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National Presbyterian Church

Following Jesus: "Buying Heaven?"

Luke 16:1-31

David A. Renwick

In our sermons through the winter we're looking at the ministry of Jesus through the lens of one of the four accounts we have of him in the Bible: the account of St. Luke. And we come this morning to two parables – two stories – that Jesus shares in Luke 16. But in order to understand these stories and indeed, to understand other stories and parables of Jesus as well, we need to understand something else from the outset . . . that . . .

Jesus rarely if ever told a story in order for people to say “*nice story, tell me another.*” Nor was it always his intention to tell a story simply to clarify a spiritual truth. Parables aren't always “simple illustrations” from the natural world to illuminate a spiritual truth. To be sure, *sometimes* that was the reason (to clarify). But, what we see more often than not, is that Jesus' intention was to grab people's attention by saying something slightly confusing, or provocative, or outrageous or extreme; making a twist in the story that breaks through the outward veneer of his hearers and makes them think.

Quinn pointed this out last week as he spoke about the parable of the two sons and a father, which we normally call the “*Parable of the Prodigal Son.*”

Among other things, Quinn shared the part of the story where the father ran towards his prodigal son and prepared a huge feast for him when this son returned home after wasting all his inheritance.

Those hearing the story, especially the Bible experts, would have heard clear echoes of a well-known Biblical story in the action of the father: *the story of Jacob and Esau, and father, Isaac* (see Genesis 27-33). In this story, Jacob, the younger son, had abused both his father Isaac and his older brother, Esau, to obtain his older brother's inheritance. In particular: Jesus' listeners would have seen that in his story the love of the Father in running to his younger son and kissing him (see Luke 15:20) was exactly like the love and forgiveness of the elder brother, Esau, running to forgive his younger brother, and kissing him (Gen. 33:4) – after all the betrayal and deceit. Nice story? Happy Ending? Well yes and no! You see, Esau's descendants were the Edomites, the traditional and hated enemies of the people of Israel (see for example, 2 Kings 8:22; Psalm 137:7-8; Psalm 83:6; but also see Deuteronomy 23:7!).

And so Jesus' choice to make the father's love to ***be like Esau's*** was provocative to say the least! Like making Benedict Arnold *be the hero of the story* or your worst political enemy *be like God*. In other words, this is a huge curve ball, a twist, twist, an attention grabber, thrown into the story!

And there are numerous examples of this in Jesus' teaching all through the Gospels.

(We see this, for example, in the Beatitudes, in Jesus' teaching on marriage, adultery, wealth. Or in other parables – the parable of the talents in Mathew 25, where a man is thrown into hell for burying his single talent; or of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10: no one in their right

mind would travel on the Jerusalem to Jericho road alone; and then, the hero is another enemy of Israel: a Samaritan, whose care is limitless!).

And these twists and turns and surprising reversals are present, too, in Jesus' teaching today, in our passage in Luke 16.

So in the first story (Luke 16:1-9), there's a rich man with a manager. And the manager is accused of squandering his master's property. The premise is that he's guilty: he doesn't defend himself. He knows that he can do nothing about the past. He's going to lose his job; his future has become uncertain; but he has every intention of securing whatever future he can.

So he contacts his master's creditors and makes a business deal with them (presumably before his firing becomes public); a deal that may be rather shady! But, for all that, a deal that will ensure that they will be forever indebted to him, and will remain his friends *in the future* when he's booted out of work, and on his own. And so he summons them one by one (we read in vv.6-7)

- and **asks the first**, 'How much do you owe my master?'
He answered, 'A *hundred* jugs of olive oil.'
He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, *and make it fifty*.'
- **Then he asked another**, 'And how much do you owe?'
He replied, 'A *hundred* containers of wheat.'
He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.'

And, no doubt, they are immensely grateful. For one it's a 50% savings; and for the other, a 20% savings. Not bad . . . **they owe him!**

And when the master hears too late about this, it's "*fait accompli*." He ought to be mad (the scoundrel has done it again; looking after his own interests and not his master's). But instead of being MAD, the master commends him! Which should make US (*and Jesus' audience*) scream:

"Commend him for what? That's outrageous! Why would he do that?"

Which, of course, is what Jesus wants us to ask, and not just rationally (as if we were seeking mere information), but emotionally (as if our being had somehow become unsettled)!

And then, having asked the question, Jesus, I believe, would want us to find the answer not by focusing on the honesty or dishonesty of the manager any more (*those issues are in the story primarily to shock us and wake us up!*), but by seeing that even this dishonest person is thinking ahead and securing his very uncertain future in any way he could, and in particular – with money – so that, at the least, he would have friends and a place to stay when things went from bad to worse, as they were about to do.

And ***it's this emphasis*** on

- thinking long-term (*lifting himself out of the consuming present*)
- using the future to inform the present
- and the role of money in all of that

that comes into play in the next story too . . .

So in Luke 16:19 (the second story) there's another rich man. And this time, it's the rich one who ends up as "the bad guy."

In fact, every day this rich man (whose name we do not know) has the chance to help a man in need (named Lazarus: we usually know the names of the rich and famous, but rarely the faceless poor!). But the rich man squanders the opportunity. In fact, the days go by with no interaction until they both die.

And in the story, Jesus takes us into the realm of the dead where we come face to face with “shock #1”

It's poor man Lazarus who is in heaven. And it's the rich man who's in hell!

Which would have been really surprising for those who saw wealth and a comfortable life (see Luke 16:14) as a sure sign of being blessed by God.

And the rich man calls out to his forefather, Abraham, for the poor man Lazarus to come and help him in his torment. As if Lazarus was still a servant at his beck and call; and as if Abraham was undoubtedly on his side (after all, he was a normal, faithful kind of guy)!

But then we get “shock #2.”

Abraham basically says NO! *No deal. Too late. You're there, and he's here. And he's not going there!*

And it's only then that the rich man begins to wake up to reality – that his choices on earth really mattered, and other people in his life matter too – his family! They need to know this reality before it's too late.

Which leads us to shock #3:

Abraham says, “No point in sending Lazarus to them! They have all the information they need to get life right. They have the Bible (Moses and the Prophets). And even if they see a miracle (someone returning from the dead) they won't change. You cannot fix them. The ball's in their court.

And that's it. Story over . . . but now with the combined messages of the two stories becoming much more clear and poignant.

That is, in both Story#1 and Story #2 life is a two-part play . . .

- There's a “now” and a “later”
- There's my present job – and there's what happens next
- In fact, there's an earth and a heaven/hell
- A “here” and a “here-after”

And the repeated message is that if you don't STOP, and step outside of the present, and take the future/hereafter into account, right now, then you're not going to make it!

From a secular perspective, columnist David Brooks, speaks about the same issue (*the importance of stepping outside ourselves into the future and deciding to shape our lives by looking back*).

He says . . .

ABOUT once a month I run across a person who radiates an inner light. A few years ago I realized that I wanted to be a bit more like those people. I realized that if I wanted to do that, then I was going to have to be better at balancing my life.

It occurred to me that there were two sets of virtues, (that I needed to understand and take into account): **the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues.**

The résumé virtues are the skills you bring to the marketplace (*DR: the virtues demanded of us by the present*). The eulogy virtues, on the other hand, are the ones that are talked

about at your funeral (*DR: the virtues that become important looking back from the perspective of the future*) — Were you were kind, brave, honest or faithful. Were you capable of deep love?

We all know that the eulogy virtues are more important than the résumé ones. But our culture and our educational systems spend *more time* teaching the skills and strategies you need for career success than the qualities you need to radiate that sort of inner light.

But if you live for external achievement, years pass, and the deepest parts of you go unexplored and unstructured. It is easy to slip into a self-satisfied moral mediocrity. . You grade yourself on a forgiving curve. You figure as long as you are not obviously hurting anybody and people seem to like you, you must be O.K. (*DR: like the rich man in Luke 16*). And . . . gradually, a humiliating gap opens between your actual self and your desired self, between you and those incandescent souls you sometimes meet.

David Brooks (April 11, 2015, NYT)

And Jesus is saying something very similar in Luke 16, both from an earthly perspective (like David Brooks), and then, in addition, from an eternal perspective.

How *we see ourselves NOW* and *What we do now* (Jesus is saying) especially with our money and material blessings *has ramifications for the future and Not just for our future on earth* (though it certainly does, according to the first story). **But – BE WARNED!! – for our future in the here-after!** (*the message of the second story*).

But why this focus on money? Well -- not because we can buy our way into heaven – God forbid. But rather, because our seemingly insignificant choices about *what we choose to do with our material blessings, few or many, speaks volumes about our spiritual commitment to God, now and eternally.*

Listen again to what Jesus says in vv.9-13

(Note, in the Hebrew world, the name of God was used explicitly as rarely as possible; below, I have made the implicit explicit).

- Make friends for yourselves by means of deceptive wealth so that when it is gone, these friends (people like the poor man Lazarus?) may welcome you into the eternal homes
- ¹⁰“Whoever is faithful to God in a very little is faithful (to God) also in much; and whoever is deceptive (with God) in a very little is also going to be deceptive (with God) in much.
- ¹¹If then you have not been faithful (to God) with deceptive wealth -- who will entrust you with true wealth?
- ¹²And if you have not been faithful (to God) with what belongs to another (i.e., to God) -- who will give you what is your own?
- ¹³No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other.”

And then this concluding stark summary:

- **“You cannot serve God and wealth.”**

As if to say:

- Do not wait! You have to choose *what really matters* right here and now!
- If you want God to be at the center throughout eternity, then you have to put God right at the center of your life here and now.

And one of the best ways to demonstrate this commitment, not just to others but to yourself (that your spiritual life has really changed; that God really is at the center), is not seemingly spiritual at all, but is related to the radical new choices you make

- In how you handle **your wealth** RIGHT HERE and NOW
- In how you prioritize your use of possessions, including money, here and now.

Let me close by telling you a story . . .

Not about money, but about water (at a moment when water became the standard of wealth).

Not about using the material world to buy an entrance to heaven, but about God and an assurance about the future entering a person’s heart and transforming the way that wealth was used in the present.

Ethel Blackledge writes (in Plus Magazine, July/August 1992)

When I was a little girl in the 1930s, my family moved to a house in southwestern Ohio. At first the only source of water we had was a tank called a cistern in which we caught rainwater. Our next-door neighbors, the Lawsons, offered us water from their well when we needed it, and my parents eventually saved enough money to have our own well dug.

Soon after that a terrible drought hit the Midwest and wells began to dry up.

Water could have been trucked-in but the great depression had hit the nation and people had no money. They depended on nature.

The lack of rain continued and soon the Lawsons’ well went dry. They asked if we could spare enough water for their use and mother replied without hesitation, “God gave us the water, take what you need.”

Then the Perkins who lived across the street came over and said their well too was dry. Mother gave them the same answer. As days went by with no rain other neighbors came too, all pumping water from our well.

Mr. Paige, a neighbor whose well still supplied water asked mother, “*Aren’t you scared, letting all those people help themselves to your water? Your well will run dry.*” Again mother gave the same answer: “God gave us the water, we will share it.”

A few days later Mrs. Gaines, a widow with five children who lived near the Paige’s sent her young son up with an empty bucket: “Momma said you might be kind enough to spare some water from your well,” he said shyly. “We used to get water from Mr. Paige’s well but he says we can’t have any more.” Mother replied, “Go to the well, fill your bucket, God is still giving us water.”

Day after day the hot sun burned down scorching fields around as creeks had long ago dried up the water disappearing.

I remember the day when Mr. Paige with an empty bucket on his arm knocked at our door: “I know that I refused water to my neighbor,” he said, “and now our well has gone dry like the rest. If you could . . .” **and mother did not even let him finish the sentence! She said, “God gave us the water. Take what you need.”**

As a result, the Paige’s became *the seventh family*, many of them with small children, who now carried water from our lone well.

This is **NOT the story of someone** who is buying heaven in any way by their generosity or good works; this is not a story about someone who thinks in terms of earning or deserving at all!

Rather,

- This is the story of a person **who sees life and everything in it** from the perspective of the end, the outside (not confined to “the consuming problem or mess” she’s in at the moment).
- This is the story of a person **who sees life and everything in it** as a gift entrusted to her care by God, and has decided to be faithful to God in a little, with the little material wealth she has (unlike Mr. Paige who is so like the Rich Man; with exactly the same opportunities to make the right choices).
- This is the story of a person who has unquestionably begun a living relationship with God NOW, the kind that will last into the future, forever.

LET JESUS SHOCK YOU – into that kind of wonderful life TODAY.

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THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800