

September 11

I'll always remember the call we got from Ida's brother Terry, about 4 a.m., to quick, turn on the TV, something terrible is happening.

Teatua here was barely one year old. We had just learned Ida was pregnant with Joey, and on the television, there they were, the twin towers, consumed in smoke, and then, the surreal vision of those towers, one after the other, collapsing with all of that human life destroyed.

I'm not one to wear patriotism on my sleeve, but that day, and the days that followed, I felt a bond with my countrymen that I don't ever recall feeling before.

We, all of us, had been attacked.

And like nearly every American, I was pleased to hear President Bush declare from that rocky pile at ground zero that those who did this would soon hear back from us.

"Go get 'em," I said.

And now ten years have passed.

Tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands, have died, and many more maimed, to avenge the deaths of 2819.

Trillions of dollars spent.

Thousands of walking wounded veterans unemployed, homeless, lost.

Anniversaries should cause us to reflect; and as Christians, our reflections, if they are true to our faith, will be shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is no small wonder that today's gospel, on this of all days, is about not only forgiveness -- that's the obvious message; but it's also about the God who comes down, the God who lets go, the God who releases enormous debt, enormous obligation, with reckless abandon, at incalculable cost to God.

We so often think of God as the angry bookkeeper in the sky, just waiting for a chance to knock us down.

That is not the God of Jesus Christ.

The story Jesus tells us today tells us the truth about the character of God, the nature of God, and God's expectations of us.

If Jesus told the story today, he'd probably start off with:

"A man owed a king a bazillion dollars!"

That's how you'd say "ten thousand talents" today.

It's an unimaginable sum.

It cannot be repaid.

The fellow's plea for more time to pay is laughable.

Take all the time you want, you'll never come up with a bazillion dollars.

The king comes down and forgives the man's vast debt.

The king expects the man who is forgiven to do likewise.

When reports come that the forgiven man has become tight fisted with a fellow who owes him a hundred bucks, the king comes even further down, stooping all the way down to look after the second debtor, and his distraught friends.

Hold onto, if you will, in your left hand, this sense of the king coming down, of the king letting go, of the king releasing enormous obligation with reckless abandon, and at great cost.

We'll get back there in a moment.

When we think of our spiritual growth, we often think of going up, of moving forward, of somehow gaining rather than losing.

But when you really sit with the God who becomes a human being, the God who lives, eats, drinks, among us; the God who is brutally tortured and killed for us; perhaps you may begin to see that our own spiritual journey is not about going up, but a journey of going down.

Let me share two stories that may explain what this might mean.

The first is the O Henry story called the "Gift of the Magi."

In it, Della and James are newlyweds.

They are as poor as church mice and their first Christmas finds each of them with no money to buy the other a gift.

However, each of them has a prized possession.

James has a gold watch, a precious gift from his grandfather.

Della has long and rich auburn hair that nearly reaches her waist.

James secretly sells his pocket watch to buy Della a silver comb for her beautiful hair.

Della, unbeknownst to James, has her hair cut off, so she can sell it, in order to buy James a gold chain for his watch.

Christmas comes, and both stare dumbfounded at the other.

It is a pointless, if extravagant, sacrifice each has made.

Pointless -- unless love itself is the gift.

The other story is from the 1987 movie, "Babette's Feast."

Babette is a celebrated chef in Paris in the late 1800's, who due to rioting in the city streets, loses everything.

She flees to Denmark and falls into the care of two aging sisters, women who have given their lives to religious work and to keeping their old, declining religious order together.

When Babette arrives, the small community is old and tired; they are reduced to petty bickering.

Babette tries to cheer them up, but every effort fails.

Then one day, completely unexpectedly, Babette receives a letter from Paris.

She has won 3 million francs in a lottery.

With her prize, Babette decides to treat these aging Dutch women to a real French banquet.

She brings in the finest foods, but not only that.

She purchases the best china, embroidered tablecloths, silver cutlery, champagne and liqueurs, fine cheese and choice meats.

When the meal is prepared, the table set, candles blazing, the Dutch ladies stand astonished at the extravagance, the abundance.

At first, they are frightened and apprehensive, but little by little, the mood lightens, and gratitude and forgiveness spread around the room.

The banquet night ends with everyone a bit drunk, but very happy, stumbling into the town square, where they form a circle around the fountain, and sing and dance together.

They've spent a lifetime laboring in the fields of the Lord.

And now this.

"After all these years they have finally touched the wellspring, and their hearts are overflowing." C. Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*, 67.

Then someone asks Babette that since she won all this money, must be she'll be leaving soon, back to her life in Paris.

"No," Babette says, "I don't have any money. I spent it all on the banquet, every penny!"

In a way, the gift she gave is wasted, just as with O Henry's young married couple.

The old Dutch ladies will sober up by morning, and likely soon forget the extravagant gift they received from Babette.

And yet, if you're still holding in your left hand, that sense of the king coming down, of the king letting go, of the king releasing

enormous obligation with reckless abandon, at great cost, it doesn't matter if the old ladies soon forget Babette's gift.

By throwing away her only chance to return to the life she knew, she has become, for one night -- and in another way -- for all time, the image of the self-giving, abundant, extravagance of God.

She may as well have given away a bazillion dollars.

Perhaps to some, this extravagance is an unholy waste.

How dare she throw away so much for so little in return?

We might ask the same question of Jesus, hanging there on the cross.

It seems pointless - unless love itself is the gift.

If we sit long enough with the gospel, what emerges is the truth of our situation.

Our common sense, our logic, our culture, our economy, all insist that in order to survive, I must save, I must protect, I must react.

But the wisdom of God turns our common sense, our culture, our economy, on its head.

The wisdom of God, so stark hanging there on the cross, is alive in Della's chopped off hair, in James' pawned watch, in Babette's extravagant feast.

All given with joy, yet at profound cost.

And so I wonder, ten years after the horrific attack on September 11, what might have been if our born again Christian President had

done what only a few were willing to do, and instead of seeking revenge, had stood on that rubble pile and said to the attackers:

“We forgive you.”

“We will not attack you.”

“We will suffer this injury, this loss, this death.”

“As a nation, in this moment in history, we will embrace the foolishness of God, and trust God to protect us.”

Most would say: “That’s completely naïve!” “Foolish, wishful thinking, and probably suicidal too!”

All true.

It is as naïve and foolish and suicidal as the God who delivers us by dying at our hands.

And yet I wonder, if we had reacted as Christians, where we might be today, as a nation, as a world?

I’ll leave you with this:

“Love is recklessness, not reason.

Reason seeks a profit.

Love comes on strong, consuming herself, unabashed.

Yet in the midst of suffering,

Love proceeds like a millstone,

Hard surfaced and straight forward.

Having died to self-interest,

She risks everything and asks for nothing.

Love gambles away every gift God bestows.”

Jalaludin Rumi

Such is the life that Jesus invites us into.

Perhaps most especially on September 11.