

The Reverend Tasha L. Blackburn

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The Lost and Found Table

Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

Once upon a time¹ there was a young man who lived in a town not so far from here. His story has become legend and even inspired song. When he was young and living at home with his parents he began making bad choices; the sort of choices many of us have thought of making and some of us have made; the sort of choices our parents warned us about and we warn our children about. He fought with them, his parents, at every turn. He said things he shouldn't have said. He said the kind of things you're pretty sure you cannot take back. Of course his anger began to spill over to his friends as well, for we always strike out against those closest to us, don't we? Late one night, all that anger brought him to violence and he committed a desperate crime. At the trial, his guilt was clear. He had no innocence to prove. He was convicted and sentenced and jailed. He went to prison, knowing he could not take back all that he had done. Years passed and no visitors came. No letters arrived. The young man was alone there in his cell. All that remained was a past that horrified him by day and haunted him by night.

Finally, he got word that his sentence would soon expire. And with shaking hands he took a pencil and paper and wrote a letter, the first letter he'd written since arriving so many years before. It was a letter to his parents, back home on the farm in the house he could barely remember. He wrote to them of his shame and his sadness. He wrote of how sorry he was for all he had done and how he could not go through a day when he did not regret the choices he'd made. He wrote of their farm and his memories, of playing in the yard as the trains passed nearby. "I will be on a train—on those tracks—two weeks from today", he wrote. "And if you can ever forgive me; if you can ever take me back; hang a white sheet on the clothesline to let me know. But if my crime has been too great; if you cannot bear to have me as your child; you don't ever have to see me again. When I pass by, if there is no sheet, I'll know and I promise to never contact you again." He signed the letter and, heart hammering within him, mailed it to his parents that same day.

The two weeks pass and the man, no longer so young, is released. To everyone at the train station he looks to be free, but he knows it is just an illusion. He has not been free since that night. His crime is his prison, its memory his jailer, its consequences his perpetual punishment. He boards the train and settles in for the long ride. He is anxious and nervous; his sweating hands trembling as he tries to still them in his lap. He tries to imagine a happy homecoming, his parents welcoming him, but it will not come into his mind. He cannot conjure a happy ending in either his heart or his head. All the while, clickety-clack, clickety-clack go the wheels on the track.

Now an older man in another seat notices him. He sees the sweat, the trembling; the anxiety etched in the other's face, and moves to sit nearby. "What's the trouble, son?" he asks and the whole sordid story tumbles out: the troubles of the younger man's youth, the violent act that turned the world against him, the long and lonely years in prison, the guilt he cannot shake, the letter he's sent home.

¹ This is an old story that was first documented during World War One. The original version always involved a white handkerchief or sheet. Much later the song, "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree" was written and based on the older story. The white sheet became a yellow ribbon.

The older man sat and listened to his story and he learned about the white sheet and all that it would mean if it was there—and all that it would mean if it was not. As the miles pass beneath them, and the fear grows, they hear it: the clickety-clack, clickety-clack of the train rolling over the tracks.

Closer and closer they get to the family farm. Closer and closer they get to the younger man's parents. Clickety-clack, clickety-clack. As they turn each corner and cross each cornfield, the young man falls into despair: "Why did I write to them?" He wonders. "Why did I even ask them to forgive me? They never will! They never will!" In our hearts we fear he is right because we know that some things just can't be forgiven, some things, once set on their courses, can't be taken back. Clickety-clack, clickety-clack.

And now they are there: the final turn before the farm. The train passes through the trees which line the farms border. Both men know that this is one of those moments, one of those times that will always be a before and an after. Whatever happens there will be the moment before the farm comes into view and the moment after. "I cannot bear to look," the younger says. "You look for me, please, for I cannot stand to see nothing there." And then there is silence except for the clickety-clack, clickety-clack of the wheels on the track. "What is it?" The young man asks in the silence. "Tell me, what do you see?"

"Oh son," the older man finally says, "Oh son, there's no sheet in that yard. There's not one sheet. Son, they've covered the yard in sheets. Son, you've got to look!" And he did look and he saw all the sheets. Where he would have seen the green of grass it was covered, all in white. Where he would have seen the black of a roof it was covered, all in white. White sheets blew from each window and hung from each tree. Where he would have seen sky it was even covered, all in white. And for one moment, one brief moment, for the first time in years, his mind raced to that day in the past and it too was covered, all in white.

Perhaps you have heard this man's story before. Perhaps you have even lived some of his anxieties and his fears. Perhaps you have heard the clickety-clack of destiny building and building within you and you don't wonder what lies around the bend for me? Will I find forgiveness or will the yard be bare? [moving to the communion table] Perhaps you understand this man's story more than you would ever like to admit. If you understand him then you also need to understand this; that the Gospel of Jesus Christ says to you that today, on this table, is your white sheet [lifting the white cloth on the table]. It has been laid out for you in the hopes that you would pass by and know the love your Savior has for you. At this table let us eat and celebrate for, even if you came here lost; once you've been to this table you are found. You were dead and now you are alive. Amen.