

LUTHERAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY AT GETTYSBURG

INTEGRATIVE PROJECT

# “IT’S ALL ABOUT HER”

**A Short-Story with Bible Study**

by

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Witness of the Gospels

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I almost cried out when she stood up. There she was, looking not at all different than I remembered her. Certainly she was a little thinner and her hair was shorter – and neater – than the last time I’d seen her, but the spark, the sparkle, in her eyes was there. She was beautiful.

I leaned forward in my metal folding chair to listen. I tried to see her as clearly as I could through all the smoke. I remember thinking that all these people had traded in their multiplicity of addictions for the singular vice of smoking.

“Hello. I want to share my story with you tonight. I guess it really started when we decided to kill my mother.” She looked over to the man who was running the meeting. He whispered something to her and she blushed.

“Oh yeah. I’m sorry. I’ve seen everyone else do this but I . . . OK.” She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “My name is Kara and I am an alcoholic and an addict.”

The fifty or so people around me responded as if in a chorus, “Hello Kara.”

“Hello.” She giggled. The things she had done hadn’t killed the little girl in her. She was only just 21 after all. “Today I’m three months clean and sober.”

There was light applause, and even a few amen’s from the assembled addicts and drunks.

“I want to tell my story. I told it to Mallory, my counselor in rehab. I told it to my group there. But I want . . . no, need to tell you in a meeting. Maybe there’s someone out there who could learn something.” She glanced at the head man again and he gave her a skeptical look. She giggled again. “OK. I’m supposed to be honest. It’s mostly because it’s good for me. I’m still pretty selfish, I guess, and that’s been part of my problem. And that’s where the killing my mom thing came from.

“I could say it came from Derrick, because it was actually his idea. But that’s not taking responsibility, is it?”

Derrick. Derrick Ubel. Just hearing her say his name sent my stomach into a spasm, as if trying to regurgitate some indigestible piece of garbage. Was I jealous? Of course. But there was more to it than that. It was Derrick that had taken her away.

“No, I should say that I was responsible for my part in it. But Derrick, well, I know I learned about co-dependency and all that in rehab, and I think that’s what I was, or what we were – co-dependent.

She was struggling. Struggling with her culpability in all that had happened. Saying that it was her fault, at the same time making sure she listed all the reasons why it wasn’t. It was clear that she wasn’t completely able to bear her part in it. It was Derrick’s fault, it was the alcohol, it was the drugs, and, oh yeah, it was Kara. As much as I loved her, as much as I hated Derrick, and alcohol, and drugs, I knew better than anybody that it was her that did what she did. It was her that *chose* what she did.

“So, one day we decided to do it. To kill her. You all know who my mom is – Senator Nancy Gratzia. And you know how Senator Gratzia feels about drugs. You know how she feels about addicts. About you – I mean, about us. You might think it’s just political. When mom took my father’s Senate seat after the plane crash, she had to look tough. She was the housewife in the senate, from the kitchen to the capital, one magazine said. So she took on his positions about Law and Order, and she got even more fanatical. Capital punishment for drug dealers, jail for users. No rehab, because addiction’s just an excuse for weakness at best and evil at worst. You’ve heard the speeches she’s made. And she’s gotten re-elected because in our state that’s what the voters want to hear. Law and order.

“And there was her little girl – I was 14 when he died – smoking pot to make the pain go away. I lost both parents in that crash, you know. Father to death and mother to the Senate. That’s what Mallory said, anyway, so you can understand how I got started.” She gave her head a shake and got herself back on the program. “But I’m still responsible for my use.” There was just a hint of a smile that no one else might have noticed, but I recognized her fishing-for-a-compliment look. She’d said the right thing. She always needed a lot of compliments. And Derrick sure did give them to her. At least at first.

“The terrible thing was, my mom believed all that stuff. She talked the talk and walked the walk. No way could I ever let her know I was using. But in a way, I think, I hoped she’d find out. At least she would’ve paid attention to me.”

My God, she was a walking, talking cliché. Maybe she’d learned that in rehab, maybe on the streets. This was what they called “recovery?”

“But it wasn’t mom’s fault. I was responsible for my decisions.”

You couldn’t have programmed a computer much better.

“We needed money, Derrick and I. We were using pretty heavy, he owed the wrong people too much money. His family, such that it was, was dirt poor. I knew if I went to mother she wouldn’t give us anything. I was 16 then, Derrick was 24. She hated him, hated his hold on me. But what was she going to do? Get me help, call the cops – hell, how would it look for Senator Gratzia’s daughter to be in that kind of trouble. So she just ignored the problem, ignored me. We had kind of an unspoken deal – her part was to let me alone, mine was to be miserable. She decided to let me be miserable figuring I’d straighten up and come back to her. Eventually.

“But we needed money. We were ready to live life together, to get out of our houses and get our own place. And pay off our debts. So one night, at my house, my mother was at some fund raiser or something and Derrick was there and we were talking. It came up – I don’t remember who said it first but we realized that we – well, I – would have plenty of money when she was dead. My father had been a wealthy man, and it had all been left to her when he died. So, if we were – I mean, I was – going to have all that money eventually, why not now?

“She had plenty of enemies. She’d pissed a lot of people off with her tough stands on stuff. All we had to do was make it look like it was one of them – we could leave notes, plant threatening letters. It would be easy. And Derrick promised to do the actual killing. It was such a great plan –

so exciting – that it never seemed like murder. Just a clever scheme to get a lot of money and end up together. We started on the letters that night. I hid them in my room after he had gone.

“Leola. My sister. The perfect one. She was *supposed* to be asleep. Early to bed and early to rise and all of that. But she wasn’t. She heard it all. And the next day she snuck into my room and found the letters and she stole them.”

Kara didn’t even try to hide how betrayed she felt. Still. I was amazed, but even when the drugs and the alcohol are gone the real person remains.

“It didn’t take long until Derrick and I found ourselves together sitting at a table in the interrogation room at the police station. The cops left us alone and he told me not to say anything because they were watching through one way mirrors or whatever. He even pointed to the mirrors on the wall and I got the idea. Then he said again, ‘Don’t say anything.’ Then he whispered, ‘Remember I love you.’

“The door opened and it wasn’t a cop that came in. It was mother. There was the Senator. I was pretty sober at the time – remember money was tight – but I was numb enough when she came in. You’d think there’d be some guilt, or something, seeing her like that . . .”

Yes, you’d think so.

“But, there was . . . nothing. All I cared about was getting out with Derrick

“And she seemed just as numb, except it was more like a coldness in her. She sat down at the table with us and said, just matter-of-fact, ‘So, you wanted to kill me?’ Now Derrick, I expected him to say something like we wouldn’t really have done it or something, but he says back to her, just as cool and calm, ‘It wasn’t personal, Senator Gratzia. We just needed the money.’ And then he smiled like it was something charming that he had said and I was starting to shake because I knew I couldn’t be as cool as those two and I knew if I lost it I was going to be letting them down somehow.

“Then my mother pulled a packet of papers out of her purse. She did it really slow, like she was taking a sword out of its sheath. She laid the documents down on the table in front of me. When she spoke, it was right to me, totally ignoring Derrick. ‘I had this drawn up when I heard. It gives you immediately, as soon as you sign, half of everything that your father left for us. I have spoken to the State’s Attorney and to the police, there will be no charges. You are free to go.’

“Derrick jumped up and grabbed the papers. ‘Let’s get out of here!’ he said and grabbed my arm. I went along.”

She was so involved in her story that she didn’t stop to apologize again for making it sound like it was all Derrick’s fault.

“I took one last look at mother. She still seemed just . . . what’s that word for not caring one way or the other . . . ammmm?

Someone in the audience shouted out, “Ambivalent.”

“Yeah, that’s it – ambivalent. Then my mother said, ‘I’ll be here.’

“I was confused, I was like, ‘What? You’ll be *here*?’

“Derrick pulled me again, and said, ‘I don’t think she means *here*, like the police station. She means here when you decide to crawl back.’ Then he looked at her with a confidence that scared me a little, ‘Right Senator?’

“She didn’t acknowledge him at all. At that moment a police officer opened the door and we were free. The last time I saw my mother was after they’d processed us and we had to walk back by that room. The door was closed, but we walked past those one-way mirrors. She thought nobody could see her. She was doubled over the table, sobbing her eyes out. Derrick just kept pulling me along. The last time I saw my mother . . . :”

I thought maybe Kara was going to shed some of *her* ambivalence just then as she replayed the memory. But, after the briefest hesitation, she picked right up with her story without any discernable emotional investment. She could’ve been reading the proverbial phone book.

“I’m going to move a little faster now. I know I’ve spent a lot of time on that part but it seems important. Derrick and I, well, we moved to LA and we had some *fun!*” A big smile lasted only a second. It evaporated when it seemed like she remembered where she was. “The wrong kind of fun, of course. We paid for parties and for booze and for everything else for everyone else and we were so popular. He treated me like gold, until I turned up pregnant and that allowed us to get married. Then he took me to take care of the ba- . . . problem.”

I didn’t think she could shock me any more, but she did then. She had absolutely no shame, no remorse that I could see. Everything was just part of the story. *Her* story.

“Then the money was his as well as mine and he wasn’t so good to me any more. He had a lot of ideas, he thought they were great but I just wanted to party and be with him. But he wanted to be a player, and he got more and more involved in importing and distributing and who knows what. He said he was a businessman. I told him a businessman didn’t carry a gun and have people killed and deal with people who got other people killed. He just said I was too stupid to understand. Then one day he said he was going out to negotiate some big deal and he never came back. They found his body in the river a couple of days later.”

So, Derrick was dead. Good.

“The money was gone. Derrick had this friend, he said he’d take care of me if I’d do certain . . . things for him. And for his friends. What else was I going to do? The money was gone.”

It was always about the money. It was always about getting drunk and getting high. It was always about Kara.

“I can’t tell you much about that time. I don’t even know how long it was – weeks, months, a year maybe? All I remember is one day – it was a Friday – I was in a hotel room. I was alone after a . . . anyway, I was alone. I went into the bathroom. I was trying to get the bathroom light on

but I hit the wrong switch and all these lightbulbs came on around the mirror over the sink. You know, like one of those Hollywood makeup mirrors? Now, I tried not to look in mirrors too much then – Mallory said it’s because I didn’t like myself very much. But when all those lights came on I couldn’t help but look. What I saw was . . .” She shook her head as if she couldn’t believe it even now. “What I saw was my mother! In my face, that I did indeed despise, I saw her. Sort of behind and in my own face was hers. And in that moment, I remembered who I was. I remembered what she had said. ‘I’ll be here.’”

“You know, what I’m trying to do now – what my goal was when I went into rehab – is to get back to her. That’s kind of what’s kept me going these last three months. Remembering that she is there. I’m not ready yet, but when I’m sober and clean enough I’m going back there and ask her to get one of those people that owe her to give me job and pay her back. I mean it.”

Was she trying to convince herself?

“I mean it.”

Like a runner who has run out of breath and energy, she came to a halt. She didn’t have anything else to say, I guess, but she didn’t know how to end with the “big finish” she hoped to create. But circumstances created it for her.

As Kara stood there wordless in front of everyone, a woman stood up in the middle of the third row. I was a little farther back so I only saw her back. She had a beautifully printed scarf around her head and was wearing a bulky coat. “Kara, come home now.” It was so gently delivered as to be somewhere between the command implied by the words and an invitation. She began making her way to the end of the row and I began to make out who she was.

So did Kara. Recognition drained all color from her face. “Mother, I . . .”

“Kara, come home now,” she repeated, softer this time, but still without the option to decline.

I heard the unmistakable click of a camera shutter behind me. Kara was frozen in place, mother was in the aisle now and heading for the inevitable embrace.

“Stop! You can’t be here!” I shouted.

Mother turned around just before she reached Kara. She was wearing sunglasses, I suppose hoping that no one would recognize her on the way in. “I have to be here. My daughter is here. We’re going home.”

“But what will the press say? Your opponents? You can’t be in a place like this, with people like this. It represents everything that you’ve said is wrong about the way we treat criminals. Punishment not treatment, right? This daughter of yours is going to destroy your career.”

Mother took two steps toward me, then stopped. Kara remained in her place in the front. “Your sister was gone. Now we have found her. I thank you for that. I followed you here tonight.

I'm not sure why you came but I am here to bring her home. We should be celebrating. Your sister is coming home." She went to Kara and took her by the arm. "Let's go."

This couldn't be happening. "I was just here to see how . . . how low she had gone. And I found out. You did, too. You heard the things she's done. She can't just come back and be part of the family again."

Mother made her way to me. She took the sunglasses off and put them in her pocket. Her eyes glistened but she was certainly not crying. "Leola, you have always been there for me. And I know you always will be. But your sister was lost, and now she is found."

With that, she took me with her other arm and led us both from the meeting. She led us both back home. There was no option to decline.

## **BIBLE STUDY GUIDE FOR “IT’S ALL ABOUT HER”**

This is a modern retelling of the Parable of the Lost Son (or Prodigal Son, or Forgiving Father) in Luke 15:11-32. Before discussing the following questions about the story, be sure to re-read the parable in Luke.

### Discussion Questions

1. What were your general reactions to the story? What themes did you notice were present in the story that were also important in the original parable?
2. Did the change from father and sons to mother and daughters make a difference in the meaning of the story? If so, how so?. If not, is this a change that can be generally made in the parables that Jesus tells without “damaging” the meaning?
3. The names of the characters in this story were all chosen to represent an element of the theme. Discuss the name(s) of the characters in this story as related to the original parable and to Christian “theology” in general:
  - Kara = “Pure”
  - Nancy Gratzia = “Grace” (both names derive from words meaning “grace”)
  - Derrick Ubel = “Ruler of Men” (Derrick); “Evil” (Ubel)
  - Leola = “loyal”
  - (Mallory comes from “counselor” but that is incidental to the story)
4. Kara says that she must be “sober and clean enough” to go home. By clean, she means drug-free, but what does it mean as Christians that we sometimes think we must be “clean enough” to approach God?
5. The story tries to capture the ambiguity of the son’s (in the original parable) journey home. Is Kara really going home because she has really changed, or because she has no place else to go? Does it matter?
6. Discuss the contrast between Law (Senator Gratzia’s stand on addiction) and Grace (Senator Gratzia’s acceptance of Kara).
7. What about Leola’s reaction (the reaction of the “other” son in the Parable)? Isn’t she justified in her complaints? How would you answer her?
8. One more question about Leola – throughout the story, she says that “it’s all about Kara.” But doesn’t Leola’s reaction indicate that she thinks it should really be “all about Leola?” Relate this to the reaction of the “other” son in the parable.
9. Mirrors appear twice in the story. Both times Kara sees her mother – through the one-way mirror at the police station, and in the hotel room mirror. How might this relate to the “lost” son “coming to himself” in the parable?
10. Finally, try to sum up the theme of the story in one sentence. Do the same for the parable.