

Making Friends*

Luke 16:1-9

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The great comedian Groucho Marx, at his seventieth birthday party, was asked, “Groucho, how would you like to be thought of a hundred years from now?”

“As a man in remarkably good condition for someone of his age,” quipped Groucho.

What makes this a joke, of course, is the unavoidable truth that none of us will be around at age one-hundred seventy, much less in good condition. Every human life is a fleeting breath, a flickering candle, a brief moment bound by decline and death. Columbia Seminary has been graduating people since the early nineteenth century, class after class, and as the psalmist says, “They flourish like a flower of the field, [and then]...the wind passes over it and it is gone.” Which is not a reason for despair, but urgency. The fact that our lives don’t stretch on and on, arcing into infinity is a sign that we are not God. We are human; we don’t get unlimited do-overs. What it means to be human is a matter of how we use the shortness and urgency of time, a matter of making these decisions and not those, these choices and not others.

Indeed, this is precisely at the heart of Jesus’ strange parable of the dishonest manager in the sixteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. It is the story of a man running out of time, making urgent decisions under the pressure of a world coming apart. Now, you may well have wondered why I selected a passage like the “dishonest manager” for your baccalaureate service. This is supposed to be a celebration of academic achievement, an inspiring prelude to a life of ministry, an upbeat occasion. Usually a baccalaureate text is something uplifting, like 2 Corinthians 4: “We have this treasure in earthen vessels...”; or 1 Corinthians 12: “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit...”; or 1 Corinthians 13: “If I speak in the tongues of humans and angels, but have not love...”

But no, for your baccalaureate the preacher has chosen a story about a man who loses his job because of mismanagement and dishonesty and then figures out a slick way to save his neck by cutting quick deals with his boss’s clients. It sounds more like the Enron scandal than effective ministry, more like “Let’s Make a Deal” than “Called as Partners in Christ’s Service,” more like the insider trading of Martha Stewart than the lilting prayer of St. Francis. Why bring such a story into a festive occasion? There were other options. Right there in the very chapter before, in Luke 15, there are three lovely and gentle parables that would have worked quite well tonight—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost boy—the prodigal son—all three of them full of very inspiring thoughts about ministry. Why can’t we go there?

But tempted as we may be to retreat to the sunny shores of Luke 15, the fact is, in Luke 15 Jesus is talking to his *opponents*, the grumbling scribes and Pharisees. But in Luke 16, Jesus is talking to his *disciples*. In Luke 15, Jesus is *defending* his ministry,

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but in Luke 16, he's *defining* it.

The parable of the "Unjust Manager" is an all-too-familiar story of corporate crime. The CEO of a corporation discovers that a trusted manager has been negligent, dishonest, and cooking the books. He calls him on the carpet. "What is this I hear about you squandering and pilfering our resources. Get out of here! You're fired! Clean out your desk; turn in your Blackberry."

The man now is in a full-scale crisis. "What am I going to do?" he cries. "I've lost my job and I have no other useful skills. I am too weak for manual labor, too proud to be a beggar." He thinks, he frets, he worries, he ponders, he schemes, and then—a light bulb turns on, a brilliant idea comes to him! He runs as fast as he can to each and every one of the company's clients and reduces their accounts payable. "How much do you owe us? You've been a good customer; cut it in half. How much do *you* owe? Discount it thirty percent as a personal consideration from me." In other words, he ingratiates himself to every customer, scratching each and every back so that, when he is tossed out, they will scratch his. He feathers his nest so that when his pink slip is in force, they will take care of him, give him something to do and a place to live. That's the story about ministry that Jesus told his disciples. What did Jesus want them to get out of *that*?

I think what Jesus wanted them—and us—to get out of this story can be found in the two insights Jesus names at the end of the parable: First there is a very *challenging word* in this parable. Jesus says, "I wish the children of light, I wish the people of God, I wish the ministers of the church were as shrewd for the gospel as the wheeler-dealers out there in the world are shrewd for themselves." In other words, there are people out there in the culture who get up every morning scheming for a buck, focusing every ounce of energy on feathering their nests, working in overdrive to save themselves and to scramble to the top of the heap. "I wish God's people," Jesus says, "would be just as focused and energetic for the beloved community."

I think this is what the Presbyterian Church is getting at in one of the questions asked in the ordination service. Many of the constitutional ordination questions, frankly, are about adapting to the church's system of order and belief. They ask if the person being ordained will be faithful and obedient and loyal to the church's polity and authority. But then there is this one question: "Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?"

I take this question to mean, roughly translated, "Look, Jack Welch got up every morning of his career focusing all of his energy, imagination, intelligence, and passion for the bottom line at General Electric; Donald Rumsfeld gets up every morning focusing all of his energy, imagination, intelligence, and passion on making war. How dare the people of God do any less for the things of God? Will you, as a minister of the gospel, get up every morning focusing all of your energy, imagination, intelligence, and passion on the ways of peace, the paths of justice, the building up of the Body of Christ, and the hope of the gospel?"

A few years back I was preaching one Sunday morning in a church where, as a regular feature of the Sunday service, a member of the congregation would speak for a few minutes about the experience of God in his or her life, a kind of personal testimony. The Sunday I was there, the person doing this was a young woman who was a dancer in a professional ballet company. It was obvious that she was more comfortable as a dancer than as a speaker; she trembled a bit as she spoke, but she spoke nonetheless. She told the congregation that she had grown up and been baptized in this

church. Then she looked around until she spotted the baptismal font. Pointing her finger in the direction of the font, she said, “In fact, I was baptized right over *there*. I don’t remember it; I was just a baby, but my father used to love to tell me about the day I was baptized. He would tell me with delight about the baptismal dress I wore, about all the relatives who came to the service, about the hymns sung that day, about what the minister said in the sermon, and he would always end this story by exclaiming, ‘Oh honey, the Holy Spirit was in the church that day!’”

“But as a child restless in worship,” she continued, “I would wonder, ‘Where is the Holy Spirit in this church?’” Now she moved her finger away from the font began to point to various places in the sanctuary. “Is the Holy Spirit in the rafters? In the organ pipes? In the stained glass windows?”

Then her voice softened. “As many of you know, I lost both of my parents in the same week last winter. In the midst of that terrible week, I was driving home from the hospital, having visited my parents, knowing that I might never see them alive again, and I stopped by the church, just to think and to pray. Sarah Graham was in the church kitchen, getting ready for a family night supper, and she saw me sitting all by myself in one of the back pews. She knew what was happening in my life, knew about my parents, and she took off her apron and came and sat beside me, holding my hand and praying with me. It was *then* that I knew where the Holy Spirit was in this church.”

I have thought a great deal about that word of testimony since I heard it, thought a great deal about Sarah Graham and what she did. Now Sarah Graham could have kept her apron on and kept on cooking, and she would still no doubt have been a churchwoman of faithfulness and obedience. But she had the discernment to sense the urgency of the moment, to know that the meal being prepared in the kitchen paled in importance before the needs of a grieving young woman sobbing in the sanctuary. When Sarah Graham took off her apron, she showed herself not just to be a Christian but a *shrewd* Christian, a Christian of “energy, imagination intelligence and love.”

Jesus said, “I wish the children of light were as shrewd as the children of this age.” But to that challenging word, Jesus adds another word...a *puzzling and perhaps disturbing word*. What Jesus tells his disciples, his ministers, is to “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” What does *that* mean? Well, it is clearly a word about money, but what in the world is Jesus saying about money? “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth....” It sounds as though Jesus wants his followers to use dishonest wealth—say laundered drug money or casino gambling proceeds or the profits gleaned by cheating migrant workers out of a living wage—for godly causes. Right? No, in fact the phrase “dishonest wealth” is not a very good translation of the Greek. A better translation would be “the money of this unrighteous age.” In other words, it is not the money that is corrupt; it’s the culture that is corrupt, and Jesus is not talking about dishonest money versus good money. He is talking about *all* money, every last penny of the currency of our culture. Jesus wants us to take all of the money we have and “make friends for ourselves with it.”

Here, then, is the heart of the matter. The world will eagerly tell you how to use your money shrewdly. If you have money, wise financial heads will advise you to invest it, leverage it, put it to work in the marketplace. It takes money to make money, so take a little pile of dough and make it rise. And that is very shrewd advice, indeed, unless...unless...unless this world, with all of its glittering empires, is passing away.

What if the truth, hidden even from the savvy investors of Wall Street, is that this world and all of its glory is dying right before our very eyes, and a new world, God's very own world, is being born? Then a new wisdom would be summoned. The shrewd among us would invest what we have not in this world but in the world to come.

And that is precisely what Jesus tells us to do. "I wish the children of light were as shrewd at investments in the coming world as the wheeler-dealers are at investing in this world. Make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of this dying age, so that when this present age passes away, you will have invested in that which truly endures." All the money we have—the money in our wallets and purses, in our checking accounts, that money that fuels the stock market—all money—is like Confederate money in 1863; it is still negotiable, but it is the currency of a doomed sovereignty. If we continue to invest in the doomed sovereignty, woe are we. But money still has a little shelf life, still has a little time left; so invest it, but this time invest it in God's future, the world that, even now, is emerging by the grace and power of God.

When we think about this parable in relationship to the church and its ministry, it becomes clear that this is about more than simply cash. This is not just about money; it is about everything. It's not just about dollars and cents; it's about how the church relates to the present age, to the values of our culture, and about how ministers should lead the church to steward all of its resources. We know, don't we, what the church in North America is like. Sadly, the church has become less like a community of disciples and more like a collection of small corporations. The church has too often lost sight of the world to come and become captive to the present age. Churches that preach the cross are losing members like mad, while the churches that preach the self-serving gospel of prosperity and "Your Best Life Now!" are packed.

But even those of us who strive to preach the cross must not be smug. It's easy to point the finger at the megachurch or at the prosperity preacher, but across the board, in the churches of every sort, we are quick to serve ourselves and not others. We want to think of ourselves as "a friendly church," but we do not take seriously the call and risk to show hospitality to strangers. We are more worried about statistics than we are about service, more anxious about keeping the youth from drifting away than allowing the church to be a house of prayer for all people.

That is why Jesus, the Lord of the church, like the master in this parable, confronts the church and its ministers with a demanding but finally redemptive charge: "What is this I hear about you?" Jesus says. "You have squandered the treasure of the gospel. You can no longer carry on business as usual. You can no longer preach greed and call it the gospel. You can no longer run a private club and call it the church. I am removing you from your position."

In short, the grace of God precipitates a crisis in the unfaithful church, and we can no longer make our way in the world as we once blithely did. What will we do? What will we do now that the structures of church and the structures of our authority are shaken? And Jesus said, "Make friends for yourselves with all the resources you have. When the thin pudding of this culture evaporates, that is what will endure." And who are these friends that we are supposed to make for ourselves? The Lukan Jesus has already made that plain. "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed..." (14:13-14). And notice that this is not about charity; this is about making *friends*. In this world, the poor and the powerless may be the ones who receive mercy and hospitality, but in the light of the world to

come, we see that they are also those who dispense it, the ones with power who issue the word of welcome. "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

I once had a student in a preaching course who was the son of an inner city pastor. One Christmas vacation, my student was at home with his family and spent an afternoon talking to his father about ministry. My student talked about what he was learning in seminary, and his father talked about the difficulties of ministry in the inner city and the struggle for justice in and through the church.

As the conversation continued late into the day, father and son decided to get some fresh air by taking a walk around the neighborhood. As they walked, they continued to talk together, and near the end of their walk, the father said, "It's almost dinner time. Let's call the pizza shop and order a pizza to be delivered to the house. By the time we get home, it will be there." So they walked over toward the nearest pay phone, only to encounter a homeless man blocking their way.

"Spare change?" the man asked.

The father reached deeply into his pockets and held out two heaping handfuls of coins. "Here, take what you need," he said to the homeless man.

"Well, then, I'll take it all," said the surprised man, sweeping the coins into his own hands and turning to walk away.

Before he had gotten far, though, my student's father realized that he no longer had any change to make the phone call. "Excuse me," he called after the homeless man. "I was going to make a phone call at a pay phone, but I have given you all my change. Could I have a quarter?"

The homeless man turned around and walked back toward father and son, extending his hands. "Here," he said. "Take what you need."

A glimpse of the kingdom, if you will squint to see it. This is not the old world of winners and losers; that world is passing away. This is the emerging new world. These are not recipients of charity, but friends, each saying to the other, "Here, take what you need."

I saw another glimpse of this emerging world a few Sundays ago at church. Because our church is located in the heart of downtown, there are many homeless people who live on the streets around the church. Some of these neighbors have chosen to worship with us and have become a part of the congregation. On this Sunday, I saw one of the street people, a man dressed in an old and worn suit, seated just a few spaces away on the same pew. When we passed the "Friendship Pad," he signed his name, and in the space for the address, he wrote "homeless."

During the announcements, one of our pastors noted that we would be taking up a special offering that morning for the "One Great Hour of Sharing" fund. She told us that this offering would go to victims of the hurricanes on the Gulf Coast and of the tsunami in Asia. She urged us to give generously and to place our offerings in the "special envelope" we could find tucked into the day's worship service bulletin.

Like many others around me, I found the envelope in the bulletin—there were blank spaces on the front for one's name and for the amount enclosed—and I reached for my wallet, taking out some money to put in the envelope. As I did so, I winced when I suddenly became aware of what I was doing and the effect this could have on our homeless friends who were among us. Most of them had no wallets or purses, no available cash to stuff into the envelopes. This offering, I now realized, was only for

those who had something to give, and this seemingly generous act actually drew a sharp dividing line between the haves and the have-nots.

To my surprise, though, I saw the homeless man find the offering envelope in his bulletin. Using the pencil in Friendship Pad, he wrote something in the blank spaces on the front. When the offering plate passed by me, his envelope was on the top, and there he had written two things: his name and the words "I love you so very much."

Making friendships, kingdom friendships. This is what really counts. Our lives, our ministries, will be brief. "They flourish like a flower of the field...the wind passes over it and it is gone." Which is not a reason for despair but urgency, a sign that we are human and not God. So, as you leave this place to become ministers of the gospel, help the church to pry loose the death grip of this vain culture, which is passing away, to help it draw back from its desperate investing in a world that will not last. Help the church to use all that it has and all that it is to make friends of those the world wishes friendless, to make friends for Christ. In the end, only that will endure.