

It used to be that when we did something stupid such as, say, walk into an apparently invisible plate-glass door, or fall down the stairs, or back the car out of the garage while the door was still down, we'd try to keep that to ourselves. After all, there's no sense letting our neighbors, or anyone else for that matter, know we're clumsy or that we're not always very bright.

But with the advent of the Internet and the popularity of shows such as *Ridiculousness* or the older *America's Funniest Home Videos* (which probably started the trend), people are now beginning to look at their mistakes, *faux pas*, and misadventures as things to share with the whole world. We've bought into Andy Warhol's "15 minutes of fame" idea, even if that fame comes from a 15-second clip we posted on a video-sharing site just before we headed to the emergency room.

But while most video-posting sites, such as YouTube, carry a wide variety of content, one site is devoted entirely to the imperfect populace. It's called the "Fail Blog" and people use it to post their own pictures and videos or they upload goofy signs or sights they've seen for everyone else to view and comment on. You'll see everything from a guy getting de-pantsed by a bull at a bullfight to sports mascots with big furry heads brawling on a football field. Over each picture or video, the site stamps the word FAIL in big, bold letters. Kinda gives a new meaning to the concept of the "boob tube."

This morning, after reading the famous parable of the prodigal son in Luke, we might consider the idea that it looks like a similar photo album of failure — but without the funny. **Clip number one**, for example, shows a kid with his hand out, demanding (not asking) that he get his share of inheritance right now, up front. Now...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 a shockingly bad blunder 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 is disrespectful, rebellious and foolish — a clear violation of the commandment to honor one’s parents. 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.

And as if to hammer home that very point, Jesus offers **clip number two**: the suddenly wealthy kid living it up in some foreign, 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, as you may know, were an abomination to Jews, 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 porky charges were horking down would have qualified as a major FAIL photo. Jesus seems to be making the point that this kid is even farther gone than any of the “sinners” with whom he’s sitting down to eater dinner with.

But the pigsty is also a place of revelation. In the midst of piles of pig poo, 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 repentant 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. Yeah, he’ll have to acknowledge his blunder, but at least he’ll have a full belly.

Of course, we know the next picture — that of the father racing down the driveway to embrace his long-lost sinner son and calling for a major-league 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 fail blog 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.” 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 a failure, here, for sure.

The older son seems to think so, too. He can't believe that Dad is doing such a heinous thing for his stupid kid brother. He stands outside the party and angrily pouts, so the father once again disgraces himself to come out and "plead with him." 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 his Dad reminds him of. 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."

Read the gospels and you 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" 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.

The Season of 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.”

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 to accept everyone, especially those who falter and fail in this world. Amen.