

### "This Very Night"

I want to tell you about two sisters: Olga and Luna. To picture Olga and Luna it's important first of all to know that they are rats. Your mental image of a rat might be a beast the size of a small dog, carrying a piece of pizza and terrible diseases through a subway tunnel. Olga and Luna were not this kind of rat. Olga's fur was cream-colored, her eyes pink. Luna's fur was charcoal, her eyes black. They were small and soft and sweet, and lived at a pet store called Fin and Feather until I brought them home.

Every day I would feed my rats six pellets made of mixed grains—three for Olga and three for Luna. And every day this is what happened: Olga would pick up the first pellet she found, take it in her front paws like a sandwich, and begin to eat it. Luna, meanwhile, would take the first pellet she found in her teeth, and then immediately try to pick up a second. She'd try to hold the second pellet in her front paws and soon re-discover that it wasn't possible to carry a pellet in her paws and walk at the same time. Next she'd try to fit that second pellet in her mouth with the first. That didn't work either. So she'd scurry off to a corner of the cage to deposit the one pellet she could carry, and quickly return to the remaining pellets to get another. And there would be Olga, crouched on her hind legs, eating her pellet.

Imagine the best bite you've had recently. For me it was a mixed berry pie with vanilla ice cream. That first bite—the perfect ratio of crust, filling, and ice cream. Sweet and tart. Crunchy and smooth. I actually had to close my eyes, so completely absorbed in the taste and texture that I couldn't possibly use my other senses too. That's what Olga looked like with her mixed grain pellet, just lost in it.

And while she ate, Luna came and went, taking the pellets one by one off to her hiding place. And when there were none left, you would guess perhaps that Luna finally began to eat. But instead she kept looking, darting here and there like a hound trying to pick up a scent. Luna could never rest until absolutely sure she had not missed a single pellet.

The parable of the Rich Fool begins with a man asking Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." At first glance this request to "divide the family inheritance" seems to be a plea for fairness, for justice. He does not specify

how he would like the inheritance divided, so my mind tends to assume that divide means in half. But then I think about Olga and Luna and wonder which one of them would complain to Jesus. Would it be Olga, who ended up with only one of the six pellets, asking Jesus to intervene on her behalf? No, it would surely be Luna, upset that Olga got one of the pellets who would do this. In fact, sometimes, after Luna had stashed away five pellets and searched everywhere for more, she would go to Olga—still eating her pellet—and try to pry it from her mouth.

It would be nice to tell ourselves that this is how some rats behave because they are not like us. They are not civilized. Not Christian. Not human even. But we know that they are like us. Our scriptures tell us so. Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Martha and Mary, the prodigal son and his older brother. A sibling feeling anger, greed, envy, or resentment toward a sibling is just about the most common depiction of humans in our scriptures.

In today's story we do not meet the brother. For a while I assumed that the brother does not come because he got what he wanted. As I sat with this assumption, it revealed something to me. Some part of me believes that contented people are the ones who get exactly what they want. I didn't think I believed that. I don't want to see myself as the brother who complains to Jesus, but his voice is in me. Part of me believes that I will be happy when... fill in the blank.

The truth is that both siblings live in me. And they both live in you. It is good to know this. That I think is why we hear this story again and again. We want to forget. We want to believe ourselves the generous sibling, and make the greedy one somebody else. But our inheritance cannot be divided. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul makes explicit that the struggle of the brothers is inner work. He writes of the inner division of our "old self" and our "new self." And in the same breath affirms that all our external divisions are an illusion, a projection of our inner struggle on the world around us. There is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free. This is perennial wisdom. Paul's words are as essential for us now as when they were written. I don't need to list our apparent external divisions in 2016; they are named constantly. But where is the conversation about our inner divisions?

This is the conversation Jesus invites us into today. The parable of the rich fool is an illustration of inner division. If we look carefully, we can see the brothers here, as the rich fool speaks to himself. One brother does all the talking. That's the one you usually have to look out for. He describes his great plan for building bigger barns. But

he has to convince his silent brother, the one he calls "soul," that this is a good plan for him too. And so he assures his brother that some glorious day, when the barns are built, he will say, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." Don't worry, soul, this will turn out great for you.

I am an older brother myself. I know these lies well. I know how this story goes. After the barns are built, it's something else. There's always something else. We never run out of reasons to say to the soul, "tomorrow, friend, tomorrow." We'll do your thing tomorrow.

God has recently sent me a teacher, a soul harder to ignore than my own, because I can see his eyes. He is four months old. When I feed him a bottle, he makes eye contact with me the whole time. It's incredible. He'll make eye contact with me for twenty minutes. This I think is what it is to be rich toward God. And I feel inside of me the joy that is God's response. But I feel something else too. There's another voice in me. The brother who doesn't speak the language of the soul starts to get bored. He wants to know when I'm going to pick up my phone, or a book. I actually notice myself getting bored of love. And it doesn't take as long as I think it should. Why is it difficult to give my full attention to my son's eyes, to pure love, for twenty minutes?

On Tuesday, I leave for the Dominican Republic.

I will be away from Emmett for a week.

You know what they say: absence makes the heart grow fonder.

And I know I will miss him. And I'll day dream about staring into his eyes and wonder why it is that I can't focus on him for a full twenty minutes when I am with him. And ironically, my very wondering about this will be my answer.

Emmett won't miss me. He doesn't have object permanence yet. He can't imagine that things continue to exist when he is not directly experiencing them. So while I am missing him, Emmett will be fully present with someone else, melting that person with his eyes. He's not picky about whom he loves. He doesn't yet have the mental barns for storing ideas and images, for housing past or future. He will be overjoyed when he sees me again, but he will not notice my absence, and his heart will not grow fonder.

But here's the thing: his heart couldn't possibly grow any fonder. It's already at maximum fondness.

It's not really that absence makes the heart grow fonder. It's that absence reminds us that permanence is an illusion. And that realization kindles our hearts to love now. We whose brains have achieved object permanence must be reminded constantly. "You fool," God says. "This very night your life is being demanded of you."

May these words kindle our hearts to love that we might know healing within ourselves and in our world.