Christmas meditations edited by Brian Linard, published by New City Press in 1991. Listen:

He is simply there –
that is all
that he does
or that he can do.
But, by being there,
powerless yet radiant,
it is God himself
who is there.
God is there for us.
What, then, does this being God
in the child of Bethlehem
say to us?
It says to me and to you
and to every human being:
it is good that you are there.

This beautiful writing brings to mind an incident from my college days that is as poignant now as it was when it happened more than fifty years ago. A group of us went together to watch a movie about the Incarnation during the Christmas season. After it ended my friend Ginny was crying. “What’s the matter?” I asked. “I am used to seeing the baby Jesus depicted by a doll or a light,” she replied. “It never struck me until tonight that he was a real baby, just as helpless as the one shown in the movie.”

That, of course, is what we need to understand if we want *“to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know that love that surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3:18,19)*. Imagine the eternal Son of God – the Word who created the universe – lying in a manger, unable to sit, stand, walk, talk, see clearly or comprehend what was going on.

But he was able to do some things: he could communicate by crying (don’t believe the Christmas carol that says “No crying he makes”!), he could drink milk, he could fill his diapers, he could sleep, he could respond to loving attention, and he could bring joy and wonder to the hearts of Mary and Joseph as well as to any who saw the newborn infant. True, this baby was special in that he was fully God while also fully human. But like any baby, his value in infancy came from being, not from doing.

Leo and I were blessed with three sons and two daughters, each one loved even before birth, but oh, so much more afterwards when we could hold the precious bundles in our arms, close to our hearts! We had hopes and dreams for our newborn infants, but no immediate expectations; we were content to let them be. We were glad that they were there.

Recently I have been thinking about the similarity between babies and old people who suffer from various kinds of dementia. My mother, in particular, is the one I have in mind. In February, 1999 Mom and Dad moved into a church-related facility in their town due to Dad’s deteriorating health. He was placed in the nursing home section, while Mom had a room in Independent Living. Dad died in April, 2000 and Mom soon transferred to Assisted Living. There her forgetfulness accelerated and she was

moved again to the dementia unit. After a year or so there, we moved her once more, this time into the nursing home unit. There she is today (December, 2004), at the age of 95!

Though more than two hundred miles separate us, I was certainly involved in Mom's care as long as I could be. Now my own debilitating illness coupled with the state of Mom's cognition have kept me away from her since September, 2003. My mother's deterioration caught me by surprise. After Dad's death, I thought Mom and I could go places and do things on my visits to her. And I thought we would have wonderful phone conversations when I was home in New York, that we would talk as two girlfriends might. But just a month after the funeral, I went with Mom to see her doctor and was stunned to realize that she had no idea why she was there. It turned out that she was having mini strokes and had probably been having trouble for some time, all masked by our concern for Dad, her age, and her personality traits.

How comfortable we are with change in general has much to do with how well we adapt to the inevitable changes that come to most of us with age. Mom was so vocal for many years that she did not want to go to the "Old Folks Home"; she would die if she had to live there. But then as long as I can remember Mom never was comfortable with anything that made her face the subject of mortality: life insurance policies, gray hair, slouching, shuffling, funerals, hospitals, Homes, Heaven, cemeteries.

Yet Mom also had a sense of responsibility and usually did what was required of her, sometimes more. "Must I go?" she would ask me at times, and if I said yes, she would attend the funeral or visit the sick. Yet she took her own mother into her home where she lived until her death five years later. "I'm not spooked about this room," Mom told me, referring to the room in which Grandma had died. I never thought to ask her what she meant by that. Mom always saw to it that the family graves were decorated with flowers every Memorial Day, because that was the custom in Lebanon County, Pennsylvania. She had sympathy for the sick, the old and the bereaved, but was uneasy in their presence. Mom would have been much happier if things had remained as they were; she went "kicking and screaming" into old age.

How much of Mom's outlook was inborn and how much developed through the years? I ask this because I am quite different from my mom, and I feel that I have always been that way. Desiring to be different from Mother might have been one factor in shaping my philosophy of life, but not a major one. My outlook has increasingly allowed me to accept change, even death, as a normal part of life. Did I add to an innate positive view of things through pondering my experiences? Where does God enter into the picture? I have no answers to these questions; they are just good food for thought.

I can remember twice in my life when I was disturbed by my age. I did not want to be fourteen. Revisiting that time now, what I really didn't want was to be promoted out of Nora's Sunday School class into the young people's class. I did stay with the Intermediates a year longer than necessary. Then I was ready to enter a new class, which I thoroughly enjoyed. And for some reason, being thirty-five troubled me from time to time. I couldn't believe I had lived that long, perhaps half my life. But these thoughts were fleeting compared to my looking at life, with all its changes, as an adventure.

It was certainly a change to let go of my Mom and of all the plans I had hoped to carry out with and for her. Instead, I watched her regress and marveled at what I was seeing and thinking. I was faced with the basic thought of a person's worth. Mom was becoming more and more like a toddler: she was confused as to what was expected of her; she needed help with bathing and dressing; her speech was less clear and fluent; she sometimes had toileting accidents and began wearing diapers; she needed help with eating her meals. Mom could do very little and I knew it would get worse. She was on her way to an adult version of babyhood! She could no longer do much of anything. Did her life still have value?

Taking care of babies is messy, time consuming and repetitive. How is it that so many find this work to be a pleasure? Surely the wonder, the sweetness, the helplessness of the tiny baby tugs at our hearts

and lets us know our labor of love is not in vain. Hope for future development also comes into play. "The baby stage does not last long," we think as we wipe drool from baby's lips. "Let's enjoy it while it lasts. This little one will soon be running around, needing less and less attention from us."

Except it doesn't always work out that way. My father's sister, my Aunt Sara Ziegler, was one baby girl who did not develop as expected. She never walked or talked normally, though she had a language of her own that her mother understood. Grandma Ziegler bathed, dressed and otherwise cared for her daughter for over fifty years without complaint. Sara did what she could: she fed herself and she happily embroidered various printed cloths day after day, year after year. And she loved people. How her face lit up when she saw us! Did her life have value? Yes it did! I think with fondness of how my dad related so kindly to his sister. And how priceless is Grandma's example of selfless service! Grandma and Grandpa used to drive to our house to visit, leaving Sara in the car in her chair. My brother and I, as well as some neighborhood children, would gather round the open door of the car to interact with her the best we could. I think my aunt had a broadening, deepening effect on all of us. We are better people because she was in our family.

Mom no longer speaks at all. As far as we can tell, she does not recognize us. Having forgotten how to eat, she must be fed by others. On Mother's Day, 2003, my daughter Marty took me to see Mom as a much appreciated gift to me. Mom was wheeled into the dining room for dinner just as our visit was coming to an end. Marty and I sat on each side of her, deciding to feed her ourselves before returning home. Little did we suspect what was about to happen!

We had been told that Mom did not eat very much. All of her food was soft in consistency, some of it so unappealing in appearance that we were not surprised that she wouldn't want it. But Marty filled a spoon with food and lifted it to her grandma's mouth. Mom received it, held it for a moment and then – spit it out! Her tongue came right out of her mouth with the food still on it! Marty and I were so startled that we both started laughing. My daughter and I share one characteristic that gets us into trouble at times: when we start laughing we sometimes find it hard to stop, even if the laughter is inappropriate. This was one of those times. We took turns trying to feed Mom. Sometimes she would swallow the food, but just as often it would go in, be evaluated and then come out. There was a rhythm to the procedure that reminded me of an ATM machine: we insert a card, the machine holds it for a while and then ejects it. And all the time we convulsed with laughter, to our own distress and to the puzzled looks of the aides who were feeding others. Mom's expression never changed; she had no idea that something was funny.

Then a new image came to mind: I saw my baby brother Bobby sitting in his high chair, bib in place, ready to eat the strained baby food that Mom was offering him. There were certain foods that he liked, but if Mom gave him something that he did not like, he simply spit it out! Such behavior is expected of a baby, of course. We just clean up the mess and try again later. As Marty and I wiped Mom's mouth, I realized that she had come full circle. She was not a baby; she was an adult. But how much like a baby she had become! What was the value of her life at this point? She looked so pretty and peaceful. She had given us someone other than ourselves to think about that day; hence, our visit. We still love her, that's certain, and she is tenderly cared for by the staff at the Home. She is making me face subjects I might have avoided otherwise. All that is worth something! And then I realized that I had just fed my mother, the one who had fed me until I was able to do it myself. Another full circle! What a privilege!

I have felt compelled to write this essay in the past few days. Why? Because of my own condition. Twenty-four years younger than Mom, I am not far behind her in physical limitations. I am like a young child in that I need some help with bathing and dressing. I spend most of my days sitting in a chair (just like Aunt Sara, except mine is motorized). My eating is getting to be difficult and sloppy. Moving a utensil from the plate to my mouth becomes increasingly awkward as my arms and hands become more spastic. Others help to cut my food and sometimes I use my fingers to eat it. I know I am heading toward having to be fed. Along with swallowing problems, my speech is becoming harder and

harder to understand. I sound like Aunt Sara. I tried so hard to understand her. Now the people around me are trying to understand me, sometimes to no avail.

My startle reflex is heightened, so at home I wear an apron when I'm drinking from an open cup (I use cups with lids now) or when eating soft pudding-consistency foods. Did you ever see a baby have a startle reflex episode? The child may be asleep, lying on its back, when all of a sudden the arms and legs flail in all directions – and then it's over. That's what happens to me with sudden noises, when the phone rings, for example. And if I'm holding a cup of prune juice at the time – well, it's messy! On my last visit, my neurologist asked me if I drool yet. "No," I said, "but it's coming." More mess! And I thought of my dear Aunt Clara who drooled in her old age.

One big difference between my mother and me is that my illness does not include dementia. I am well aware of what is going on in my body as well as around me. Is awareness an essential ingredient in the value of life? Is my life worthwhile? Is Mom's? What about all the other infant-like old people (and some not-so-old) in nursing homes or in their own homes?

Two contrary thoughts ring in my brain. One is the oft-repeated sentiment of not wanting to be a burden to anyone, of rather being dead than lying there needing constant care. But then I think of babies shortly before birth. They must feel terribly cramped in their mother's wombs. They are getting into position for the journey of their lives, so different from what they have experienced to this point. Everybody involved with the family where a birth is impending gets ready to rejoice in the accomplished fact. That is the way I am now seeing the aged infirm people, whether in nursing homes or not: they are getting into position to be thrust into a Life MUCH different from anything they have dreamed of before. The people around them have a chance to help them get ready as well as to get themselves ready for the change. This can be looked at as a privilege, not a burden.

The other comes from my son George, who spent a lot of time thinking about this and then shared with me his conclusions. He feels that the incapacitated ones, without being aware of it at all, may be greatly affecting for good the people who take care of them. We are all born with the image of God, and we do not lose that due to disability. George would say, "Of course we all have value, no matter what our state on earth!" I choose to agree with him.

This brings me back to Klaus Hemmerle's thought provoking quotation: "What, then, does this being God in the child of Bethlehem say to us? It says to me and to you and to every human being: it is good that you are there."

God loves us. He understands our human condition with all its frailties. Our worth comes from being, even if we cannot do. Our earthly lives have meaning as long as we are here. God is aware of us and stands ready, as a midwife, to receive us when we are thrust from this life into the freedom of the next. No impediments There!

Mom, until you move to Heaven, it is GOOD that you are there where you are.
To all in similar circumstances, it is GOOD that you are there where you are.
To all living lives that are normal for you but considered different, such as Aunt Sara's,
it is GOOD that you are there where you are.
To you who are reading this, it is GOOD that you are there where you are.
And it is GOOD that I am here where I am.