

Octave of Easter

Once when I was still in my 20s I was preparing my income taxes with the help of a consultant, and I asked him, “How long should I keep receipts?” He said, “Hold onto them for 6 or 7 years, and then throw the old ones away.” I flinched at the thought of throwing something away - even receipts. I asked, “Throw them away?” He said, “Yes, otherwise they just pile up.” Again, I was in my 20s. He continued very directly, “You might as well throw them out. After you die, somebody has to do it.”

He was right, yet over the years I still find it hard to throw out some things. I have possessions that mean something to me, but they mean nothing to anyone else. I treasure them, but when I die, someone else will decide they're worthless, and out they'll go.

If you're like me, you think very strongly about things you own. It is hard to throw some things out or to give some things away. It is also hard to share some things with others. I know that my possessions aren't really mine. Everything belongs to God. I should share what I have. If I have unused things that others need, in God's eyes those items “belong” to someone else. I need to share.

The first Christians in today's first reading were exemplary in this regard. Luke is explaining the great spiritual power that the apostles enjoyed after the resurrection: When they preached, people listened and got baptized by the thousands; when someone got sick, the apostles performed a miraculous cure. But they also powerfully accomplished a different kind of miracle: They got everybody to cooperate. Luke writes, “The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common.... There was no needy person among them.” Luke says that people who owned property and houses sold them and gave the money to the apostles so that they could distribute the proceeds to the needy. My tax consultant would probably say that the disciples did it wrong: They should have donated the property and houses directly to the apostles without selling them first - that way they'd get a better deduction. But obviously they were more interested in taking care of the needy.

Families are especially good at sharing things. Oh, there will be times when one of the kids puts up a fuss because kids like to think that some things belong only to them. Parents often have to remind children that we have to share. But ordinarily families do this very well - they share space, food, games, cars, clothes and love.

In a parish like ours, the same issue often arises. Groups and organizations like to think that a certain item belongs to them and not to others. Some of the greatest fights in the history of Catholic parishes are over who owns the coffee pot. It's nice that people feel connected to an organization and its purpose, but we are all part of something larger. We share our faith, our space, and our property. Sometimes it doesn't go well. We all become territorial in an active parish church. But one sign of a vibrant parish community is not just how many activities we have, but how well we all get along when we share the building we love.