

25th Sunday Ord Time/Year C
September 22, 2019
Ps. 79; Jer. 8:18-9:1; 1 Tim. 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13
Rising Strong Sermon 3 of 4
“Rumbling”

We began the Rising Strong series a couple of weeks ago with the challenge to be vulnerable, and I encouraged us to cultivate the courage to risk vulnerability. Last week we learned about reckoning, which is learning to walk into our stories, and I challenged us to live with holy curiosity about our stories.

Last week, we heard Jesus tell two stories about things that were lost. Directly after those stories in Luke is the story commonly known as “The Prodigal Son.” There seems to be a nice, clean theme there, a thread that acknowledges the pain of being lost and the joy of being found.

That nice little theme falls apart in our reading today, however, which immediately follows The Prodigal Son in Luke’s gospel. Today’s reading is complicated and perplexing, much like the next step in Brené Brown’s rising strong process: rumbling.

If reckoning is learning to walk into our stories, then today we focus on rumbling which is learning how to own our stories—the good, the bad, and the ugly. Whatever they are, they are ours, and God is mightily and mercifully in the midst of them. The challenge for today is creativity, creativity that is vulnerable, courageous, and curious.

The story we have comes from Luke 16:1-13 (*The Message*). Let’s listen now to God’s word for us today: “The Story of the Crooked Manager”

“Jesus said to his disciples, “There was once a rich man who had a manager. He got reports that the manager had been taking advantage of his position by running up huge personal expenses. So he called him in and

said, 'What's this I hear about you? You're fired. And I want a complete audit of your books.'

"The manager said to himself, 'What am I going to do? I've lost my job as manager. I'm not strong enough for a laboring job, and I'm too proud to beg. . . . Ah, I've got a plan. Here's what I'll do . . . then when I'm turned out into the street, people will take me into their houses.'

"Then he went at it. One after another, he called in the people who were in debt to his master. He said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'

"He replied, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.'

"The manager said, 'Here, take your bill, sit down here—quick now—write fifty.'

"To the next he said, 'And you, what do you owe?'

"He answered, 'A hundred sacks of wheat.'

"He said, 'Take your bill, write in eighty.'

"Now here's a surprise: The master praised the shrewd/crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is right—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior."

Jesus went on to make these comments: If you're honest in small things, you'll be honest in big things; If you're a crook in small things, you'll be a crook in big things. If you're not honest in small jobs, who will put you in charge of the store? No worker can serve two bosses: He'll either hate the

first and love the second or adore the first and despise the second. You can't serve both God and the Bank.

I warned you, didn't I? There is a lot going on here, and none of it seems to make sense. There's enough goodies in here for about 6 sermons, so get comfortable. Just kidding.

Last week, we talked about how we're wired for story. I think the fact that we are wired for beginning/middle/end, for patterns that make sense and offer completion, is why today's scripture reading is so difficult for us. We can't force it into a predictable pattern.

At first, it makes sense. The manager is dishonest, and the rich man fires him. So the manager has to figure out a way to garner favor because he's too proud to beg and too weak to do manual labor. The manager is consistent – you've got to give him that; he figures out a dishonest way to take care of himself. And all of a sudden the rich man is commending him for being shrewd? What is that about?

Is Jesus trying to tell us that it's just semantics? Dishonesty is bad unless you call it "shrewd"? And while we're talking about odd words choices, does anyone else find it striking that Jesus seems to set up faithful and dishonest as opposites? Does that seem to be slightly off-kilter?

I'd expect the ends of the spectrum to be honest and dishonest or faithful and unfaithful. Jesus seems determined to keep us squirming. Is faithful the same thing as honest? Can you be faithful to a lie? And what is all this business about children of this age and children of light? And serving two masters? It all falls apart; there's no plot anymore. It feels like a mashup of disjointed pieces, and Jesus sounds like the dog from the movie *Up* who is famously distracted by a squirrel.

In an odd way, though, it seems appropriate that it's so confusing because today we're also talking about rumbling, owning our stories, and rumbling

can be a confusing, unsettling place to sit. Let's look at what it means to rumble.

If we're ready to rumble with our stories that means we've already reckoned with our emotions. We know where we are, and that's a huge step. In order to move forward, though, we have to rumble; we have to take a good, hard look at the stories we are making up about our struggles.

Remember how we talked about being wired for story? Our brains want a pattern, a tidy beginning/middle/end, and as soon as we find one, our brains reward us with the feel-good chemical, dopamine. That's especially true when we've been hurt because a story can help give our pain some sort of meaning.

Here's the problem: we want that complete story so badly that we will fill in missing parts with details we assume or just flat make up. I think this is mostly true about the *why* of things, why someone hurt us, for example. And our brains don't really care if the story we make up is true, they just want our stories to be complete.

Rumbling is capturing the story that we're telling ourselves in what Brené calls an SFD, a Smelly First Draft. (That's edited to be church-friendly.) This is writing down the story that you're telling yourself in your head about what happened. It's raw and messy; no polish, no façade. It might even have bad words in it. It's where you let the 5-year-old inside throw a tantrum and flail all over the place. It's not polite; it's authentic and genuine.

Brené says that our grown-up, rational selves are good liars; it's the 5-year-old tyrants who tell it like it is. If you're embarrassed that someone might find your SFD and think either you're a jerk or you're insane, then you're probably on the right track. Worry not; the SFD is for your eyes only. No one else gets to see it.

For our dishonest manager, his SFD might include the fact that his gravy train is being cut off and he's about to be out on his keister. He needs to come up with a plan quickly, and he does. The rich man commends him because he acted shrewdly. The end. We don't know if the rich man re-hired the manager. We don't know if the manager was taken care of by the rich man's debtors. We don't know anything else. That's the manager's entire Smelly First Draft.

Once you've captured an SFD, you have to rumble with it. You sit with it and address it with some creativity and curiosity. Here are the rumbling questions:

1. What more do I need to learn and understand about the situation?
2. What more do I need to learn and understand about the other people in the story?
3. What more do I need to learn and understand about myself?

These questions include things like determining what is fact and what is assumption, figuring out if there is additional information that might be helpful, and probing what's underneath responses.

After we spend some really uncomfortable time with our SFD, we end up with 2 different versions of the story: the one we wrote originally in our heads and the one that is the result of our rumble. The difference between those 2 is the delta – the change. The delta is where the meaning and the wisdom are. The delta gives us some key learnings that we can take away from the rumble and use to approach life differently. It allows us to remove the dangerous stories we tell inside ourselves and replace them with the truth. The delta allows us to move forward with courage and vulnerability.

So back to this manager. I looked up shrewd – here's the definition: marked by sound judgment and practical intelligence; 2. inclined to use cunning, underhanded practices. Shrewd is similar to astute as both words

are used to describe sound judgment and practical intelligence, but since shrewd has a negative connotation, it's usually used to describe someone who is sharp and intelligent, but potentially underhanded at the same time.¹

What if this is the first time the manager been commended for anything? We know he thinks he's weak. What if he fills in the gaps of his story with assumptions that hinge on his weakness and stupidity? What if this is the first time anyone has called him shrewd, which indicates a degree of intelligence and sound judgment? What if the story he's been telling himself his whole life is that he's stupid, and now suddenly there's this teensy bit of a turn?

He is dishonest, yes, but he's also shrewd. He's smart and crafty, and that is a different story than stupid and slow. If that is indeed the case (and we can't really know if it is or not, of course, since it's not our SFD), but if it is, then that's a delta. That's a chance that he could be something different than what he's been assuming about himself all along.

It might also be worth noting that the manager realizes that he is dependent on the mercy and good will of others. He might not go about garnering that in honest ways, but that feels kind of like my relationship to God, except that God doesn't owe anyone anything and I certainly can't do anything to make God's load a little lighter.

Maybe it has to do with the fact that the rich man notices the dishonest man's ingenuity, even if he's using it for selfish gain. Maybe that's what Jesus means when he says we should "make friends for ourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." Maybe we're just supposed to be as motivated and creative as the manager, but for good purposes rather than dishonest ones.

¹ <http://vocabulary-vocabulary.com/dictionary/shrewd.php>

All we really have here is a lot of maybes. It's a confusing story because there's a lot we don't know. Here's some good news: when you and I rumble with our own stories, we are the experts. We might still have a lot of maybes, but we have a pretty good chance of working through some of those if we are willing to do the work.

In the midst of our maybes today, as we rumble with this unsatisfying story, there is one thing that seems clear to me. Jesus wants to shine his truth on our stories. The way we shame and blame ourselves, the idea that we're not enough, the notion that we're stupid or slow or dishonest – Jesus reminds us that we're children of God. We have received grace and mercy and a new path forward.

Jesus Christ is our delta; he gives us our meaning and our wisdom. He offers us rich, fertile soil to grow and produce fruits that make the world a better place. When we rumble with the stories we tell ourselves in our heads and see them as Jesus does, the negative assumptions simply don't hold up. We are changed. That change leads to the last stage of the rising strong process: the revolution. If we rumble in the light of Jesus' love, we ready ourselves for revolution, for wholeheartedly embracing the arena, the cross, and the life that Jesus offers us. It's a chance to change ourselves and the world.

What is going on in your life right now? Where and with what is God Almighty inviting you to rumble? What story are you telling about yourself, and in light of your relationship with Jesus Christ, your "delta," what edits need to be made?

I am rumbling with the reality that ministry feels different to me on this side of my sabbatical. I did not realize how close to the edge of burnout I was until I stopped and began reflecting on myself, this ministry we share, and the whole of my life. For so long, I've believed that if I just did more—more hours at work, more meetings, more projects, the longer the list the better—it pleased God more and made me a better minister.

On sabbatical I discovered that my soul, my body, my intellect has to have a little more space—more being (prayer, meditation, reflection, reading, study)—and less doing. Coming back into a very busy ministry here has flooded me in so many great ways with catching up with you, and I feel God’s Spirit of goodness and grace. But I’m in the midst of a rumble to find balance. Sometimes in our walk with God, doing more activities is not what we need to do. Less is more. I welcome your prayers as I rumble, and I want you to know that I pray for all of you daily in your rumble.

I hope you and I will gain confidence and strength from the fact that we do not rumble alone. Hand in hand, heart in heart, Jesus is with us. He is the Alpha and the Omega, our beginning and end, and Jesus is our Delta who says to us, in spite of all the things we tell ourselves in our heads, “You are my child. I will never forsake you. I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

To God be the glory. Amen.