

Sermon September 25, 2022 Luke 16:9

This Sunday we have a special speaker – The Rev. Robert Marshall - from Lutheran Heritage Foundation. Since Pastor Breight did not prepare a sermon, we are including here last week's sermon from [The Lutheran Hour](#).

"Fresh Start" Presented on The Lutheran Hour on September 18, 2022

By Rev. Dr. Michael Zeigler, Lutheran Hour Speaker Copyright 2022 Lutheran Hour Ministries

The first time I was fired from a job, it happened so quickly, it took a moment for the words to register. Chris, the manager pulls me aside and starts monologuing about the importance of teamwork and dependability. And then he tells me that I don't need to come back. They'll mail my final paycheck. It all happened so fast. Just a few words, and I became unemployed. My friends who had worked there said that the job was easy, much sought after quality among high school students seeking summertime employment. It was at a car wash, the kind that runs the vehicles through on a conveyor belt. After the manager, Chris, hired me to be part of the team, I learned that easy is a relative term. Although it wasn't as hard as other jobs, it was still a job. There were still smudges to wipe from hard-to-reach rear windows, French fries to extract from floorboards under seats, and insistent customers to try to satisfy.

But there was also a lot of downtime between tasks, which my friends and I took as license to goof off. Our game of choice was spraying each other with glass cleaner. At the beginning of the shift, each worker was issued a spray bottle filled with glass cleaner, which when holstered in your belt like a six-shooter, you could draw it on your opponent like a bandit in a saloon shootout. But the checkmate move, we discovered, was more clandestine in nature. Shrewdly, you shift your spray bottle nozzle from stream to mist, and then just when your opponent least suspects it, quietly you douse him with a dozen or so sprays aimed just below the belt. Just before he goes out to meet a customer, now presenting an embarrassing wet spot on the front side of his jeans. Given these antics, I wasn't completely surprised when Chris, the manager, launched into his monologue about teamwork and dependability.

Now, I don't mean to be flippant about getting fired. It can be a traumatic event, especially if a person is depending on that income for their livelihood. And whether it happens to you or someone you know, whether it's because of a conflict between you and your boss, or you just got caught in a crisis of corporate downsizing, getting fired is an emotionally significant event. Because your life moving forward is going to be different. That chapter of your life is closed, terminated. And you're reminded of how little you control in life, and of how often others have the last word over you. Others are the judges of your performance. Others judge your potential or the redundancy of your position. You can more or less respectfully disagree, you can appeal, you can bargain, but you don't have the last word. And the more you think about it, the more you see how this experience extends beyond a crisis of terminated employment.

There are many situations in which you and I don't get the last word: how people respond to you, to your pitches, your proposals, your offers for partnerships and friendships, how they talk about you when you're not in the room, how they will talk about you when you're gone. Getting fired can be eye opening if it helps you reckon with this final crisis we all face. In the end when my life is over, what others say about me will matter more than what I said. I don't get the last word.

Jesus of Nazareth once told a story about a guy who got fired. The story is recorded in one of His ancient biographies, the Gospel according to Luke 16. As with all of Jesus' stories, though they may entertain and inform us. This story, like the rest, is meant to prepare us, to prepare us to face that ultimate crisis. Jesus calls this crisis the kingdom of God, and facing it is kind of like getting fired. Now, this story Jesus told about the guy who gets fired, made more obvious sense in its original context than it does today. Because we are a long way

away from small-town life in the ancient Middle East, where these hypothetical-yet-realistic events are said to take place. As a result, we can't be sure exactly what Jesus was trying to tell His disciples with this story, or what He might be trying to tell those who follow Him today through this story. But despite the ambiguity in the story, the Bible as a whole, makes at least three things clear: number one, there is a crisis coming, a crisis called the kingdom of God. Number two, Jesus wants to prepare us for it. And number three, these parable stories can help.

So let's see what we can learn from this story. I'll bring in some cultural background, drawn mostly from Dr. Kenneth Bailey's book titled, *Poet and Peasant*. But first, let me just tell you the story as it's recorded in Luke's Gospel. It goes like this:

And Jesus went on saying to His disciples, there was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him, to the rich man, that this manager was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, "What is this I am hearing about you? Turn in the account of your management because you can no longer be a manager."

And the manager said to himself, "What will I do since my master is taking the management away from me? I'm not strong enough to dig. I'm ashamed to beg. I know what I will do, so that when I am dismissed from the management, they will welcome me into their houses." So calling together his master's debtors, one by one, he began saying to the first, "You owe my master how much?"

He said, "A hundred measures of oil." And he said to him, "Take your contract, sit down quickly, and write fifty." And to another, he said, "And you, how much do you owe?" He said, "A hundred measures of wheat." And he said to him, "Take your contract and write eighty."

And the master praised the unrighteous manager because—because he acted wisely, he acted shrewdly. Because the sons of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation as compared to the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves with unrighteous wealth so that when it fails, they will welcome you into eternal dwellings. (Luke 16: 1-9)

I recently retold this story to my teenage children, and their reaction was "What? Wait, what?" And I was like, "My thoughts exactly." So let's try telling it again with some plausible cultural background. First, let's say that the master's name is Theo. Theo Von Himmel, which is most certainly not culturally accurate, but that's what a pastor friend of mine calls him. And I like the ring of it. So, Theo Von Himmel is a big-time landowner in his village. And he's built his estate by renting out large tracks of land to neighboring farmers. The farmers pay rent, not in cash, but in commodities. They fork over some of the fruits of the land as their rent. Barrels of olive oil from the vine growers, bushels of grain from the wheat farmers. The rent is set ahead of time, based on a projection of what the land will likely produce in a given growing season. Von Himmel and his renters signed a contract on how much each will owe, and the rent is due at harvest time.

To manage all of this, Mr. Von Himmel relies on his eager accountant, Eugene, his bean-counter. But some time ago, Eugene realized that a man can count only so many beans before desiring a burrito of his own. So Eugene has been cheating Mr. Von Himmel and his renters, not the whole enchilada, just a little off the top. But because it's a small town and everybody knows everybody's business, it's not surprising that Eugene's antics got back to the boss, Mr. Von Himmel, who dresses down his disgraced manager saying, "What is this I am hearing about you, Eugene?"

What is surprising though, is that Mr. Von Himmel merely fires him. This guy committed a jailable offense. Any other wealthy landowner would've locked Eugene up, put him behind bars until some friend or family member

paid off his debt, but not Mr. Von Himmel. He lets him go free. The profundity of this mercy is not lost on Eugene, but he's still out of a job. So he hatches a plan, betting everything on more of Mr. Von Himmel's unexpected out-of-this-world mercy. Eugene, the disgraced former bean-counter is too weak to dig and too proud to beg. So moving forward, he can only rely on the hospitality of others. He's got to make friends. But how?

Ancient Jewish law recorded in the Mishnah made provision for renters to request a rent reduction from their landlords in a time of drought or blight or diminished harvest. Or the landlord, if you were feeling generous, could grant it all on his own. And that's where Eugene sees his opportunity. He uses his last few hours, given in order to get the account straight, to give generous reductions in rent to all of Mr. Von Himmel's tenants. Now, from their perspective, it looks like Eugene has gone to bat for them. And like a factory foreman who's negotiated with upper management on a big Christmas bonus for all the workers on the floor, they love him for it. And now the whole village is a buzz with stories of Mr. Von Hummel's unexpected generosity, and he can hear them cheering his name in the streets.

When Eugene knocks on his door account books in hand, Mr. Von Himmel looks over the contracts. And when he sees what Eugene has done, he knows he's got two options. He could throw Eugene in jail for cheating him, run out in the street, interrupt the impromptu parade forming in his honor until everyone "There will be no discounted rents today." Or he can let it ride, keeping in character with his actual generosity, enjoy the favor of his renters, and allow his dismissed manager to share in it as well. Von Himmel looks up from the books and says, "You are a very shrewd fellow, Eugene, very shroud indeed."

And that's where Jesus' story ends. He doesn't tell us what happens next, whether or not the manager gets a fresh start. And maybe it's because He wants to shift the attention back on you and me. If this scoundrel could use his wits to throw himself on the undeserved mercy of his earthly master, how much more can we, before all else fails, throw ourselves on the mercy of God, our loving Father? That's the God, Jesus makes known in the midst of our crisis. Behind the crisis of the Kingdom, before the impending Day of Reckoning, Jesus reveals the merciful generosity of God, His Father, but first comes the crisis.

The crisis comes because we all, like Eugene, have gone astray. Each one of us has turned his own way, and the Lord is calling each of us to account. The crisis of God's kingdom is like the crisis that came upon the employees of the Revenue Authority in Uganda, Africa. In 2004, in Uganda, even people who worked at the Revenue Authority, the country's tax-collecting agency said that they were as corrupt as bandits, counting loot in a saloon. The agency's public image was bankrupt. Tax evasion was rampant. So they hired a new commissioner, who determined that because the corruption was so widespread everyone was complicit in it. And a hard decision had to be made. All 2,000 employees of the revenue authority were fired. Everyone had to go. All the old positions were eliminated, and a new structure was created, and anyone, including former employees, could interview for a new position in the new organization.

When Jesus said God's kingdom was coming for sinners, in the first place He meant that we are all sinners, evil, complicit in the world's corruption. Everyone must go, no exceptions. It's the only way the world will ever get a fresh start. And if you look around and give an honest assessment of the world and of your own heart, you know it's the right call. If we don't meet our Creator's expectations, if we refuse to honor God's standard of work, there's nowhere else for us to go. There's no other job to be had. Hell is all that waits for us. One of the hard lessons I had to learn after being fired when I was 16 was that it was a judgment on my performance, not on my personhood. Often we get these two confused. We think "I am what I do. And what I do is what I am."

We confuse performance and personhood, but Jesus sorts it out. Jesus condemns our performance, but He doesn't reject our personhood. He values every person, especially the ones who've lost their way. "Sinners" isn't His last word for us. He came to call sinners to repentance and forgiveness, to a fresh start, to die with Him in Baptism so that we might live with Him by His Holy Spirit. You have mismanaged your accounts, but Jesus covered your debt with His life. God shows us His out-of-this-world love while we were still sinners. Jesus Christ died for us and rose for us. But for this truth to take hold of you, first you have to believe that you are a sinner, that Jesus does condemn your performance, so He can redeem your personhood, so He can restore your performance.

When I think about that parable He told of the shrewd manager, Eugene, or whatever his name was, what's surprising is that in the end, despite all his antics, after he's thrown himself on the mercy of his master, he's finally starting to act like a manager. A faithful manager, faithfully representing his master's character, making friends, giving others a fresh start. The person who was put in charge of rehabilitating the Ugandan revenue authority in 2004 was a woman, a wife, and a mother of three, Mrs. Allen Catherine Kagina, a devoted follower of Jesus Christ. Following Jesus faithfully isn't easy, like a short-term summertime job. And as you can imagine, Mrs. Kagina did not make a lot of friends at work, deciding to fire everyone and have them reapply in the new structure. She faced attacks in the media and threats on her life, but she did it because she believed that Jesus called her to serve her neighbors there. And she knew that it was the only way there could be a fresh start.

And in time, the plan worked. Over the next ten years, the organization's reputation was restored in the public eye, and the amount of legitimate revenue collected increased over 300 percent. A reporter once asked Mrs. Kagina how she found the courage to do it. She said, "Courage does not mean you are brave. It means knowing I need help. And I know where to get help from." Mrs. Kagina explains that she is a Christian. And day after day at the Revenue Authority, not altogether different from the shrewd manager, she just kept throwing herself on the mercy of God, her Father, and watching Him come through for her.

She didn't make a lot of friends at first. But now, almost twenty years later, the tax system is better. Uganda is held up as a model for reform, and Mrs. Kagina is known throughout the world as a woman of integrity, and she makes her loyalty to Jesus known. She is using her resources and position and networks to make her Master's faithful character known, making eternal friendships by faith.

About a year after I was fired from the car wash, I applied for another job. I needed work to pay my parents back for two speeding tickets I had gotten in the prior month. This next job was at a restaurant. I went in for my interview and the manager doing the hiring was none other than Chris, the guy from the car wash who fired me. He recognized me right away. He didn't say why he wasn't working at the car wash anymore, and I didn't say anything about needing this job to pay off speeding tickets. And thank God, the subject of my earlier termination never came up, and I got the job. I used to think that he had forgotten about my former buffoonery, but now I think he just wanted to give me a fresh start.

If you're willing, would you pray with me? Dear Father, despite all my antics, thank You for making a place for me in Your eternal Kingdom. Through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

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