

CALLED TO ACCOUNT
Sermon for Pentecost 18C-Proper 20-Lk 15:1-13
LPC, 9/18/16

Some of you may have noticed that I failed to mention Nine-Eleven during last Sunday's service. To be truthful, I have mixed feelings about the way Nine-Eleven is often commemorated. But this week I do want to reference Nine-Eleven in this sermon, because of its relevance to today's scriptures.

Nine-Eleven, to my mind, was a time when the entire country was called on to make an accounting of ourselves. Something we had thought we could rely on was no longer there, and we had to decide what to stand on. We had assumed that America was more or less invulnerable to international attack. This is what we thought, perhaps unconsciously, we could rely on. We found this was no longer something we could rely on. We had to figure out what to rely on instead... what as a country we could stand on.

Nine-Eleven was a collective experience. But similar experiences happen on a personal scale. Something happens that requires you to give an accounting of yourself. Something you depended upon changes radically and you have to decide what you stand on.

I have a clergy colleague in this diocese who has twin sons in their late twenties. A few years ago one of them was involved in a serious car accident. All at once she went from having independent children to being part-time care-giver to a brain-damaged adult. The ground beneath her had shifted. She was called upon to give an accounting. Something she relied on was no longer there and she had to figure out what to stand on. By her own admission, it has taken a long time.

As relatively secure members of society here in America, we don't have these calls to accounts very often. In unsettled parts of the world, some people have to do it quite frequently. Here we can often go for years or decades without having to give an account of our life. But all of us will face, at some point, something that turns our life upside down, taking away something we rely on, and forcing us to decide what we are going to stand on.

This could be death of a loved one, job loss, diagnosis of a catastrophic disease. The initial reaction is shock and grief. Sooner or later, however, just the reality of continuing to live requires us to give an accounting and decide what we are going to stand on when what we thought we were standing on is gone.

This is the key, for me, in understanding this latest in a series of problem parables from Luke. A manager embezzles from his employer. He is caught, fired and called upon to give an accounting. Knowing that his very life is on the line, the manager decides to ingratiate himself with his boss's debtors by reducing their bills without his boss's knowledge or approval. In this way he hopes to have a network, so to speak, once he is unemployed. If you've ever been unemployed, you know how all-important that network can be!

Here is the twist. When the boss finds out, instead of being furious at being cheated out of even more of his own property (after all, his debtors will not now be paying him the full amount he is owed) he commends the manager on his initiative!

As I've said before, Jesus casts his parables in situations that his audience will recognize, but nearly always provides a surprise ending, to challenge people to really look at their assumptions and their usual ways of doing things. We have seen in previous examples how Jesus uses this method to challenge people's assumption that God acts the way people act. Now Jesus is challenging people's complacency that their usual way of life is good enough for God.

In other words, Jesus is calling people to account. He is letting us know that much of what we depend on is not ultimately reliable: things like property, especially, but perhaps also our position in society, our sense of entitlement, our assumption that as long as we aren't actually killing anybody that our lives don't need continual self-examination and repentance.

Jesus is letting us know that what we do, and the way we approach what we do, matters in the great scheme of things. And the stakes are high. Our very lives depend on where we place our priorities, on what we ultimately stand.

What we stand on, where we place our trust, makes a difference in how we behave. And if, as Jesus says elsewhere, we are standing on firm ground, we will indeed stand. We will withstand storms, we will have abundant life, even though the storms of life and the reality of death are ever with us.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to account every day, not so we can grovel in all the many ways we inevitably fall short, but so that every day we can remember where the solid ground is that we can stand on, always.

If we stand on the Gospel of Jesus Christ, on the love of God, in the kingdom where people are children of God to be fed, forgiven and healed as Jesus fed, forgave and healed, we will be on solid ground. All other ground, as the old hymn goes, is sinking sand. All other ground is sinking sand.

In the teachings and parables that Luke reports, Jesus particularly emphasizes the dangers of standing on property. You cannot serve God and wealth. But there are other things that human beings put their trust in that are ultimately unreliable. Often these things are unacknowledged addictions and unspoken assumptions that we don't even realize we have until they are challenged, the way our confidence in American security went unchallenged until Nine-Eleven.

We are not, however, to walk around paranoid, looking for signs of everything crumbling down around our ears. We are to put our trust in the solid ground of Jesus Christ, his love and his Gospel, and in the inviolate and invulnerable kingdom of God.