

Letters to Liam, No.5: Crying in the Darkness

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The 4th Sunday in Lent
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Isa 12.1-6; Ps 32; 2 Cor 5.16-21; Lk 15.1-3, 11-32

CCT: Christ gives *Life* to repentant sinners.

The parable in Luke 15.11-32 is about a God who loves us enough to call us to repentance and forgive us (cf. Isa 12.1-6, Ps 32). He calls self-righteous, dutiful sons *and* reckless, prodigal sons to repentance, reconciles us to God, and gives us Life. (cf. 2 Cor 5.16-21) Liam, like most of us, is *both* prodigal *and* dutiful. He needs—like we all need—the God of *Life*.

“Liam” is a literary creation, a conflation of many young people I know. These are personal, pastoral letters, like St. Paul wrote many personal, pastoral letters. They are an effort to speak to some key issues that younger people, especially, are facing. They are forthcoming in confession of Christ, and of personal weakness, in an analogous way to St. Paul. As, e.g., with 1 Corinthians, they address issues that will make some uncomfortable. For the sake of small children, the language is generic. My prayer is that these letter help you prayerfully consider your own personal witness of Christ. —Rev. Lance A. O'Donnell

3/27/2022. Crying in the Darkness

Isa 12.1-6: Though you were angry with me, your anger turned away that you might comfort me (basis of NT canticle in Prayer and Preaching)

Ps 32. Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven

2 Cor 5.16-21: Regard no one according to the flesh... be reconciled to God.

Lk 15.1-3, 11-32: The Parable of the Gracious Father (aka prodigal son)

“*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” (2 Corinthians 1:2, ESV)

Dear Liam,

I am one of those whom St. Paul calls an “ambassador of Christ,” (2 Cor 5.22) one who has been entrusted with the “message of reconciliation,” (2 Cor 5.19) the message that, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” (2 Cor 5.19) “*For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*” (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV)

Some 600 years before St. Paul wrote that, the prophet Isaiah was given a Word looking forward to “that day,” (Isa 12.1) the “day of the Lord,” the fulfillment of God’s promise of *eternal* salvation in Christ:

“Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.” (Isaiah 12:2, ESV)

Liam, I am asking you not to be afraid. I am praying that you will receive this letter from your older cousin, from one of your parents’ generation, a generation that repeated and accelerated the excesses of our parents’ generation even as we angrily reacted against it...

Liam, I rejoice in writing these letters to you and in thinking of and praying for you, in whom—if you’ll forgive me—I see much of my younger self: ambition, charisma, eagerness, compassion, yet also confusion and anger. My previous letters flowed, but I re-started this letter many times. It was difficult to write. If I had not made a promise and set a deadline, I might still be taking notes...

The writer of Psalm 32, the man the world knows as “King David,” the one who slay the giant, Goliath, with a stone and a sling, the one who conquered kingdoms and established Israel among the nations, was—simultaneously—also an utter fool, with rapacious desires. He was, as St. Paul writes of himself in Romans 7, *simultaneously* a saint and a sinner.

I’ll be frank: a lot of Christians have this wrong. They live one reality, but confess another. They confess that in Christ they are “saints.” They say with St. Paul in 2 Cor 5, “I am a new creation,” “the old has passed away, behold! the new has come.” (2 Cor 5.17) They say, “I’m a saint, a new creation,” but their computer logs are littered with porn, they grumble about their spouses and play passive-aggressive mental games, they say “thank you” to their teachers and then tell lies about them to their parents. With the same tongue they “bless our Lord and Father, and with it curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.” As St. James says, “my brothers, these things ought not be so.” (James 3.9-10)

And yet they are.

The *reality* of the Christian life—this side of heaven—is a “both/and.” There is *both* the “new creation” (2 Cor 5.17) *and* there is the “flesh,” the old sinful nature. This reality is *everywhere* in the Scriptures—from the backsliding of

Abraham, to the fearfulness of Moses, to the treachery of David, to the blurting impulsiveness of Peter—but nowhere is it more succinctly and doctrinally stated than in Romans 7, where the great St. Paul himself reveals his inner life:

“So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members [parts of the body] another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:21–24, ESV)

The answer to this question is the truly “good news”:

“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 7:25–8:1, ESV)

God became a man in Jesus Christ to stand-in for us hypocrites. He “became sin for us.” (2 Cor 5.21) He was “. . . tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15b, NIV84) He—as the God-Man—can and did take our burdens upon Himself (cf. Mt 11.28-30), in order to “reconcile us to God,” (2 Cor 5.18) pay the price for all sin, and rise from the dead, victorious over sin and death (cf. 1 Cor 15.57).

Liam, that victory, that reconciliation that is ours in Christ, is the message of which I am an ambassador (2 Cor 5) to you as you cry out in the darkness.

I heard that cry a while back when you “came out” as a “non-binary.” I didn’t join the chorus celebrating your declaration... because I have a very deep sense of the spiritual struggle involved... and the consequences.

Yours is an important cry, and in some ways reflects the cry of David in Psalm 32:

“For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. ” (Psalm 32:3–4, ESV)

Your cry made public a very personal struggle, but the fact that you made such a public declaration, and repeated that declaration, suggests something. If your non-binariness was just the way it is, you might have just

lived it and by that life asked those in your life to either accept it or reject it. But you didn't do that. You made a public declaration.

Again, I have great sympathy for such declarations. I made one myself at a similar age. I took the cross off my necklace, publicly declared Christ a "fraud" and a "crutch," which liberated me to be who I was, to be who I wanted to be, to live my life on my own terms. Isn't that what we're supposed to do? "You do you," right?

It's really similar to the younger son's request in Jesus' parable in Luke 15. The younger son asked his father for his inheritance ahead of time so that he could do his thing. And the gracious father—who represents God in the parable—said, "OK." The son made his request, and the wise father, rather than have a restless and disgruntled son under his roof, gave him what he asked.

Liam, as I noted last week, wisdom is gained *either* by "learning the hard way" *or* by learning from the experience of others. The Scriptures have a special place in that latter category, for—as St. Paul writes in 1 Cor 10—all the accounts of the fathers of the faith in the Bible "took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did." (1 Cor 10.6)

Liam, your non-binary declaration was not entirely different in character than my own libertine declaration. I say this not to scold you. I say this as a fellow traveler. When you hike up the trail you can listen to what the people coming down the trail tell you, or you can ignore it, or you can keep your headphones on and "follow your bliss." But if there's a mountain lion up the trail or clouds coming from the other side of the mountain you can't see, then you'll have to deal with the consequences of ignoring the warnings or risking it. As my old sociology professor said, "Behavior has consequences."

I'm trying to learn from my own mistakes here and follow the lead of the gracious father rather than the impudent son or his self-righteous older brother. I am both, actually. In truth, Christians—in their old sinful nature—are *both* impudent and self-righteous *and*—in their Christian nature—a lover of God and his will. Saints and sinners.

So, I write as one who traveled up the mountain of sexual exploration. I could say, "Been there. Done that. Got the t-shirt." But, in reality, it's more like, "Thus far, survived the zombie apocalypse." Liam, I died spiritually—and nearly physically—because of my exploration. I "squandered my property in reckless living." (Lk 15.13) We don't need to go into the details. You know yours. I know mine.

The reality is that we are sexual beings. Our bodies—almost uniquely in the creation—are designed not simply for reproduction, but also for pleasure. That combination reflects the truth that we are created “in the image of God.” (Gen 1.27) We are created to be loved and to love, to receive and to give, to “be fruitful and multiply,” (Gen 1.28) to rejoice and say, “This is very good.” Consider:

A man’s bodily systems are complete in all respects... but one. A woman’s bodily systems are complete in all respects...but one. Every cell in a man’s body has 46 chromosomes...except one. Every cell in a woman’s body has 46 chromosomes... except for one. Man and woman are meant to complete one another, even at the cellular level. — Christopher West, *Our Bodies Tell God’s Story*

This is part of why the sexual drive is so powerful... and dangerous, for—in the case of humans—“fertilization” is not just the genesis of a being, but of an embodied, eternal *soul*. When we experiment sexually we are, literally, playing with the power of God.

As Jesus Christ shows us by His very being, Liam, you are not a body *with* a soul. You are an *embodied soul* destined for an eternity *in the body*. Your body matters. How we live our lives in our bodies matters. This is why Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. It’s why He talks with and teaches prostitutes. When you’re in the midst of that type of thing you start to accept your lot, or your heart hardens and start to hate God. You lose hope. Jesus injects hope into creation. Jesus is THE HOPE of creation. He is the *embodiment* of what we are *to be*. To tax collectors and sinners, to prodigal sons and self-righteous sons, to those broken by sexual exploration and sexual exploitation, to *all of us* He says, “Come, follow Me. There’s a better way.”

Liam, you know that I love you. You have a sense of what I have done. You know that I am a fellow traveler in this life in the body, so hear me as I come down from the mountain. I know that your “non-binary” declaration was a declaration of intent to live outside God’s design because you feel like you have no other choice. I know you struggled with this for years, since you were a little boy. I know you know God’s design and that it seems impossible for you. I know that you have felt incapable of God’s love.

I do not come to you, I pray, as the self-righteous older brother. I come to you as one who squandered everything in reckless living and had no place to go except to bow before God, plead for mercy, and ask for strength to lead a life on this earth—if necessary—outside of marriage.

At 23 I had no idea how I'd do that. No idea. But I'd lived through my own sexual apocalypse. So, for me, it was figure out how to follow Christ as a single man, or expose myself again to degradation.

And, an amazing thing happened along The Way. I went back to Church. Week-in and week-out I submitted to hearing God's Word. Eventually, I came back to The Lord's Supper, receiving *in my body* the forgiveness of sins, as *in my body* I struggled to follow Jesus. Along The Way, I opened up to other travelers. With some I was very honest about my struggles to follow. Some couldn't handle how raw my struggles were. They had never been there, and we should thank God for that. But with many—who on the outside looked like they had it all together—I found companions on The Way, a family to live with and serve as I learned how to be a celibate, single man.

I know that what I have just described seems impossible to you. While our particular temptations are different, I know despair. I have been up that mountain, and it is Mordor. But—because there was no other way to go and *live*—I followed Jesus, and I began to discover something on The Way, something that St. Paul discovered, and it is my fervent prayer is that you discover it too:

“. . . I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:11b–13, ESV)

Your Cousin in Christ,
Pastor Lance O'Donnell_+