

[Readings: Ezekiel 37:12-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45]

Are you feeling "dead on your feet?" So did the Jewish people in the time of the prophet of our First Reading, Ezekiel. So did the people listening to Paul in today's Second Reading. So did Martha and Mary and Lazarus in our Gospel.

Those who had appeared banished from the land of the living would be called forth from their graves of slavery and bondage of the Babylonian captivity, and each would begin to live again the life that seemed lost forever. John does not tell us in today's Gospel if the restoration of Lazarus from death to life brought an awakening of faith in the people witnessing this miracle. For some, it did.

Some interpret this Gospel not as the literal resuscitation of Lazarus, but of the spiritual re-awakening of the Jewish people who were lagging in their faith. I myself felt this story was a test of my own faith. If Jesus Christ is believed to be the first to be raised from the dead, how come Jesus is raising people left and right? The answer: We need to remember that these people who are resuscitated will die again. Jesus Christ, once Risen from the dead in glory, will never die again. THAT'S the difference! And WHAT a difference that is!

So, are you "dead on your feet?" Are you feeling indifferent, or bored or lazy or in doubt? Do you find yourself being swept away by "fleshly" ways of thinking? One that is shaped and controlled by the values and standards of a world in rebellion against God? Then you're still in the tomb! A "spirited" existence is one that is surrendered to God, to grace, and to the action of the Spirit of God who dwells within. Have you found that power, that grace yet?

This is what Christian Stewardship does. It recharges the batteries. It gives insight into who we are, how we got here, what our purpose is in life, and what to do with what we have when we love God and believe in God.

Here is a theme to each of my stewardship homilies so far this Lent, in the form of a question. Imagine each of you asking me these questions. The First Sunday of Lent: What exactly is stewardship? The Second Sunday of Lent: How do I "do stewardship" in my state in life: as a single person, as a married person, as a consecrated religious, or as an ordained person?

The Third Sunday of Lent: What is the connection between stewardship and my prayer life? The Fourth Sunday of Lent: Where does my commitment to my family fit in with stewardship as a spouse, a parent, a child, a sibling, a grandparent? Can you picture yourself asking these questions?

Now, here is the real challenging question, and no one has asked me in 35 years of priesthood: Father, what do I as a responsible steward, do with my money and my material possessions? "Lemme tell ya!" If we want God to touch every aspect of our lives in relationships and in spirituality, we also want to invite God into the dollars and cents of our lives.

Almsgiving is donating money or goods or services to the poor. It is a witness to fraternal charity and a work of justice that is pleasing to God. Here is what the Book of Tobit says:

"Give alms from your possessions. Do not turn your face away from any of the poor, and God's face will not be turned away from you. Give alms in proportion to what you own. If you have great wealth, give alms out of your abundance: if you have but little, distribute even some of that. But do not hesitate to give alms; you will be storing up a godly treasure for yourself against the day of adversity. Almsgiving frees one from death, and keeps one from going into the dark abode. Alms are a worthy offering in the sight of the Most High for all who give them." (Tob. 4:7-11) Do you struggle to give alms? If so, why?

I am proud to say that as your pastor, I only talk about money from the pulpit once or twice a year: when I give my "State of the Parish" address, and when it's time for the Catholic Services Appeal. Right? Amen? Any parishioner who says different, doesn't come to church here every Sunday!

Our financial and material support of the Church and charities comes from first and foremost from a deep sense of gratitude. We acknowledge that everything we have comes from God. We admit that we have to give back to others, as God has given to us. And we realize that God can never, never be outdone in generosity.

There are two stories which come to mind about financial stewardship.

The first is from the reality that Jesus Christ Himself did not begin His religious and spiritual life as a Roman Catholic. He was a nice Jewish boy with observant Jewish parents. Someone once described God the Father as a very good Jewish agent. He gets us things: a job, food to eat, a car to drive, a roof over our head. A beautiful religious tradition and faith practice. God even makes sure we have family, friends and co-workers. And as a good Jewish "Agent," He wants His ten percent! We get to keep 90%. Such a deal!

The other story is about my pastor in the last parish where I was an associate pastor. He asked me if I give 10% of my income to God through my parish, through my participation in the CSA and to charity. I remember vividly saying, "I give God my very life every day. What MORE does He want?" Without missing a beat, the pastor said, "10% of what's in your wallet! It's in the Bible! There are at least 17 biblical passages that deal with giving ten percent to God."

Then he said, "Nick, I would not ask the parishioners here or you to do something I myself would not do. I tithe. And I have never been more blessed in my life. The more I give, the more the Lord gives to me."

I can testify to that. When I think I am being generous in giving to this parish, to the CSA or to charity, when I think I may be giving too much to an individual who needs assistance, within days, God gives me a financial blessing of equal or more value! God can never, never be outdone in charity!

I want to show you a pie chart, thanks to the creative skills of Dan Heileman and Zora Dziurman. Let's take a look at it. The entire circle or pie represents 100% of what God has given to us and continues to give to us. All of this belongs to God. See all the green? That represents what you get to keep -- 90% -- and spend as you like: on your bills, on your food, clothing and shelter, on your education, recreation, on your entertainment and on your favorite sports.

The American bishops then ask that you take 5% of the remaining 10% -- the blue slice -- and donate it to your parish: St. Martin de Porres Parish.

Quick math: does your financial support of your parish equal this percentage? Fifteen days before Federal Income Tax Day, someone asked, "Are we talking gross income or net income?" I tell them, "Start with net. I'll take net!"

Every July 1, when I am informed what my annual compensation will be for the next fiscal year, I look at the bottom line figure. I make a prayer of thanksgiving and then I say, "Lord, 10% is yours, right off the top!"

The next slice – the purple one -- is 4%. That's how much we are asked to give to our favorite charities. This is separate from our church support. And do not, I repeat, do not feel at all guilty that you cannot support the 150 charity pleas you get through the mail throughout the year, especially before Thanksgiving, Christmas and during Lent. Select three or four or five or ten favorite charities and leave it at that. Vet the charity. That's what I do. How much of my gift actually goes to the cause, to those in need, and how much is for administrative costs? The rest of the pleas go into the recycle bin.

See the almost invisible red slice? That's for the Catholic Services Appeal. 1% of your income. It's the smallest slice you can have before you have to get into fractions. Is 1% too much to ask to support our Mother Church? Charity begins at home, yes, but it must extend to the larger Church.

If everyone who attends Mass regularly followed this simple 10% tithing invitation and challenge of financial giving, sacrificing 5% to the parish, 4% to favorite charities and 1% to the CSA, we could triple the amount of parish services we provide for you, we would always make our annual CSA parish target, and any child who wanted to attend a Catholic grade school or high school could do so because the parish would pay for it! This is happening in Catholic parishes all around the country. This is the spiritual result of responsible sacrificial giving in a Catholic stewardship parish!

I give personal witness and testify to you that I have been committed to sacrificial giving – tithing – for almost twenty-five years.

Since then, on my meager income of \$35,000 a year, plus benefits, I have been able to assist my family financially, and paid for the first two years of my niece's college education. Because of the generosity of God through parishioners who gift me at weddings, baptisms and funerals. Who gift me on my birthday, anniversary of ordination and at Christmas. And you know, I give back to God even 10% of that!

The concept of tithing must begin in our heart, move to our brain, and find expression in our wallet. If everyone here made the same amount of sacrifice by percentage, it would mean an equal sacrifice on everybody's part. But I am on a fixed income. But I am on welfare. The call, the invitation is still there for your sacrifice. My pastor told the story about his grandfather who came to America from Sicily. He was a common laborer – what we would call a blue collar worker. Every week or two weeks when he got paid in cash, he brought it home and went to the kitchen where there were three labelled jars. The first jar said, "CHURCH." The second jar said, "BILLS." The last jar said, "FUN." Most weeks, the paycheck went only in the first two jars. There is a humble lesson to learn there.

When we give out of our need, like the Gospel story of the Widow's Mite, we experience a spiritual transformation. Sacrificial giving puts God first, not last. God deserves our First Fruits, not our Left Overs!

Let the Holy Spirit fill you with a spirit of joyful gratitude for what you have. Sacrificial giving is deliberately planned. It has a bite. It means sacrifice.

How much should we give? Here is the ideal. I ask only that you take it to prayer. Let the Holy Spirit tell you to start with a percentage, not a dollar amount. You giving \$20 a week and me giving \$20 means something different. But you giving 5% and me giving 5% means the same amount of sacrifice, but not the same dollar amount. And together we become a stewardship parish.

So, in what ways are you and I still "dead on our feet?" What are some ways that we are still "bound" and need to be set free? What are some wrappings others have put on us? What are the wrappings we have put on ourselves? Are WE ready to step out of the tomb and into the light? AMEN!