

Quite Likely the Oddest Stewardship Sermon Preached This Autumn

The Last Sunday after Pentecost. (Stewardship Sunday at Trinity, Alliance) November 20, 2011. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance, in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

Long, long ago, in a diocese far, far away...

There was a rabbit named Woody.

Julie and I had only had him two days. He had been crabby, feisty, disagreeable—an ill tempered galoot the whole time. He had not been that way at the get-acquainted session a couple of weeks before, when Julie and I had first met him and his mate Bridget. We had been advised it could take rabbits a while to become acclimated to a new home and we should not fuss over them too much, but this was getting to be worrisome. We finally gave the little guy a thorough looking over. He was injured! His lower lip was torn and partly hanging loose. No wonder he was irritable all the time! He was in pain and—very serious for a rabbit—having trouble eating. (That's not a joke. Rabbits are like horses in this respect: if they get off their feed just a little bit, it can quickly develop into a life-threatening situation.)

Time for our first trip to the bunny vet, recommended by the rabbit rescue group that had hooked us up with Bridget and Woody. We were upset for more than the obvious reason. We did not have a lot of money at the time, and we had prayed seriously about what seemed to be God's urging to adopt a pair of rabbits to replace our beloved wild bunny Hazel, who had escaped during the blessing of animals a few months before. Now, many years later, we realize it had been time for Hazel to return to the wild and that God had something in mind for our household, something for which Hazel had been the first phase. At that time this was all in the process of coming together, but Julie and I believed (albeit with some apprehension) that what God wants his friends to do, God will provide the means for.

Well, we drove from Perryville, Maryland to some town in Delaware whose name I disremember where the rabbit specialist was to be found. We dropped Woody off and swallowed hard as the price for the surgery was quoted. The need for full anesthetic was worrisome enough in itself, as rabbits don't always do well with it. The price was even more worrisome. We did not have it. We bought lunch at McDonald's on the way home, hoping the treat to offset our anxiety was not too foolish an indulgence.

There was no mail delivery at my church or the rectory, so we stopped at the Perryville post office to get the mail. I was sorting it on my lap as we drove home. There was an

envelope from the Internal Revenue Service. Oh, no! Were we going to be audited? Did they want more money? It only lacked that to make our grim day dark indeed. Julie was driving. We both decided we had to know *now*. So I ripped the envelope open.

It was a tax refund check. Later than we'd expected (we were no longer looking for one) and not gigantic. It exactly—*exactly*, to the dollar—covered the cost of Woody's operation and the lunch we had just had at McDonalds.

God does not always stage a dramatic rescue, or send an obvious message, or do things in what we might consider the straightforward and sensible way. It's not just that God has a sense of humor; it's that he does not want to overwhelm our capacity for free choice. He wants friends who are childlike in their capacity for delight and wide-ranging thought, and he also wants us to grow and mature, to be solid and responsible. God set up this quirky little United States Postal Service miracle to teach his friends Julie and Kip a lesson in stewardship—and, yes, also to take care of his friends Bridget and Woody. This was a ministry (or at least an activity) God wanted us to have, and he would be with us during all its ups and downs.

The broader lesson, which I've already kind of mentioned, is this: If through prayer, study (especially of Holy Scripture) and Godly conversation we have discerned that God wants us to do something, he will support it. That support includes money, but also time, talent, and anything else needed. In the story I just told, God supported us with a sense of humor, to offset (indeed, to correct) our anxiety. Just because God insists on certain mental attitudes and certain kinds of behavior doesn't mean he's going to be stern about it. His correction, his urging, his leading—his guidance in any form—has usually moved me most with its gentleness and quirky charm.

I'm trying to help God get your attention about stewardship. What does God want you to be up to in the world? If it includes being part of a community of believing, practicing, mutually supporting and confident Christians, what has God placed in your lap, as you travel your road, to enable you to support our common life? What's in that envelope?