

Escaping the Power of “My” – A Nonviolent Approach to Stewardship

When I talk with parishes around the diocese about stewardship, I begin by asking if there is anyone present who has enough time to do everything he or she wants to do, if there is anyone in the room who feels truly free. I have yet to see anyone hold up a hand. We follow a Savior who came to set us free, and not one of us feels free. Not one. I want to try to explain why.

A lot of the reason that you and I don't feel free comes from a word, the most dangerous word in the English language, the word “my.” “My” and all its correlates, like “yours,” and “hers,” and “theirs,” but we needn't list them all here.

What does “my” mean? What do we think we're saying with this word?

Well, of course we mean, “That belongs to me!” That's “my” book. That's “my” house. That's “my” car. You know dozens of other examples.

But there's another meaning for “my”, one that we don't think of nearly initially. How about “My” family? “My” country? “My” church.” When we say “my” in this context, do we mean that we own these things? Certainly not! We don't own the church. We surely don't own our country, and we don't own our families.

What then, does this kind of “my” mean? It refers to something bigger than me, something more powerful than me. It refers to something to which I owe loyalty. It may be obligated to me, but doesn't it *own* me in some meaningful way? After all, don't I say that “I belong to” certain groups?

I think that, if we look closely, “my” conveys (and hides) this last meaning more often than not. In fact, even in those places where we use “my” to indicate what we think we own, we really mean something that owns us, almost all of the time. This can be hard to swallow, so let's start with the bigger things, and work our way down to the smaller ones.

What about “my” country?

We surely don't own the country. It isn't “ours” to do with as we please. In fact, while we tend to think that it owes us something from time to time, mostly, especially on April 15th, Our Country is something to which we owe something. We owe it obedience to the laws of the country. We owe “our” country our taxes. We owe it our freedom to choose the course of our lives if we are conscripted into military service.

In return for these things we expect a modicum of safety, of certainty from day to day.

What about “my” church? We don't usually think of our church as something we own, but something we “belong to.” Do you hear those words? We are one of our church's “belongings!” When we say we “belong to” a church, we say that we “give ourselves” to that church. We are, in a very real sense, owned by our church. We may not pay attention to our words, but sometimes they reveal a truth we don't intend!

As with “our country” and “our family” we do expect certain things in return for our loyalty, for our gift of ourselves to the group.

The same is true of “my” family. Of all the “my's” in this group, “family” is the most complicated. We tend to think that the obligations of others within our family are roughly equal to our obligations to the rest. There is much more reciprocity implied in “family” than in “country” or “church,” at least for many of us. Even for those of us whose experience falls short of this (and it does for a lot more than we'd care to know) there is the sense that this isn't the way “family” was supposed to work, that there's more to it than our experience.

Still, even in this most balanced example, “my” doesn't indicate something I own, but something to which I give myself, something that controls my choices more than I control it.

What, then, does this kind of “my” indicate? Let’s review.

- 1) This kind of “my” indicates something bigger or more powerful than I am.
- 2) This kind of “my” is something to which I owe my loyalty and obedience.
- 3) This kind of “my” is something to which I even owe my life!
- 4) This kind of “my” is something from which I expect a certain amount of protection or benefit in return for my loyalty and obedience.

This next step is the frightening one. It may even seem offensive, but I ask you to give it some time. Now we’re going to talk about what we mean when we say “God.”

- 1) God is someone bigger and more powerful than I am.
- 2) God is someone to whom I owe my loyalty and obedience.
- 3) God is someone to whom I owe my very life!
- 4) God is someone from whom I expect certain benefits in return for my loyalty and obedience.

The parallels are obvious. When we use “my” in this way, we’re really naming one of our (lesser) “gods?” And what do the “gods” do? They demand sacrifice! Baal, that god of the Caananites, demanded human sacrifice. Other gods demanded grain sacrifices, or the blood of animals. The nature of the sacrifice may change, but the one thing that doesn’t change is the demand for sacrifice. Remember the freedom no one seems to have? That is surely one of the things that gods demand.

“That’s fine,” you may be thinking, “about ‘country’ and ‘church’ and ‘family. But it surely isn’t true for all my other ‘my’s’.” No? Let’s see.

What about “my” car? It’s bigger than I am, but not like the church, or my house. Size, though, doesn’t tell everything. “My car” is definitely more powerful than I am. It can do things that I could never do. And my car demands obedience. If I don’t put fuel in it, it won’t run. If I don’t put oil in it, it won’t run. If I don’t make all the payments on it, it won’t be in my driveway the next morning!

And in return for my obedience, I can expect certain benefits. I get to work more quickly than if I walked. When it’s hot, the car keeps me cool on the way. When it’s raining, the car keeps me dry on the way.

How about “my” money?

Well, there’s no question that “my” money is more powerful than I am. “My” money can get me all kinds of things that I can’t get for myself, things I could never make for myself.

And “my” money expects my obedience. I have to work for it, work a lot for it. It demands a great deal of “my” time and effort. Often, “my” money demands sacrifice. I sacrifice time with “my” family. I sacrifice relationships. Sometimes I sacrifice integrity, doing things I don’t like doing. Sometimes, “my” money requires a sacrifice of sleep. When “my” money gets tight, I lose a lot of that sometimes.

Now, “my” money isn’t physically larger than I am, but, like one of those little household gods the ancients used to keep on the mantle at home, the size isn’t the thing. If the little figure on the mantle could guarantee a good harvest in the Fall, the size didn’t matter much.

As you can see, when we say “my,” we name one of the “gods” in our pantheon? Some of them, like “my” watch, don’t make big demands, and they give back small rewards, but they’re still little gods in my world as long as I talk about them with the word “my.”

No wonder we never have time for anything! We’re too busy trying to keep all our gods happy! No wonder none of us feels free!

And you can see now how dangerous this little word is. You can see how the word “my” pretends to say one thing, but in fact it refers to something else entirely. “My” pretends to name something that belongs to me, but in fact it refers to something that *owns* me, something that demands sacrifice from me.

There is a simple, but not easy, solution.

The first step is to give yourself to One God, and one God only. The Lord our God, the Lord is One, says the *Shema*. If we want to escape all these little Gods, we give ourselves exclusively to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God and Father of Jesus Christ. This God is MY God.

And what’s wonderful is that this God does not demand sacrifice like all the others. Jesus, quoting Hosea, reminds us that God desires “mercy, not sacrifice!” (Matthew 9:13, 12:7, quoting Hosea 6:6) This God doesn’t burden me with demands, but makes me free, free to serve, free to give, free to love.

If we want to break loose, to be free, we give ourselves to the Only God, the One God.

We stop using “my” except for this One God.

I know that this isn’t entirely possible in our current world, using our current version of the English language, but we can start. We can begin by letting the lie that is “my” set our teeth on edge every time we catch ourselves saying it. In fact, the more frequently we allow ourselves to have this awareness, the better we’ll see through this lie, the more often we’ll find other ways to say what we really mean. These other ways will take a few more words, but it will be worth it to speak truthfully. The extra words the extra seconds will seem less onerous over time if we stick with it.

Once we’ve established that we want to be truly free, and once we’ve given ourselves to only One God, the second step is the reason for this paper in the first place. The next step is the step of Stewardship.

If you want to be free, if you want to belong to only One God, then you become a steward, not an owner of anything.

What is a steward? A steward is someone entrusted with the care of something on behalf of, for the sake of someone else. Joseph, the son with the multi-colored coat, had a steward over his house when he was ruler in Egypt. And there was a steward set over Daniel. We wouldn’t dream of thinking that these stewards used the word “my” to describe the things or people whose care had been entrusted to them.

Jesus speaks of stewards a few times, when he wants to teach us. In Luke 12 Jesus speaks of the faithful steward who is given responsibility for the care of the master’s household, to be sure that they are fed. Jesus also uses the image of the steward in his parable of the shrewd servant who misuses his master’s wealth. In neither case would the word “my” ever be thought of by the steward with regard to the household, or the wealth that was misused. No indeed, the only “my” in that parable refers to “my master.”

When you think of a steward, think this way. Imagine the steward, bearing the property of her master, or his master, reverently, with open hands supporting the precious object of care. Have you ever seen the way a wine steward treats a bottle of fine wine in a restaurant? Displaying it? Cradling it in his hands? This is a steward, someone who treasures the task of caring for the precious things of her master, his master.

Becoming a steward sets us free from all of those little gods who own a piece of us. It changes our relationship to all that “stuff” in our lives. Let’s look at how that happens.

“My Money.”

What if every penny you “have” is really God’s not yours? We talk a lot about giving God back a tenth of “our” money, but is that really true? Do we want it to be true? Or would we prefer to be returning a tenth of God’s money to God?

Which way of seeing this makes me more free? If I’m giving something of “mine” to God, I am making a sacrifice. God desires mercy, steadfast love (what Hosea actually said) not sacrifice. If I’m giving something of “mine” to God, I suffer loss, I experience it as a burden. When I sit down to write that check

for my offering envelope, it hurts to write the first check for a tenth of my paycheck. Now, some folks think there's benefit in that. "No Pain, No Gain" is a common phrase in today's culture. If there's no sense of sacrifice, there's no meaningful gift to God. But God doesn't want your pain, God wants your love. God doesn't want you to make sacrifice, God wants you to be merciful. (Even to yourself!)

If I'm giving God back God's own "stuff," God's own money, then what do I lose? If I am writing that check from God's checking account, what burden is there? When I sit down at my desk to write this check from God's checking account, as God's steward of these funds, I am amazed that God has entrusted this task to me, I am grateful that I've been found worthy of the task.

Which of these two approaches makes me more free?

Why a tenth?

This is a better question than you realize. I hear that question a lot when I'm talking with folks about stewardship. Why the tithe? Why a tenth?

I'm going to say something here that will upset a lot of traditional thinkers about stewardship.

Forget the tithe. Don't tithe. Give a tenth? Maybe. If that's what it takes to make you into a steward from an owner. But please, don't tithe. I've been using that word for years and years, and recommending the tithe to everyone, but I'm changing my mind. Don't tithe. Tithing is about slavery. Stewardship is about freedom. Tithing is about giving away something that is "mine." Stewardship is about escaping the lie that is "my."

Let's look at some sound biblical reasons for resisting the tithe.

In First Samuel, (1 Samuel 8:4-18) the elders of Israel demand a king from Samuel. And Samuel goes on to warn them that the king will demand their children to work his fields, the best of their fields and vineyards, a tenth of their grain, and a tenth of their flocks. This is what kings do. Demand a tenth of everything, and surround themselves with "your" stuff. The tithe is never explained in the Hebrew Scriptures. It's just demanded.

And then there's Jesus, being critical of the tithe offered by the Pharisees. Matthew 23:23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others." Clearly, Jesus doesn't think much of the value of the tithe.

Indeed, Jesus doesn't ask for a tithe. He asks for it all. He suggests that only those who lose their lives (stop seeing themselves as owners even of their own lives) will save them. He tells the wealthy young man who wants to follow him to sell everything and give the proceeds to the poor, not just a tenth.

The tithe is about that arrangement we had with our little gods. "If I do this, then you'll do that. If you save us God, then we'll give you back a tenth of all the stuff we manage to earn, manage to grow.

Giving a tenth, the way I'm suggesting it, isn't about that. It's about changing the way I relate to *everything* in my life, everyone in my life. This kind of "proportional giving" is about doing whatever it takes to change myself from an owner to a steward.

Honestly, if giving a tenth back to God doesn't do this for you, if it's something you can do without thinking about it, like the rich young man kept the commandments without effort, then a tenth isn't enough. If you can give a tenth and still feel like the other nine tenths are "yours," then Jesus might be saying to you, "Well, Jim, or Jane, I think that you need to sell it all, give it to the poor. Then come and follow me."

On the other hand, there are certainly people reading this for whom giving two percent is a constant reminder of the power the rest of "their" money has in their lives, and giving that helps them to change that sense of ownership. Two copper coins were all that the woman could put into the treasury, but Jesus recognized that in doing so, she had given her whole life. (That's what it really says in the Greek.)

Giving proportionally only works if we are giving back a chunk large enough to stir up our hidden “my” feelings. Giving a tenth or a twentieth, or a fifth, is supposed to make you uncomfortable, help you discover the parts of yourself that still need healing, the parts of you that still act like owners, that are still in bondage to your little gods. Give whatever you need to give to find that in yourself. I can guarantee that, if every one of us gave to God what we needed to give to feel uncomfortable, to be reminded of the power that “my” still has in our lives, the church would have more than enough to feed all the hungry, pay all the bills, and re-roof all the buildings.

Just about now, I hope that some of you are saying. “Now wait just a doggone minute. That money *is* mine, after all I made it with *my* time, *my* effort, *my* sweat, *my* talent, *my* work!” I hope you’re saying that, because if you are, well, you’ve just named five more little gods. This is why most stewardship programs nowadays don’t just ask you to think about “your” money, but about “your” “Time, talent, and treasure.” Each of these other two acts like a tyrannical God in our lives, just like money. (So do the other little ones, but in smaller ways.) Let’s start with Talent, and end up with Time.

We have all met artists who are slaves to “their art.” I was like that, too, when I thought of myself as a singer. Thanks be to God for introducing me to my wife, whose love convinced me that this bondage to “my” talent wasn’t worth it. Still, I know that I can become enslaved to “my” intellect sometimes, or to other “gifts” that I “possess.” Every mention of “my” is slave talk, even when it’s about “your” talent. It isn’t yours, it never was. If you can bring yourself to see this gift as something entrusted to you as steward, then you can begin to take real joy in the use of the gift for the purposes for which it was intended, for the sake of others. Giving of “your” talent to God is not giving something you own back to God. Neither is it giving God something God needs. It is simply the opening of your hands, the release of those miserable cramps in your fingers so that you can use the gift freely, joyfully.

What talents do you “have?” What gifts do you think of as “yours?” Are you gifted with the ability to do great cross-stitch? Do you listen well? Are you a writer? Do you have great physical strength or agility? What gift has been entrusted to you?

Lots of times, the gifts that I encounter in people I counsel are gifts that go unused much of the time. Even these gifts, lying dormant, exact a deep price for their rank as “my” talent or gift. When I am a worshipper of the god of “my” talent and it goes unused, “my” talent consumes me, since I offer it no other sacrifices. People with unused talents, who are not free of the lie of “my,” waste away with anger and frustration because “their” talents are being “wasted.”

If I am a steward of my gifts, just as I am of all the other stuff placed in my trust, then I am better able to wait. I am able to wait for the time when the Giver of the gift calls upon me to use the special talent that has been entrusted to me. The talent no longer lies hidden and hungry, but waits with me, waits with patience and joy and confidence that the day will come when together that gift and I will be able to serve as we dream of doing. Now I have a hidden treasure and friend, just waiting to be needed, not a nasty little god, pouting and devouring me from within!

This last part is big, at least for people in the United States.

I’m talking about “my” time.

I think that the tyranny of “time” in our lives is second only to that of money. It may even surpass that. After all, I can write about your gift of a tenth of “your” money without you setting fire to this paper. But what if I asked you to think about a tenth of “your” time?

How many of us go to church *every single week*? How many hours is that? One or two? And how many of us go to at least one meeting at church, or with church folks at someone’s house each week? How many hours is that now? We’re up to maybe three or four? And that’s for people who go to Bible study, or prayer group *every week*! I don’t know many people who do that, especially in the Episcopal Church.

I figure we all have about a hundred and two waking hours each week to play with. So a tenth of that would be a fraction over ten hours a week. Now, I know people whose prayer life uses ten hours each week, and sometimes, I'm one of them, but not always. How many of us can imagine giving a tenth of "our" time to God?

And that's precisely it, isn't it. We can't, because we still think it's "our" time. We are absolutely *enslaved* to the god that is "our" time.

Almost every American has some kind of calendar or electronic manager because we spend our time before we even have it. We're like people with too many credit cards, spending our time before it even arrives, putting down one debt of time after another to someone or something so that, when we're on the road down to Jericho and we see a man lying by the side of it, we simply have no time to give him, and we pass by on the other side. This isn't because we're mean, or nasty, or bad people, but it's because we've already spent "our" time on something else, and have none to give.

And what about time for yourself? Once it's all spent, do you have any left over to care for yourself?

Don't we find it true that when we're home, trying to relax, to rest a little, and the phone rings, we have negative feelings of one sort or another? We find ourselves resenting the phone. We find it hard to stay in our chairs and let it ring. Even if we do manage to let it ring, our quiet time is poisoned by our frustration.

It is poisoned because we still think it's "our" time, and the spending of it is up to us. Other people think the same way, (or at least we think they do) and so we expect them to be upset with us if we don't give them "our" time. We waste a lot of energy even while we're supposed to be resting, making sacrifice to the god that is "our" time.

But all this time is something entrusted to you to use on behalf of the God who gave it to you.

What if your calendar weren't like a checkbook where you spent "your" time in advance, but a place where you planned the use of time, time that your God might rather have you use somewhere else along the road to Jericho? What if it really were okay to stop and help, even if there's a committee meeting somewhere else?

Time spent to rest and heal your own body can be time spent in service of others. You can hear that phone ring, and still know that you are using time in God's service. When it isn't "your" time, you can spend it on yourself without feeling selfish!

Let me conclude by telling you my own story about stewardship, in short form.

When Sara and I made our decision to tithe (yes, we called it that, back then...) back, more than 20 years ago, we did what I advise a lot of people to do. We did it in increments. We started off by looking at what we were giving to God of "our" stuff, and it came to about 3 percent. So we committed ourselves to increasing that by one percent per year until we got to ten. Well, some years we managed to increase it by two percent, so after about five years, we made it up to the tithe.

But it wasn't easy. It wasn't easy because I didn't understand what I was doing. I knew that there was something out there that I was pursuing, but I didn't know it was freedom. I still thought I was pursuing something like, "Being a Good Christian," or "Being a Good Parishioner" and so the business of gradually letting go of more and more of "my" stuff each year was a real burden.

Don't do what I did. Don't give to be a "Better Christian." Don't give to be a "Better Parishioner." Don't give for any reason other than your own desire to be free. If you look deep, if you listen, you'll hear your heart down there, aching for the freedom you were created to enjoy. "For freedom Christ has set us free!" cries Paul in the letter to the Galatians. Don't settle for anything less. Don't give for any other reason. Set your eyes on the goal I couldn't see back then, and begin working, a little at a time, toward the freedom that is yours in Christ Jesus. Remember, it isn't the amount. It isn't the number or the percentage. It's the

fact that you give enough to be reminded each time of the power that “my” still has in your life, so that you can turn that little god back into the lump of wood that it really is, and turn your heart back to God.

Nothing, nothing is more precious than this freedom. Don't settle for less.

Some areas for expansion

- I. Changes in our vocabulary
 - a. Alternatives to “my”
 - b. How this changes our thinking
- II. The Grace To See Anew
 - a. “My” and the Holy Spirit
 - b. Finding a way to talk about God as something more than “owner.”
- III. The Last of the “My's” My Life
 - a. Dying with Christ
 - b. ?