

For the people of St. Philip's
"let it go"

Luke 16: 1-13

September 23, 2007

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I was over at the diocesan offices earlier this week and stopped in to see our dear bishop, Porter Taylor. It occurred to me that he may need a blessing on his head as he prepared to travel to New Orleans . He was leaving the next day for a little meeting he's having with some other bishops. After I reached up to put the sign of the cross on his forehead (he's tall) and wished him Godspeed, we sat down for a quick visit. He and Chal, his assistant, were working on an 18 month calendar for the bishop's parish visits. A big job. Have you ever thought about that? Week in and week out, bishops all over the world are out on the road on Sunday mornings, visiting the faithful. Not too long ago, one of them, Jim Kelsey from Upper Michigan, died in an automobile accident on his way home from a Sunday parish visit. He was 58 years old. His daughter was to be married the following week. Our bishops have no home parish. They are itinerates, on the road more days than not. I bid you all to pray for our bishops. They are hashing it out in New Orleans, seated at tables in small groups that stay together for three years. They are in relationship with each other asking the hard questions. They are in relationship with us asking the hard questions. And we with them. Pray for the church.

While Bp Taylor and I sat down for an impromptu visit and I had a chance to pass on to him some of the good conversation that came out of our Adult Forum parish study of the Communion Matters study guide. Then as I was leaving Bishop Taylor asked, "Are you preaching this week?" he asked. "Yes, I am." says I. Then he said, "have you read these readings yet? These have got to be the most obscure set of Sunday readings of all time. I'm going to preach on the collect!"

As usual, Bishop Taylor is right. The first time I read through the Gospel text out loud at Bible study on Wednesday, I could hardly read it. "Am I reading this right?" I kept asking the group. I felt like I'd left out a sentence or two, or put the wrong emphasis on an key word. It took us all of the hour to get to the heart of the Gospel. So, if you'll indulge me, I'm going to dive in and pull this Gospel apart a bit. If you still don't get it when I'm done, give me good marks for trying, and then go home and reread the collect!

I'm going to begin with a summary of this week's Gospel. I didn't write this summary, a NT scholar wrote it: (Sarah Dylan Breuer).

There was a very, very rich man who had a huge farm, but he didn't like to work, so he got lots of other people to do all of the planting and growing and picking crops and such. He hardly let the farmers who did this work keep any of what they grew, though, so the farmers were hungry and angry. He hired a manager to make sure the farmers did their work, and to collect most of what they grew, and the farmers were very angry at the manager too. The harder they worked, the more they owed the landowner.

But the manager wasn't very good at his job, and he wasted a lot of the landowner's money. The owner called the manager in, and told him he was fired. And then the master went away to the city, where he liked to lie around and visit with his friends. So the manager did something very clever.

He called each of the farmers in, and he said, "how much did you owe my master?" One said, "a million dollars." Another said, "ten thousand dollars." Another said, "a thousand dollars." And the manager took out his eraser, and he erased a bunch of the zeroes on those bills. "Wow!" said the first farmer, "I only owe ten thousand dollars now." "I only owe a hundred now," said the second. "I only owe one dollar now," said the third. And the manager said, "See how generous the landowner is? Make sure to tell him how you feel when he comes back."

So a few weeks later, when the farmers heard that the landowner was coming back, they were prepared. They and all of their families were lined up all along the road to the farm, and they were waving balloons and signs and throwing confetti and cheering : "Hooray for the landowner! Hooray for the landowner! Hooray for the landowner!"

Well the landowner didn't quite know why they were all cheering, but he liked it a little too much to say anything right away. He didn't find out until he got back to his farmhouse, where he saw the manager. "What are YOU doing here?" he said, "I fired you!" But the manager told the landowner exactly what he'd done.

Did the landowner want to go back out and tell all of those cheering farmers that they really owed him millions of dollars? No way! The landowner liked all of the farmers cheering for him. So the landowner gave the manager his job, and forgave the debts of those farmers.

So, the question that comes out of this story could be this: If the landowner could forgive because he wanted everyone to think he was as cool as they said he was, and if the steward could forgive because he wanted to keep his job, don't we have much more reason to forgive. since we know how much God loves us and forgives us?

Forgiveness. Here we have a steward who forgives. He forgives things that he had no right to forgive. He forgives for all the wrong reasons, for personal gain and in hopes that folks will like him better when he's out on the street. The landowner forgives, again, probably for all the wrong reasons, he was sort of conned into it. The ones in debt forgive the manager and the landowner for all the years of enslavement to debt that they have endured.

Despite the false motivations that the shady characters in our story today possess, Jesus can still see the good that can come out of it. Jesus, who was famous for sitting and dining with shady characters. Despite the self-serving reasons that the manager and the landlord have for forgiving debts, the debts *are* forgiven and the poor are set free. That's the good news today for all of us. We're all human on this earth, last I checked anyway. We all have dubious reasons for giving and forgiving. We can't help it, it's just how we are. But that doesn't matter. Grace abounds. Good can be made out of even the most thinly veiled efforts to save ourselves from ruin.

As I write this sermon I'm hearing headlines about the wave of ballooning mortgage interest rates that are going to force hardworking people out of their homes. I hear of the poorest of nations that are so deeply in debt that poverty cripples their governments. How are we to forgive *those* debts? Do those debts touch us here in Brevard?

We are crafty stewards. All we possess is on loan: any wealth that we think is ours is ultimately from God's abundance. Do we use those resources we receive to increase our wealth, or do we use it to benefit others, especially the poor? In little ways, all of us have ways to erase those zeros for others. Zeros that represent high interest rates and large commissions that enslave others. We don't even have to have a good heart to do the erasing. God can find the good in it, all we have to do is forgive.

FORGIVE. Forgive it all. Forgive it now. Forgive it for any reason you want, or for no reason at all. It's really not about you. Thanks be to God. Just *let it go* and God will take care of the rest.