



DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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“The Future and What to Do About It”
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Luke 16:1-13

Today we inaugurate the Joseph Harrison Jackson Preacher Fund, established by Professor Kenny Williams in memory of her distinguished father. Dr. Jackson led one of this country's great churches. He preached for a lifetime. I expect he preached on today's gospel. I wonder what he said about it. For my money, this has to be the toughest of tough biblical texts.

An employee goes to the boss and snitches. “Boss, your manager has been cheating you.” The boss calls the dishonest manager on the carpet, tells him to clean out his desk that very day. He also demands a complete accounting. Show me the books.

The manager thinks to himself, “I am unaccustomed to hard work. Unemployment compensation is peanuts. What am I to do?”

The dishonest manager decides to get together some of his boss's clients. Then the swindle begins. At an expensive restaurant, he meets with these clients, one last fling on the expense account.

He says, during that fine lunch, “Now tell me, what do you owe the company?” Each owes vast sums. “Look, why don't you just write off what you owe? And we'll call it even.”

This sleaze is writing off vast debts at his boss's expense!

It is a strange story. Why would Jesus lay this sort of story on good Chapel-going folk like us? You're saying, “Perhaps this manager was the victim of some sort of office intrigue. Maybe some of his co-workers had it in for him, set him up.”

Such things happen in business.

Or perhaps you are saying, “This guy is really a crook. He has not only swindled his boss out of a considerable amount of money, but he continues to swindle, even after he has been caught. He thinks about nothing but himself and his future. This guy needs the ethics course at Fuqua.”

What are we to make of this?

Well for one thing, Jesus has a sense of humor. I imagine Jesus' audience got a good laugh. Remember how you laughed when you saw the movie, *The Sting*? Remember how great it was when Paul Newman and Robert Redford outwitted the gangsters, swindling them out of their money? If a little guy puts one over on his rich boss, what do we care? It's funny. It's fun to share Jesus' delight. After all, the big guy is a money-grabbing capitalist pig, so maybe he deserves it!

Remember the movie, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*?” One crook tried to outwit another, and finally both got outwitted by a savvy woman. That's funny. It is fun to see the little guy put one over on Mr. Big. It is fun to come to church, to relax, to suspend moral judgment, to lay aside our ethical posturing, and simply sit back and enjoy the little guy getting the best of the man on top.

It's fun to watch the little manager, who is in a desperate situation, take matters in hand and by some hook and a great deal of crook, put one over on his boss. Not too moral, but fun, and around here, there are far too many serious, moral people and far too little fun.

But then we get to the end of the parable and it is not very funny. Jesus *commends* the dishonest manager. We expect Jesus to make some concluding moral point, at the end to say, "Well, enough of this fun, let's get back to church talk. What the manager did was obviously immoral and illegal."

We don't expect Jesus to praise immorality. And yet, that is just what he does. Jesus has the swindled boss praise the swindler for his shrewdness.

The story is realistic, and funny. But what do we do with Jesus' praise of an embezzler?

This may be the toughest parable Jesus ever told. Augustine said, "I can't believe that this story came from the lips of our Lord." Luke himself appears to have had trouble with this story, because Luke seems to have added a few clarifying verses at the end. Luke has Jesus say that we cannot love God and money. True, but does it really relate to this parable?

Luke also warns us to be careful of the one who is not faithful in small things, because that person will not be faithful in big things. That also is true, but doesn't really address the scandal here?

What the manager did was dishonest and what Jesus did was to praise him for his dishonesty! And what do you make of that?

Along come the learned scholars and, through many contortions, they attempt to make this parable make sense, in the usual ways we make sense. They explain that perhaps the parable is hyperbole, some gross overstatement which Jesus uses to get our attention. I'm a preacher. I have been known to overstate things, but never have I pandered for your attention by urging you to steal.

Perhaps the story is simpler than that. Jesus tells the story about a manager, albeit a dishonest one, who when faced with terrible catastrophe, recognizes the catastrophe and immediately moves to do something about it.

Look at us in similar circumstances. When adversity comes, we tend to freeze up, or we pull the covers over our head and simply give up. We do this not only in our personal lives, but also in our social lives as well. We look at this country's terribly soaring crime rate and we say to ourselves, "I am just one person, what can one person like me do to change things?"

Your boss comes in and tells you that you are the latest victim of "downsizing" and you decide that your productive life is over.

Circle the wagons, move into a defensive posture, hunker down. Why fight a hopeless cause?

This parable says this is a miserly way to live. If even dishonest, unscrupulous business people know how to move from the defensive to the offensive so quickly, how much more so ought we? Be astute. Be smart. Savvy.

Why? Because the future belongs to those who are shrewd? Because life goes better for those who move decisively? Because it takes more than defense to win a football game?

Speaking here last year, evangelical activist, Jim Wallis, noted how inner-city gangs ruthlessly defend their "turf," how drug lords mark off a neighborhood and make it theirs.

"I want churches to learn from these guys," he said. "I want some inner-city churches who will say, 'This is our turf and we control this neighborhood of the six blocks around our church and we are going to do what's necessary to make sure you don't trample our turf.'"

He told a story of one inner-city church which posted some of their little old ladies on each corner in foldout lawn chairs, armed with video cameras and how overnight they changed an entire Detroit neighborhood. They had no idea of how to work the cameras, but the drugdealers didn't know it.

Those old ladies were not simply savvy to the ways of the world, beating the world at its own game, rather than had a conviction about the real nature of the world, the true course of the future and they acted accordingly.

The Bible says that the future is God's. Therefore we are to live as those constantly open to God's advent among us, watchful, ready to move. We are not to be anxious about our lives, timid over tomorrow, paralyzed by anxiety. Worrying about the future gets us nowhere. Rather, we must trust that the future is God's.

We get confused into thinking that God's future is just like our future. The future is in our hands. Therefore, when the boss calls us in and tells us that the game is over, knowing no future other than the one we are able to construct, we hang our head and go quietly to the unemployment line. About the best to be expected of us is Stoic resignation. We sigh, resign ourselves to our fate, contort the voice into a whine. What can anybody do?

Jesus lures toward an unexpected future, unexpected because it is not our future; it is God's. He tells an outrageous story of a man who makes some outrageous moves because he is convinced that his story is not over, that the future is open, surprising, not yet fixed or final.

The unscrupulous manager took what had been dealt his way, a rather precarious and bleak prospect, and wheeled and dealed, worked with it with faith that even this could lead to good, and his story continued.

We see in this parable some good advice for the future. But it is not the advice one might get from Ann Landers. In most newspaper advice columns and in most secular therapy, people in distress and turmoil are encouraged to dig down, to draw upon their natural talent and resources.

In this parable it's different. We are urged to stride into the future with confidence, not confidence in ourselves or our abilities, but confidence in the power and grace of God. The one who told the story is Jesus, the one who not only told good stories, but boldly embodied them. Even when he moved toward a cross, he did not do so as one resigned to a bleak fate, but as one confident that the future belongs to God. He bet his life on that and, in Easter, his risk was vindicated.

Knowing that, we are able to move into the future with confidence, with shrewd recourses not of our own devising. This is good news.

In Florida, a pastor told me about her church. Her church had once been a great congregation in the heart of the city. But the city changed, the neighborhood declined, and now the congregation was made up mostly of those who commuted in on Sundays from the suburbs. Like many such congregations, they had a problem with vagrants, homeless men around the church. They put locks on the doors. At night, they broke the locks. A meeting was held to discuss further security measures, bigger locks, better doors. What could be done to keep these vagrants from damaging their precious building?

"I'm bothered," said one woman on the board, "by the church locking out, and shutting doors, particularly to those in need."

"Well what do you want us to do?" asked one of the members of the board, "just throw open the doors and tell 'em, 'come on in, help yourself'?"

"Why not?" piped up a voice at the back of the room.

What? "Why not?" it was one of the oldest members of the congregation. "We've been having a tough time attracting folk to this church. Here are people who are so eager to get into the church they break the doors down. Let's let em in."

"I move the question!" said someone else. They took a vote. That night, they left the doors unlocked, wide open. Twenty homeless men showed up. There were problems, she said, but gradually the church did what was necessary to accommodate them. "Those men have given new life to our church," she said. "They helped us be a real church."

What they did may seem to you a risk, foolhardy. I wonder they were simply being faithful, risk born of confidence, not in themselves or even in homeless men. Confidence in the One in whom we live and move and have our being.