

We are going to be reading from Luke 15. But before reading this story, my question for us to ponder is, “what is the title for this story?” Because the title we give this story tells us a lot about the way we read this story.

Some people call this the “Prodigal Son” story. If we call this the “prodigal son” story then we emphasize the first half of this story to the neglect of the second half of this story. If we call this “A Man with Two Sons” we recognize that this is actually two stories within one story.

If we call this story “The Compassionate Father and the Angry Brother” we recognize that this story offers two ways to welcome the lost. If we call this story “The Prodigal Son, the Waiting Father, and the Elder Brother” we recognize that each character has a point of view of what happens in this story. So as we read this story you can ask yourself, “what is your title for this story?”

The 15th chapter of Luke actually has three parables that are very similar to one another. A parable is a story which is told in such a way that it has multiple levels of meaning. The first story that Luke records in chapter 15 being told by Jesus is the parable of the lost sheep. The story where a farmer has 100 sheep, loses one of them, and searches and searches until the one lost sheep is found.

The second parable that Luke clumps together in the 15th chapter is the story of the woman who loses a coin. The woman searches and searches until she finds her lost coin. Traditionally we have read these first two parables in such a way that God is like the farmer who searches for his lost sheep until it is found and God is like the woman who searches and searches for her lost coin until it is found.

The gospel writer Luke then concludes this section of lost being found with the story that we are about to read. I am going to be reading from “The Message” which is a paraphrase of the Bible. I like to read from “The Message” whenever I encounter a story in the Bible.

I am going to read the first 3 verses to chapter 15 and then skip to verse 11. The first 3 verses set up the scene of who is being challenged by Jesus in these parables that he tells.

Read Luke 15: 1-3 and 11-32

So in this story, the youngest son takes his inheritance and follows his dream. He has a dream that he wants to follow and no one is doing to stop him. Not his father. Not his brother. No one. He is a dreamer and he is going to follow his dream.

But in this story, his dream does not work out so well. He ends up spending everything that he was given by his dad and he ends up flat broke. Out of desperation he hires himself out to a local gentile farmer to tend his pigs. Tending pigs would have been considered disgraceful for a Jewish person to do. Pigs were considered unclean. This youngest son has fallen to the bottom of the bottom.

Have you ever followed a dream and then had the dream come crashing down on you? Followed a career into a dream job but then the job is terminated? Followed a dream into a perfect relationship with another but then the dream ends in divorce? Followed a dream and did exactly what you felt you were supposed to do but this dream ends badly.

If we are honest with ourselves, all of us have faced times in our life when we have had to face the painful reality that whatever dream we had has come to a crashing end. It may be a dream you had in your past. You may be in a place today where your dream has ended and you are facing a new and painful reality. And because this dream has ended, and maybe in a very bad way, you may be feeling as though you blew it. You had an opportunity and you blew your chance.

Deborah Reigal tells about her experience in the corporate world and what happened to her. Eight years ago, when she was just starting her consulting firm, she was thrilled to win a large, lucrative contract with an international advertising agency. Several days a month, she would train and coach staff from all levels of the company on presentation skills, management skills, and professional presence--a dream assignment.

Business chugged along successfully for three more years, until her biggest and best client merged with another agency, and that agency had preferred vendors of its own. And she wasn't one of them. She suddenly went from a professional high to deep disappointment. In addition to losing a significant chunk of her income, she had lost her plans for the future with this client. She also lost some of her pride. Overnight, her career went from excitement about the future to a crashing halt.

She says that in that moment it felt like her professional world was crashing down around her--and that tomorrow would only look and feel worse.

Many times we read this story from Luke 15 and we think the prodigal son is someone else's story. You may read this story and not see yourself as the youngest son in this story. But if you have ever experienced a dream die, then maybe you can relate to what the youngest son in this story experiences.

If you have ever lost a job, received a very critical review at work, had a relationship end in divorce or a break-up, took a big financial hit because of a bad investment, or suffered consequences from a bad decision, then maybe this is a story that you should read through once again. Any of us who have seen a dream die, maybe this is our story.

In the story that Jesus tells, the son realizes that feeding pigs is not his destiny. That is not what he was created to do. He realizes that wallowing in self pity because of mistakes he had made is not the route that he was to take.

This son remembered that he was his father's child and that this designation meant something of importance to him. He needed to go home for a while and reassess his life.

And so this son returns home to see his father. He does not know what his father will do. After all, by claiming his inheritance before the death of his father, this son had declared that he wished his father was dead. His father had sold off part of his land so that this son could follow his dream no matter how misguided this dream was.

But as this son returns home, his father catches glimpse of him. And rather than wait for his son to arrive, the father runs out to welcome him. Jewish men did not run. Jewish men did not act this way when a son returned. But this Jewish man breaks the established custom and runs out to hug and welcome his son home.

We may have come into this sanctuary today feeling some great disappointment. Great disappointment because some dream of yours has ended. You may be going through a huge pity party about yourself and about how you can't believe you could be so dumb.

But this story that Jesus tells does not end with the youngest son blowing it. The next scene in the story is the young man's father running out to greet him and welcome him back home. This father throws a big party for this son that blew it all. This father celebrates that the son who was lost has now been found.

Or maybe you are the person who is disappointed in another. Maybe you are the one who feels as though someone took advantage of you and wasted something that you had given them. Maybe you are very angry at this person and what you feel as though this person has done to you. Maybe you are the eldest brother in this story, the one sitting in the seat of judgment of another.

In this story and in our story, we have a choice to make. We can assume the role of the eldest son and take the role of judgment on the reckless behavior of another. That is the easiest and most comfortable role to assume.

Or we could assume the role of the father in this story. We could work to find a way to extend grace to the one that made a really bad mistake. Not just extend grace, but run out and extend incredible hospitality before this person even has a chance to say they screwed up.

Grace is pretty hard to come by in our world. Judgment is pretty common.

But grace is what this story offers.

Grace of a loving father who welcomes a son home who had made some really bad choices.

Grace is certainly what God offers to us.

It may time for us to move away from wallowing in self pity and accept God's grace and move on. AMEN.

-Opening info from The new Interpreters Bible Commentary. Abindgon Press.
Nashville

-Riegal, Deborah, <http://www.fastcompany.com/3006749/how-bounce-back-stronger-after-you-blow-it-work?partner=newsletter>

-Given: March 10, 2013 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Eternal lover of our wayward race, we praise you for your ever-open door.
You open your arms to accept us even before we turn to meet your welcome.

You invite us to forgiveness even before our hearts are softened to repentance.
Hold before us the image of our humanity made new, that we may live in Jesus
Christ, the model and the pioneer of your new creation.

God of patient love, you await the return of the wayward and wandering
and eagerly embrace them in pardon.

Give us generous hearts to welcome all who seek a place at the table of your
unconditional love.