

Have you ever noticed that when you borrow someone else's stuff, you're always extra careful with it? Someone brings you a casserole, and when you return the dish, you carefully wrap it in towels, lest it break in transit. You don't dogear the borrowed book or break its spine.

One time I had to move some furniture when we'd sold our Milford house and were moving into a temporary apartment. I borrowed a truck that could have plowed any other car off the road, but I treated it like the most fragile vehicle out there. I wanted to honor the trust the owner placed in me, and so I treated the truck with much more care and attention than I normally would my own car.

The thing is, if we truly lived our lives as children of God and as followers of Jesus Christ, we would treat our own possessions with the same care and mindfulness as we treat the possessions of others. Because, when you get right down to it, our possessions aren't really ours at all. Everything we have belongs to God, who is the author of all creation.

But human society developed as a way to secure property rights. Indeed, when Thomas Jefferson penned the Declaration of Independence, he cribbed a line from famed political philosopher John Locke, only Jefferson changed the words. Jefferson named our unalienable rights as "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." A century earlier, Locke had written about "life, liberty, and property." The pursuit of property was, to him, the pursuit of happiness. And it still is for many, many people.

For those of us, myself included, who are easily swayed by the pursuit of property, the Apostle Paul has words for us today. He lists off his reasons for being confident in the flesh, he boasts of his vaunted position in society, he recounts we might describe as his *bona fides*. And then Paul says, "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

Reading those words sends me right to the mirror to ask myself the question: "Do I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Jesus?" And after working my mouth into position to answer the "yes" I know the answer *should* be, a moment of truthfulness steals the lie from my lips. "No" is the only truthful answer to that

question. Paul and I are miles apart, despite my desire for the kind of relationship he writes about.

And that's when a story I read some years ago comes to mind. As I recall, it was told by Bishop Furman Stough, the now-deceased former bishop of Alabama. It's based on Jesus' parable on how the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls: "on finding one pearl of great value," the parable goes, "he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

The story goes something like this:

*Once there was a man who found a pearl. This pearl was the most magnificent specimen. Indeed, only in the wildest dreams of clams did a pearl like this one exist. It was the size and weight of a golf ball, but no one would think to compare the two. The pearl was in a class by itself. It shone with a light all its own. The light might have hid some imperfections if the pearl had had any. But it didn't. The pearl, thought the man, was, quite simply, perfect. The trouble was, the pearl was in a glass case and very visible alarm wires crisscrossed the case and a wrinkled shopkeeper hovered over the case. The man opened his wallet, thumbed through the small bills in the billfold and pondered his several credit cards. He pulled out one especially shiny card and, pointing to the pearl, tried to hand the card to the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper raised her eyebrows and shook her head.*

*So the man went home. He wandered through his house, into the garage, and onto the deck. He gathered up everything not nailed down and sold it all – his car, his computer, his beloved grill. He went back to the shop. Not enough, the shopkeeper's look told him.*

*So the man sold his house. Not enough. He cashed out his stock options. Not enough. He even gave up his mint-condition Nolan Ryan rookie card. Not enough. The man stared plaintively at the shopkeeper. Then his eyes wandered down to the pearl. He knew somehow that obtaining this pearl was why he was alive, what he was made for. He didn't know how he knew, but, looking at that pearl, he just knew. He looked back up at the shopkeeper. "What about me?" he said, "What if I give myself?"*

*The shopkeeper smiled, brought a jangling set of keys to eye level, and began searching for a key. She found it, unlocked the case, and lifted the pearl off of its*

*bed of velvet. "Here you go," the shopkeeper said. "And by the way," she continued, "you were willing to give up everything for this pearl. Your house and grill and baseball card are still mine, but I want you to look after them for me. And remember, you are mine, too."*

With Bishop Stough's wonderful story echoing in my mind, I look back at myself in the mirror, and I realize I'm worried about all the wrong things. I'm worried about losing my stuff, when really what Jesus Christ is inviting me to do is to take better care of it, to be more mindful of how I use what I have. Just like when I borrow something from a friend. I am borrowing my own stuff from God, which radically shifts how I interact with what I own.

Yes, perhaps God is calling me to give up some of my stuff, but in the end, the loss I'm afraid of is an illusory one. It is the loss of control that never really existed in the first place. As the old saying goes, "You can't take it with you." By realigning ourselves away from the notion that what we have truly belongs to us, we have the opportunity to live more simply and more authentically. And we find a new default position: one of compassionate generosity. This new default overrides the hoarding instinct we all-too-often have because a state of generosity reflects the original intent of God's creation, when God made all that is, *all* that is, with indiscriminate glee.

When you get [home] [off our call] today, I invite you to walk through your house and imagine yourself handing all your stuff over to that shopkeeper in the story. And then revel in the new awareness and mindfulness and care you have when you realize that nothing in your house is truly yours. And pray to God for the will and the vision to use what God has given you for God's good purposes.