

Proper 20, Year C
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On most days of my life, I tend to move fairly comfortably along well-worn patterns and habits of life. Like many of you, I have some fairly set routines and ways of negotiating each day, ways that suit me. For the most part, I don't think about or question my habits of life and routines, because – frankly – life is comfortable and good. Things are going smoothly, and I get along fine in this world.

But once in a while, a tragedy like 9/11 hits, or a Katrina, or a tragedy like the one at Virginia Tech. Or, an event in my personal life jars me, my own personal 9/11 – an illness, a death, a divorce. And when something like this happens, I am jolted out of my comfortable routine, and I can end up questioning everything. At times like this, I feel a little like the Prodigal Son – I come to myself and look around at the life I've been living; I see my routines and assumptions and habits of life with new eyes. I see all that I have been taking for granted.

Well, Jesus has that same effect on me. His words and parables have a way of shaking the foundations of my life. It's as if Jesus has the power to pull me out of my well-worn patterns of life and cause me to come to myself, to come to my senses, and see my life in a new way.

Take this morning's parable, for example. A manager is asked for an accounting, after word reaches the owner that the manager has been squandering his property ("squandering" – the same word that Jesus uses in the parable just before this one about the Prodigal Son who squandered his inheritance – this is an important theme for Jesus, it seems.)

I read this parable, and I realize that Jesus is prodding me/reminding me that I am the manager. He wants me to ponder how I will respond when it is my turn to give an accounting as I stand before God. Among the things God will say to me is this:

"OK, Gary, let's see. Over the course of your life, it looks as if I gave you two million, one hundred and seventy-two thousand, three hundred and fourteen dollars and sixty-three cents. Now, why don't you show me what did with that." And so it will be my turn to show God all that I did with the wealth that God entrusted to me.

I know there will be some embarrassing moments in this accounting I give to God. After all, my use of money at various times in my life has reflected my twisted priorities and self-indulgent ways. As in Jesus' parable this morning, I am afraid I can imagine several reasons that charges might be brought against me for squandering what God entrusted to me.

When it's all said and done, and my accounting before God is complete, I know that God will forgive me, as God will forgive all of us. As we say in the Prayer of Humble Access

in the Book of Common Prayer, God is the one “whose property is always to have mercy.”

But this core Christian belief about God’s mercy and forgiveness is not intended to be a license for us to return to our well-worn patterns of life. As Ann Lamott has said, “God loves you just as you are. And God loves you too much to allow you to stay that way.”

In fact, it is teachings like this morning’s parable that are meant to jolt us out of our well-worn patterns and routines, and lift us to a higher place, where we can ponder not what we are going to live on, but focus instead on what we are living for.

And as if to press the point home, Jesus says in this lesson that he only wishes that the children of light would be as shrewd in their uses of money as the children of this world. This one really gets me. Because it jolts me again and makes me wonder how shrewd have I been about dealing with the things of this world, and how shrewd have I been about using wealth for the building up of God’s Kingdom?

Another way of putting it is this: What does my checking account say about where my heart has been throughout my life? Like 9/11 or a personal crisis, Jesus has a way of waking me up and prodding me to examine my life with a renewed honesty. What percentage of my wealth went to providing a home, food, clothing and education for my family? What percentage went to amusements and recreation? What percentage went to my alma mater or to agencies and institutions that do important good works in the community?

And what percentage went to the Body of Christ, to the faith community that baptizes, marries and buries my family, friends and neighbors, and ultimately myself?

What percentage of the wealth entrusted to me went to the community of faith that promoted prayer and gifts of the spirit, such as kindness, charity, gentleness, and forgiveness in a world that has grown increasingly coarse and violent?

The role of the church in the life of the community is simply huge and could be the subject of many books. But one example of its importance says volumes. In the aftermath of 9/11 and the shooting at Virginia Tech, in the aftermath of our personal crises and even our exuberant joys, what happens to us? What do we do?

Simply put, it is at times like these that we come to ourselves, like the Prodigal Son. We reconnect with our hearts and with that which is most important to us in the whole of our lives. We come to ourselves, we look around at our lives and the world, and we say with the Prodigal Son, “I am going home to my father.”

After 9/11 and Virginia Tech, people didn’t get up and go to the mall or to the club or to all those other places where we place our treasure. At times like these and in our personal 9/11’s, we come to ourselves, and we go to church, and we get on our knees.

It's at times like these that we remember the One to whom we ultimately belong, we remember our true home, and we vow, as the Prodigal Son vowed, that we are going to get our priorities straight again; we are going home to our Father.

And no matter where we've been or what we've done or how badly we've squandered what has been given to us, we know that when we come back home to this place, we are welcomed with unquestioning forgiveness.

And what happens next is the truest test of our character. When we realize that God always forgives and always welcomes us home, will we simply return to our well-worn patterns of life? Or, will we start to see things differently and live our lives in a new way? Realizing how unquestioningly and undeservedly we are loved, will we still hold our grudges or will we offer the same love to the people in our lives?

And in the arena of stewardship, since it's that time of year, will we return to our well-worn patterns, or will we see an opportunity for something new? And here I have to tell you that we have in our church some who have very few assets and very little income. These are the ones who will write me impassioned notes of regret and sometimes call me in tears because they wish they could give more to their church. To them, I simply say, blessed are you who weep, because you will be comforted. On the other hand, some with significant means who give only a small fraction of their wealth to the church are keen on finding fault with their church and easily come up with new reasons to cut their pledge. And to them, I simply say, to whom much is given, much is required. Actually, Jesus said those things; I just repeat them.

In the end, I can only really speak for myself. And considering the role of the church compared to all the other places where I put my treasure, I am more and more convinced that the Biblical standard of the tithe, giving 10%, or a dime on every dollar, is simply God's way of saying, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light." It is God's way of saying, "Keep 90%. The tithe is an easy yoke, a light burden. It's a way of reminding you of what matters most, and a way of keeping strong the one, sacred community that is there for you and for anyone, from your birth to your death."

When I hear that Gospel message, when I hear God saying "Come unto me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light," I feel as if God is trying to lift me out of my well-worn patterns of life and asking me to come to my senses. Like the Prodigal Son who finally came to himself and considered how he had been living, I sense my own opportunity to look at my life and my priorities again, the way God will ask me to look at it all one day, when God says, "OK, Gary, I see all that I gave you throughout your life. Now, why don't you show me what you did with it?"