

## *It's the Economy, Stupid\**

### *Luke 16:1-9*

Samuel Wells

Duke University, Durham, North Carolina

We've just listened together to a story, a story that's often called the parable of the shrewd manager. What I'd like to do with you today is to read that story three times – once as a story about a manager, a second time as a story about economics, and a third time as a story about you on your last day at Duke.

So let's begin with the simple story of the manager. It comes in four scenes. In scene one, we have a very wealthy man and a manager who is very wealthy too, because he has the use of everything the rich man has. Quickly we move to scene two. In scene two the rich man hears that the manager is squandering the property and straightaway fires him. We may be alarmed that this is a world in which the manager can simply be sacked on the basis of unsubstantiated allegations. But there is a moment of grace: before he clears out his office, gets a sympathetic pat on the back from his staff and takes home the family photos, the manager gets the chance to visit all the rich man's clients to settle up their accounts. And so to scene three, in which the manager has a bright idea. Rather than feeling sorry for himself or hiring an attorney, he sets about writing off the debts of the rich man's major creditors. It's too late to make money, but it's not too late to build social capital. He starts making friends, people who will be pleased to see him even when he's out of a job. In scene four, the rich man comes face to face with the manager. And the rich man says, "Good for you, you were in a mighty big hole and you got out of it simply by being generous. You realized that generosity is the best investment. You're better at this than I am."

It's a simple story, but a fascinating one. It's fascinating partly because it's a great escape story. We never tire of seeing whether Brer Rabbit or Huckleberry Finn or Indiana Jones can get out of a mighty big hole. We never tire of recalling what Sean Dockery pulled off in the dying seconds against Virginia Tech. But it's fascinating also because it contains an electric shock at the end. What might it mean to live like that? What might it mean to hear a rich man say to you, "I can see you've discovered the secret of real wealth—generosity"? Could it really be that generosity is the best investment? Has Wachovia heard about this? Has Alan Greenspan?

Let's read the story a second time, not so much as a simple story about a manager, but with these larger questions in mind. Let's read it as a story about economics. So, in scene one, we have a stark picture of economic realities. One man has a huge amount of money. The story begins with him because he has all the power. Everyone else matters according to how they relate to him. He has a manager. In this kind of economy, you want to be a manager. You get to spend someone else's money as if it were your own. But scene two tells us all we need to know about the downside of this economy. It's dominated by sudden mood changes, by gossip and anxiety. The word goes round

\* The Reverend Canon Dr. Wells, Dean of the Duke University Chapel, preached this sermon at the university's Baccalaureate service on May 14, 2006.

that the manager is doing a poor job, and snap—just like that—he’s fired. There’s no settlement package, no face-saving retirement party—he’s on the street. There’s no job security, no respect, no trust. Sure, there’s a lot of money out there, but everyone is just a puppet on the rich man’s string. Now, look what happens in scene three. The manager says to himself, “I wonder whether this is the only kind of economy going. I wonder whether in this desperate moment it might be time to try a novel approach.”

What might this novel approach involve? Well let’s start by looking at the root of the word economics. Economics is *oikonomia*—that’s to say, it’s Greek for household management. Economics means putting your house in order. But what if you’ve lost your home, lost your job, lost your shirt in a cutthroat economy? Look closely at what the manager says to himself: “I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may *welcome me into their homes*.” Isn’t that an interesting phrase? It’s obviously important because it’s repeated at the end of the story. *Welcome me into their homes*. In other words, when my economics is up the creek, it may be time to invest in somebody else’s. When my household is bankrupt, it may be time to think about other people’s households. It’s time to change economies.

The Jewish and Christian Scriptures have words to name the two economies portrayed in this story. The economy of the rich man is called mammon. It’s fine as far as it goes, but the problem is it doesn’t go very far. It only includes certain people, only buys certain things, only lasts a limited length of time. Mammon is fundamentally the economy of scarcity. It is the world in which there is not enough to go round. Mammon means I must use all my energy making sure that of the limited amount of cake, at least I get enough on my plate. There’s also a name for the other economy, the economy of the manager after he’s been fired. The biblical word for that economy is manna. Manna is the food God gave to the Hebrews in the wilderness: always more than they needed. It only dried up when they tried to take two days’ supply at once. Manna is for everybody, gives what money can’t buy, and never expires. Manna is the economy of abundance. It is the currency of the kingdom of God. The secret of happiness is learning to love the things God gives us in plenty. The name for those things is Manna.

What happens in scene three of this story is that the manager gives up trying to squeeze people for a living and starts making friends instead. He realizes the friends are more important than the money—or even the job. He moves from mammon to manna, from an economy of scarcity and perpetual anxiety to an economy of abundance and limitless grace.

And what happens in scene four? The rich man realizes that the manager’s economy is bigger than his. The rich man, sharp as he is with the shekels, can spot a winning formula. He *doesn’t* say, patronizingly, “You’re a lousy manager but at heart you’re a decent guy.” He *does* say, “I can see my economy is smaller than yours. You’re the one who’s living in the great economy. I need to learn from you.”

Just take that in for a moment. This isn’t a familiar bleeding-heart liberal versus hard-nosed conservative contest. This is two economies face to face. The manager’s economy of friendship is just plain bigger than the rich man’s economy of debt. The manager has left the rich man’s economy, and the investments he’s made have made him rich in a way the rich man can only begin to imagine.

And now to read the story a third time, as *your* story, your story on your last weekend at Duke before you leave to become shrewd managers. Let’s go back to scene one. You are the manager. You have been living at Duke, like the manager, on other

people's money – money from your parents, or financial aid, or the bank. And here we are suddenly in scene two, on the day of reckoning. You're about to be cast out of this cozy world of ideas and study and sports and parties, out of the gothic wonderland, and you're about to face the cold, harsh reality of scene three. And in scene three you face a fundamental choice, a choice that is what this story is all about. And if you haven't quite grasped so far what it is, I'll put it quite simply: it's the economy, stupid. The choice is, which economy are you going to live in?

Are you going to live in the small economy, the economy that is fine as far as it goes, but turns out not to go very far—the economy that only includes certain people, only buys certain things, only lasts a limited length of time—the economy of anxiety and scarcity? Or are you going to live in the great economy, the economy where the only use of wealth is to make friends and set people free, the economy in which you are never homeless and you cannot be destitute because you have spent your time and money making friends who will always welcome you into their homes—the economy of abundance, where generosity is the best investment? Which is it to be? If you live in the small economy you will spend your life fearing for your job, your livelihood, your reputation, your health, your family, your life itself. If you live in the great economy you won't fear anything. You'll have the things that money can't buy, and you'll know the things that hardship and even death can't take away from you. You'll have learned to love the things God gives us in plenty. You'll be living truly abundant life.

And if you make that choice, then when it comes to scene four, everyone will want to know you, to learn from you, to imitate you. We could call scene four Judgment Day, but at Duke we have other names for it. We call it Alumni Weekend. We call it a bunch of friends meeting up for a drink in New York—or even a funeral. We call it slyly Googling the names of your old mates to see what comes up. One way or another we see the people who were here at Duke with us years before, and between the lines we discover which economy they've been living in all these years. And when the word begins to go round that you've been living all this time in the great economy, there's a bit of a stir, and the undergraduates begin to hear about it, and even the faculty raise an eyebrow: and together they say, "We hear you've been living in a world where everything you had was turned into releasing people from debt, all your energies have gone on liberating people from disease, and all your passion has gone on setting people free from despair. We can see you don't have much money but you don't seem to need it because you're surrounded by friends. We'd like to be like you."