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A new meaning for the manger

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Dec. 12, 2011 My Table Is Spread

In my memory, the Arnett aunts, my grandmother's sisters, are all dressed in pastels -- suits with jeweled pins on the collars -- and wearing hats and kid gloves. A patent leather handbag hangs over each aunt's arm.

There was a rhythm to the attire (suits, hats, gloves, nylons, heels for Sundays and family gatherings) and to the conversation. My father would always inquire after their health.

And one of the aunts (in my memory, it is always Nell Ruth) would place her gloved hand on my father's suit sleeve and say, "Honey, we have problems no lady can discuss."

As I grew older, the memory of that exchange made me smile. It made me smile until I realized I had become an Arnett aunt (albeit one dressed in packable, washable knits and leather flats for Sundays and family gatherings.) I realized it when a friend climbed into my car and had to move a bowel prep kit in order to sit down.

I've had two bouts of an ongoing, and increasingly, bothersome problem this fall. I will have surgery in the winter. Honey, trust me, it's a problem no lady can discuss.

To enter the ranks of the Arnett aunts is to acknowledge one's age. To acknowledge advancing age is to acknowledge weakness, and to acknowledge weakness is to acknowledge death. I'm not being very good about it.

I don't want to answer the phone and explain (again) how I'm feeling (like death warmed over, as my mother would say) or what I need (to have the phone line cut.)

I never want to see or taste another clear liquid, unless it is served in a martini glass and garnished with an olive.

I do not want to be in bed.

I want to be in charge.

When my daughter came to the house to check on me because I wasn't answering the phone, I believe I told her, in response to an act of human kindness on the part of a woman with many and varied and pressing responsibilities, "You're gonna drive me crazy." I saw quick tears fill her eyes and I watched as she suppressed the urge to explain toward just what I was driving her.

I realized as she left the house that it was the gradual (one hopes) turning over of authority, with my children caring for me rather than I caring for them, that pains worse than the physical problem. One can be excised. The other must be borne.

That's what I'm thinking about this Advent season each time I pass the crèche. There is the bed of straw, ready for the baby to be placed inside on Christmas Eve. I have always seen it as a crib or bassinet, that happiest of beds, made up with the highest of hopes.

Now I see it as a sickbed, that place from which we hope, and long, to rise. The one who lies in a sickbed must relinquish power and privacy and will. The one who lies in a sickbed must accept the care of others.

"No, you have to drink this. Take this. Get up and walk. Lie down and sleep. Let me look. You're going to feel a deep burn. This will sting. Let me know if this hurts." They are orders given kindly, for one's own good, but they are still orders.

I wonder again at God-made-flesh, at the One who created the universe, the One who raised the mountains and filled the seas, lying prone and helpless on a bed of barn straw. Did he know he was helpless to clean himself, that he had to wait for someone to notice the dampness and the odor and come to his aid? Did he know that he could, and would, eat only if someone heard his cry and responded? Did he know he would eat only what others chose to feed him? That he could change positions only if someone chose to move him? Did he know that he would be taken up without consultation and removed to Egypt, a land of his own making, but not, in his weakness, of his own choosing?

We reflect in Lent and during Holy Week on the debasement of the cross, but what of the humiliation of the crib? I wonder again that the Lord of the Universe would, in his coming to earth and his going from it, share all our deaths, all the little ones leading to that final breath, the last closing of our eyes.

Now I learn I need a second surgery. This problem, while inconvenient, is not urgent. That surgery will have to wait. I will have to live with the discomfort while I wait. I am being taken to a country I do not know, a country I did not choose. I am a stranger there. But Jesus goes with me. We will cross the border into Egypt together.

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