

Stewards of God's good gifts

Matthew 18:21-35

September 11, 2011

This day marks the tenth anniversary of the coordinated terrorist attacks launched against the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon in Washington DC, and an unknown third target, possibly the United States capitol building or the White House.

Ten years. It's been ten years already?

That date, September 11, has been permanently etched into our nation's memory bank, like December 7 or October 29. We divide our histories, our nation's history and even our own histories, into before and after, before September 11, 2001, and after September 11, 2001. That day changed us,

But how? Exactly how are we different now, as people, as a people, after that fateful day?

That was the topic of a panel discussion held this summer at the Aspen Institute. Three panelists reviewed a poll of one thousand Americans conducted by Time magazine exploring the changes in attitude and outlook in the decade since September 11, 2001.

The poll reveals a profound shift in the American consciousness. Two-thirds of those polled believe America is in decline. Seventy-one percent believe that we are worse off now as a nation than at the beginning of the decade. Only six percent believe we are better off.

The panelists characterized this last decade as the most sustained period of pessimism in our nation's history with the possible exceptions of the years surrounding the Civil War and the Great Depression. They suggest that we are seeing a tipping point, a historical move away from the perennial optimism that has always seemed built into the American DNA.

We have always believed that whatever the size or complexity or danger level of the problems facing us that we have the know-how or the willpower or the resolve or the resources to find a solution or to make one. The American way is the way of unlimited opportunity, of innovation and discovery, of an ever-brighter future. But now, for the first time in our history, the majority of us do not believe that life will be better for our children than it has been for ourselves.

We have always believed that our nation has a unique destiny, that we stand apart from all the rest in terms of our moral mandate and political righteousness and collective determination. But now we wonder if we are so different, we wonder if our destiny is not the same as and even tied to the destinies of all the peoples who share this planet with us.

And maybe that's not an entirely bad thing. One of the panelists suggested we may be witnessing a nation coming of age, growing out of the naive exuberance of adolescence, learning to view ourselves and our place in the world with a more mature realism. And certainly we do share this planet with many other peoples, peoples with their own stories and dreams and virtues. It is wise and good for us to work with the other peoples of this world to address the threats to our common well-being.

It does seem clear that, for better or for worse, the events of September 11, 2001, did change us. But why? There have been other awful days in our nation's history before and since. There have been other disasters, wars past and wars now, that have claimed many more lives. What was it about this event that left such a profound imprint on our nation's soul?

It was that we felt vulnerable. The enemy reached out and touched us, right in our own home! For the first time in our history, we felt helpless, powerless, exposed. This was a problem we could not readily solve, a threat we could not readily defuse, a peril not over there, but right here.

The terrorists struck at our heart. Their targets were carefully chosen. They reached out and touched symbols of our national pride -- symbols of our economic pride and our military pride and our political pride. They cut us off at the knees, at least for a moment, but that moment was enough to change us forever because our heart, our hearts, were touched.

And that, finally, is what is at risk -- our hearts. What will this calamitous event do to our hearts? It took buildings from us and some three thousands souls from us, but will it also take from us our hearts? Will we lose not just souls, but our soul as a nation? Or can we become even more than what we were before?

That's a question we have to ask ourselves, not merely as Americans, but especially as Christians. As Americans, we make the calculations, we weigh the trade-offs. We weigh our need for security against our commitment to personal freedoms. We weigh the financial and human costs of waging a war against terrorism against the costs of not waging that war.

But as Christians, as followers of Jesus, the question is framed differently. It is a matter of the heart.

If my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? ... And Jesus concluded, "That is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Which brother? Which brother is Jesus talking about? You know which brother!

Forgiving has nothing to do with excusing. Forgiving doesn't mean it's OK, that the debt, the loss, the pain, the hurt, is anything less than what it is. Forgiving means, simply, choosing to cancel the debt. From the heart.

From the heart! So that our hearts will be inclined toward mercy, just as our God's heart is inclined toward mercy! So that we will be true children of our Father in heaven.

We have been given a gift, a matchless gift, a gift beyond all price -- the mercy of God, and we who have received God's mercy are now charged as stewards of the mercy of God.

Let's go back to Jesus' story. It is clear, entirely clear, isn't it, where Jesus expects us to find ourselves in his story? We are the servant, the servant who owes his master millions of dollars, an enormous debt, an unpayable debt. And we are the servant who is forgiven this debt for no other cause than the pity of our master.

What if it were not so? What if God were not merciful?

If you, O Lord, should keep account of sin, who, who could hold up his head?

If God were not merciful, we would have nothing. We would be nothing.

That's the crux of Jesus' story. We will not know how to be or how to act until we see ourselves as we are, as people who exist entirely indebted to God, wholly at God's mercy. We stand in God's presence, every one of us, helpless, defenseless, empty-handed, with nothing to credit to our account, nothing with which to curry God's favor, nothing other than God's own love and God's own mercy.

Having been forgiven, having received God's mercy, having become the beneficiaries of God's unmerited love, what will we do? What do we have to do, what do we have to give, if not that same love, that same mercy? So much has been forgiven us, and we, in comparison, have so little to forgive.

We are stewards of God's good gifts. That will be the theme for our worship services between now and Advent: *We are stewards of God's good gifts.*

And the greatest of these gifts is mercy. This is our one charge, this is our highest task, as human beings, as Christians, as followers of Jesus, to be stewards of the mercy of God, to show the mercy we have been shown. Otherwise ... Otherwise, God's grace itself bears no fruit, and there is no one, no one to witness to the extraordinary and world-changing love of God.

God has made us what we are. Without the mercy of God, we have nothing and are nothing. So what do we have that is ours to protect? What do we have to lose that can be taken away from us? Nothing! Our one possession is the mercy of God and that no one can take away!

No one can take it away. But you can give it away. It is meant to be given. It is given to be given. You are, nothing more, nothing less, than a steward of the mercy of God.

What will determine the shape and the direction and the intention of your heart? The events of September 11, 2001? Or the mercy of God?