

## NICE SAVE!

Luke 16:1-13

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai, Sunday 18 September 2016 [MW16-27]

Jesus tells a parable which is a good story

- but it's also a confusing story ...

An employee snitches to the boss about another employee who has been cheating the boss

- the boss calls in this dishonest manager and tells him to clean out his desk  
he is gone as of right now
- the boss also tells him he wants to go through the books before he leaves  
which is a bit of problem as they are in a complete shambles ...

Rather quickly the manager realises he is in deep, deep, do-do

- he is too old to start again  
he's grown accustomed to the good life  
and the unemployment benefit just isn't going to cut it
- so what does this dishonest manager do?

He calls together some of his boss's main clients and at an expensive restaurant

- has one last fling on the expense account  
and over lunch he asks each client what they owe
- now they each owe a huge amount  
tell you what, says our dishonest manager, let's literally tear that account in half  
I'll write off fifty percent on your behalf
- naturally the clients are keen to take up this offer  
while we wait for this dishonest manager to get his come-uppance
- this manager is already in trouble for his creative book keeping practices  
and what does he do ... grossly swindles his boss even more
- and the certainly deserved come-uppance, well it just never comes!

This manager takes dishonesty to a whole new level

- he really is an out and out crook  
he thinks about nothing but himself and his future
- he seems to have no ethics whatsoever

What are we to make of this?

- for one thing we might observe that Jesus has a keen sense of humour  
you can imagine Jesus' audience holding their sides and having a good belly laugh
- anyone remember *The Sting*?  
when Paul Newman and Robert Redford outwitted the gangsters  
swindling them out of their money
- or what about *Oceans Eleven*?  
George Clooney and Nick Price putting one over that so sure of himself casino owner
- so if this manager is able to put one over on his boss  
should we be worried?
- it's funny  
it's funny to hear Jesus delight in the little guy putting one over on the big guy
- Jesus' audience knew all about little guys being squashed by big guys  
they would have enjoyed this story

Trouble is, it's not just a story is it?

- it's a parable  
and aren't parables supposed to tell us something about the kingdom of God?  
about being a follower of Jesus?

"It's okay for followers of Jesus to carry on like crooks and swindlers"

- doesn't quite have the ring of authority does it?  
yet there's no denying that Jesus *commends* this dishonest manager
- Jesus has the wronged boss praise, that's right *praise!*  
the dishonest manager for his shrewdness

This parable may be one of the toughest Jesus ever told

- it's given preachers, scholars and theologians trouble all through the ages  
in fact there's some indication that Luke himself, who records this parable  
had trouble with it
- he adds some verses at the end trying to clarify things  
but still doesn't seem to deal with the scandal at the heart of this parable

And it is a scandal – it's outrageous isn't it?

- someone does wrong, gets caught  
because of this does more wrong ... and gets praised!

So what is going on here?

- well, parables are supposed to make you think  
and are not supposed to have one hundred percent guaranteed explanations
- which is just as well because there's nothing guaranteed about this one  
learned scholars and preachers go through all sorts of contortions  
to try and make some sense of it
- so let me offer this two dollars fifty worth  
one possible message this parable gives to followers of Jesus today

Perhaps at heart it is just a simple story

- a story about a person of decidedly questionable character  
who when faced with a terrible catastrophe
- recognises the catastrophe and immediately moves to do something about it

It sounds simple, yet is that how we would react?

- when adversity turns up on the doorstep  
or even worse, invites itself in
- many people tend to freeze up  
pull the covers over their head and give up

How easily we can become overwhelmed

- taking comfort from that great law of thermodynamics which says:  
'if something can go wrong, it probably will'
- you hear people talking with no reservation and little resistance about  
their number being up
- the roulette wheel of bad luck turns and people just give up

When things go pear-shaped in your personal life

- what's your first reaction???

[pause]

- do you circle the wagons  
move into a defensive posture  
hunker down for hopeless fight

Sometimes it seems we do this in society at large

- numbering off the social ills one by one  
domestic violence, crime, lack of care for others, housing crisis
- saying to ourselves  
"I'm just one person and what can one person like me do to change things"

I wonder if in this parable maybe Jesus is saying this is a bad way to live our lives

- if even a dishonest, unscrupulous businessman  
knows how to move from the defensive to the offensive so quickly  
how much more ought we?
- yes this manager was dishonest, no question  
there's also no question he was astute, smart, a survivor
- can we say the same?

Maybe Jesus is on the track of

- if a dishonest manager can turn disaster into triumph  
surely people of character who know God  
can do even better ...

The New Testament proclaims that the future is God's future

- we are to be constantly open to what God is doing in our midst  
to be watchful, to be prepared and ready to move
- we are not to be anxious about our lives  
or worry over much about what tomorrow holds
- Jesus said worrying gets us nowhere  
we are to trust in God's future

The trouble is we so easily confuse God's future with our future

- the modern world tells us that the future is in our hands  
so when the boss calls us in and tells us the game is over
- it's too easy to hang our head and trudge off to apply for unemployment  
sighing, resigned to our fate, shaking our head saying what can anybody do ...

The New Testament tells a different story

- it tells us to allow God to lead us into an unexpected future  
unexpected because it's not our future, it's God's future
- we are told an absolutely outrageous story  
about a man who makes absolutely outrageous moves
- because he seems absolutely convinced  
that the future is absolutely amazingly open  
surprising and not yet fixed!

The unscrupulous manager took what had been dealt his way

- a rather precarious and bleak future  
and wheeled and dealed
- worked at it with a faith that even this could lead to some good  
and so received an open future, a new beginning

By God's grace so do we, so do we

- we go up to the altar with empty hands  
there we receive a just a piece of blessed bread and just a taste of blessed wine
- not much?  
not much to build a future on?
- yet in the absolute outrageousness of God's graciousness  
those bits of ordinary daily life become transformed  
transformed into a miraculous, sacramental, God-infused future
- we are then able to go on with eyes open and fresh possibility before us  
into a future not of our own devising
- rather a future as a gift from a gracious God

Today's parable is outrageous – outrageously wonderful

- there is in this parable good advice for the future  
much better, much healthier, more life-giving  
than the advice columns in those popular magazines or the newspaper  
or Dr Phil or any of those other TV psychologists
- usually the advice from those quarters encourages people  
to reach down and draw upon their natural talents and resources, their inner strength

In today's parable the case is different

- we are urged to stride into the future with confidence  
not a misplaced confidence in ourselves or our own abilities
- rather a well-founded confidence in the power and grace of God

For the one who told that story is Jesus

- the one who not only told good stories  
but also moved in to boldly seize the future for God
- even when he moved toward the cross  
he did not do so as one resigned to a bleak fate
- but as one who confidently obeyed the will of God  
confident that the future belonged to God

Knowing that, we are able to move into the future with confidence

- with sharp options, with plans C, D, E and if necessary F  
not of our own devising  
but from the God who loves us and watches out for us
- this is good news!