

Grace: The Greatest Story Ever Told

Dan McCoig | Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 | 14 March 2010

1.

There was a time when our foibles and follies were committed in relative obscurity. If we messed up, only the persons immediately present were there to witness our humiliation and shame.

The Internet has changed all of this.

I am astounded at what people will post to the web for the world to see.

There is even a site entitled Failblog.org that is devoted to accumulating in still and moving pictures people's moments of infamy.

A quick perusal of the site discloses that the site is never short of material.

The site has images of people walking into plate-glass doors, falling down stairs, backing cars out of garages while the door is still down.

There are also botched protest signs with the word "fail" in large red letters posted across the mistaken words.

For example, a student protestor in front of a college administration building holds one sign.

The sign reads "Who's school?"

The protestor obviously meant "Whose school?"

2.

Recently, I ran across an a news article that suggested that we may be moving into what the writer of the article termed a "post-literate" era in which we get our information predominantly from images and sounds rather than words on a page.

What if we were to conceptualize Jesus' parable of the prodigal son as a series of video clips that we could post to the Internet for the world to see?

What would the clips look like?

Well, here goes.

Clip number one would show a kid with his hand out, demanding (not asking) that he get his share of inheritance right now, up front.

A kid with his hand out isn't an unusual picture, as any parent knows, but in this case it's a particularly shocking one given the cultural conventions of the time.

Jewish law dictated that when the father passed away, the eldest son would get two-thirds of the estate (a "double portion") and the next youngest son one-third.

But, as Jesus tells it, Dad was still alive and well.

So the younger son commits an egregious gaffe by basically saying, "Pop, I wish you were already dead.

Forget the family business and, for that matter, the whole family. I'm outta here."

Although it wasn't unusual for a father to distribute property in advance, as in the case of marriage, Jesus strongly implies that the younger son's demand was disrespectful, rebellious and foolish — a clear violation of the commandment to honor one's parents (Exodus 20:12).

In a culture where family and community always took priority over the individual, the kid's self-centered demand would have raised the eyebrows of those hearing the parable for the first time.

They'd definitely lump him in with those "sinners" that the Pharisees and scribes were accusing Jesus of befriending.

As if to hammer home that very point, Jesus offers **clip number two**: the suddenly wealthy kid living it up in some foreign (read "Gentile") country.

There, he "squanders" all the property (the Greek word can also mean "scatters") by living a wild and undisciplined lifestyle.

But after he's blown it all and is flat broke, he hires himself out to a Gentile pig farmer, which is about as un-Jewish as he can get.

Pigs were an abomination to Jews (Leviticus 11:7; Deuteronomy 14:8), and people who cared for swine were cursed.

The picture of a young man, hungry and destitute, sitting in the filth of a pigsty envying the slop his porcine charges were devouring would have qualified as a major Failblog photo.

Jesus seems to be making the point that this kid is even farther gone than any of the "sinners" with whom Jesus himself is sitting down to dinner.

But the pigsty is also a place of revelation.

In the midst of piles of pig dung, the boy "came to himself" and decided to go home.

Notice, though, that at least initially it's more of a pragmatic decision than a penitential one.

He's a hired hand to the pig farmer and gets nothing, so he figures that if he goes home he can at least get hired on to the family business and get what the other servants are getting, which is way better than pig fodder.

He'll have to do a *mea culpa*, but at least he'll have a full belly and a better roof over his head.

Of course, we know the next picture, **clip number three** — that of the father racing down the driveway to embrace his long-lost sinner son and calling for an extravagant party to be thrown in his honor.

Here we might picture Rembrandt's beautiful painting *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, with the penitential son kneeling at the feet of his father, whose face reflects a deep love and sense of relief.

It's a picture we certainly wouldn't post on the Failblog but is one that Christians have looked to for centuries as a reminder of God's love.

In a first-century context, however, Jesus' hearers might have been more likely to initially assign *the biggest failure in the whole story to the father*, who is really more the subject of the parable than the prodigal son for whom it's more readily known.

In the first place, the Pharisees and scribes would certainly have stamped FAIL on the father's willingness to give the boy his inheritance in the first place.

A good father would have squashed such rebellion in a child rather than give in to it.

And then, after the insolent boy has the nerve to actually show his face back on the family farm, the father disgraces himself by *running* out to meet him "while he was still far off" (v. 20).

In first-century Israel, it was considered the height of indignity for a man, especially a family patriarch, to run anywhere for anything, let alone to run out from the house to meet the one who had dishonored him.

Not only that, but the father actually forgives the boy and restores him to the status of son, even though the kid had disowned himself from the family.

Where was the rebuke?

Where was the lesson?

Where was the justice in all that?

Dad was the failure, here.

3.

The older son thinks so, as well.

He can't believe that Dad is doing such a heinous thing for his irresponsible and insolent kid brother.

He stands outside the party and angrily pouts, so the father once again disgraces himself to come out and "plead with him" (v. 28).

The older son gives dad a tongue-lashing, reminding dad that he's been a loyal son the whole time but he has nothing to show for it (except two-thirds of the inheritance, which Dad points out in verse 31).

The big brother wants justice, wants retribution, wants what's coming to him, but all Dad says is, "[W]e had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (v. 32).

4.

As we read the gospels we see that Jesus had a habit of turning failures into the heroes of his stories.

The "Good Samaritan" (a first-century oxymoron) in Luke 10 and the "Dishonest Manager" (Luke 16:1-13) are just a couple of examples that frame this particular story in Luke.

Jesus picked losers such as tax collectors to be his disciples and partied with people who everyone in polite and pious society would have considered to be failures on a whole lot of levels.

He didn't seem to mind being pictured as a failure because he knew that was the only way that the many faces on whom the rest of the world had stamped FAIL would come to him.

The parable of the loving father and his two sons was designed to invite self-righteous Pharisees and scribes to see how they had become the older brother, failing to experience the joy and celebration that God does when wayward sinners come home.

But it was also designed to remind us all of the embarrassing lengths to which God, in the person of Jesus, would go to make that homecoming a reality.

5.

Lent reminds us that the story of Jesus inevitably moves toward the Cross, the ultimate picture of failure and disgrace.

Jesus was willing to risk the embarrassment of being stripped, beaten and hanged naked to die and to be held up as a failure for the whole world to see on that Friday.

It is through failure that God chooses to save the world.

As Paul would later put it, the cross was and is "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Corinthians 1:23-25).

6.

In his book *Six Hours One Friday*, Max Lucado wonders if Jesus used his hands while telling the parable of the loving father and his two sons.

When he got to the point in the story where the overjoyed father runs out to meet his broken-down son, did he open his arms wide to illustrate the point?

"Whether he did that day or not, I don't know," says Lucado. "But I know that he did later.

He later stretched his hands as open as he could.

He forced his arms so wide apart that it hurt.

And to prove that those arms would never fold and those hands would never close, he had them nailed open.

They still are."