

Luke 15: 1 – 3, 11b – 32

‘To the Boy Who Stayed’

‘I won’t lie; my sympathies are with you. Your story haunts me. Your resentments mirror mine. Whenever I think of you standing – appalled – outside your father’s house, your brother’s easy laughter ringing in your ears, I ache inside. I imagine you sore and sweat-stained after a day in the fields, longing to go inside for a shower, a meal, a bed. Longing for so many legitimate things – only to be thwarted by a robe, a ring, and a fatted calf. Not intended for you.

Theologians tell me I’m supposed to look at you and see self-righteousness, arrogance, and unholy spite. But I don’t; I look at you and see pain.

What would have happened if you’d looked your father in the eye and said: “Yes. I **know** that all you have is mine. But it’s not enough. I can’t fathom why, but your “everything” is not enough for me. I can’t find contentment. I can’t make my way to love.”

I know these are terrifying things to admit to yourself, much less to say out loud. But what if you had said them? What if you had said: “Something in me is broken. Something in me can’t embrace or enjoy what’s mine. Something in me doesn’t understand the joy that lives in giving myself away. Please help me.”

The challenge of your story – the challenge that tears at me – is that you had **rightness** on your side. You were **right** to call for justice. Right to ask why your brother’s sins incurred no consequences. Right to ask why your own loyalty seemed to count for so little.

You were right to find your father’s version of love a bit much, a bit scandalous, a bit risky. **Because it is.** You’ve understood the point of your own story better than anyone. The real Prodigal in this story is your father, is he not? Over-the-top, undignified, and hair-raising in his love? Of course you are right to be appalled.

Here’s the hardest thing: I don’t know why your father never gave you a young goat. Or threw you and your friends a spontaneous party. I wish with all my heart he had; it makes me angry that he didn’t. Was he waiting for you to ask? Were you, in turn, waiting for him to initiate? I know that mingy, self-protective mindset so well: “if I have to ask for it, then it doesn’t count.”

Maybe it does. Maybe there is something essential to be learned in the asking.

PTO

“We have to celebrate and rejoice.” This is your father’s final word to you as you stand out in the cold, your arms crossed, your fists clenched, your heart bleeding. Did you know that joy is a must in your father’s house? That partying is a duty?

How astonishing that you lived within arm’s reach of your father all these years, and never glimpsed the merriment that is at his core. ***“We have to celebrate and rejoice.”*** He insists. But there you stand, lover of justice. One hundred percent right – and one hundred percent alone.

Some lessons can only be learned as you laugh and dance. Some hearts will only be healed at the feast.

Here’s your vindication, yours and mine: the power in this story is the older child’s. It’s ***yours***. Your brother has gone inside; he’s done breaking hearts for the time being. Now your father stands in the doorway, waiting for you. Waiting for ***you*** to stop being lost. Waiting for you to come home. Waiting for you to take hold at last of the inheritance that has always been yours.

Did you know that your choices are so powerful? You get to write this ending. ***You get to write this ending.***

It’s getting cold outside. The sun is setting, and the party beckons. What will you do, as the music grows sweeter? What will we choose, you and I?

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