

1-1-2004

The Man Who Was Not Far from the Kingdom of God

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Recommended Citation

Paul, John Steven, "The Man Who Was Not Far from the Kingdom of God" (2004). Soul Purpose Liturgical Drama. Paper 27.
http://scholar.valpo.edu/soul_purpose/27

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The Man Who Was Not Far from the Kingdom of God[©]
based on a homily by David H. Kehret on Mark 12: 28-34
A play for actors and singers by John Steven Paul
Developed in workshop by Soul Purpose,
The Liturgical Drama Troupe of the Valparaiso University Theatre

Characters:

OSCAR HOLTKAMP

MARTA, *Oscar's wife*

THE NARRATOR, *also Oscar's Next-Door Neighbor, Mr. Fitzpatrick, and Jesus*

A CHORUS of 4 people, (*numbered #4, #5, #6, & #7*), *who play various roles in Oscar's life*

A NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

The Man Who Was Not Far From the Kingdom of God is constructed for performance in a chancel; that space in a church between the altar and the congregational seating. That space may vary in size and shape from church to church: some chancels are rectangular, some are wider than they are deep, some surround the altar platform completely. Whatever their exact physical dimensions, chancels impose certain limits on the staging of a play. The chancel demands movement that is compact, economical, and reverent. In this play, the actors mime the use of specific physical objects.

Many chancels feature a series of steps leading from the floor of the nave to the altar platform. The CHORUS, the most formal least realistic element in *The Man Who Was Not Far From the Kingdom of God* begins and ends on these steps. OSCAR and MARTA who are conceived as a realistic, recognizable young husband and wife, occupy the floor of the nave below the altar platform and near the people. The NARRATOR uses the entire playing area -- steps and floor -- functioning as a bridge between the world of the play and the world of the audience.

The characters of OSCAR and MARTA remain fixed throughout the play. The NARRATOR, however, becomes OSCAR'S next-door neighbor MR. FITZPATRICK who also happens to be a senior partner in OSCAR'S law firm. Later the NARRATOR takes the role of JESUS. The differentiation between MR. FITZPATRICK and JESUS is meant to be somewhat blurred (though a director may want to use a hat to distinguish between one character and another.) There are moments when OSCAR may be looking at FITZPATRICK but seeing and hearing JESUS.

The roles of members of the CHORUS are also fluid. At times they speak with one voice: observing, commenting, helping the NARRATOR to tell the story. Occasionally, CHORUS members assume individual roles or they become extensions of OSCAR'S own

consciousness, revealing his thoughts to the audience. The CHORUS also serves as a link between OSCAR and GOD. They are his community, his fellow travelers on the road that *is* the Kingdom of God.

The Man Who Was Not Far From the Kingdom of God is meant to be performed at a spirited even rapid pace. Character transformations should be effected through the use of fluid movement more like dance than realistic blocking. In those moments when OSCAR is reflecting on the profound meaning of the day's events, the pace of the play should become contemplative.

Finally, the tone of *The Man Who Was Not Far From the Kingdom of God* is comic. OSCAR'S confidence in himself -- which borders on arrogance -- sets him up for a shock, if not a fall. Those who feel superior to him are likely to laugh at one who is incapable of knowing such an obvious truth about himself and God. Others will recognize OSCAR'S predicament as their own and chuckle with a kindred soul. Most Christians will rejoice in OSCAR'S new understanding at the end of the comedy.

This play was written for and developed with SOUL PURPOSE, the student chancel drama troupe of the Valparaiso University Theatre. JSP

NARRATOR

From the moment he woke up, Oscar Holtkamp had the feeling that this day was going to be a special day --

CHORUS

-- maybe even his special day.

MARTA

Something had awakened him even before the alarm went off.

Oscar wakes up. Alarm goes off. He smothers it.

#4

The air was filled with electricity.

#5

The sun oozing its way in through the mini-blinds seemed whiter and more pure than ever before.

#7

Because this was his special day, Oscar Holtkamp got up very quietly so as to waken no one. He showered, dressed, and went on his way.

#6

As he stepped out his front door, the air was so clean and clear it took his breath away.

NARRATOR

Morning, Oscar. Lovely morning.

OSCAR

Isn't it! You know, there's something special about today. Do you feel it?

NARRATOR

Yes, yes I do, now that you say it.

OSCAR

Have a nice. . . no, have a really fine day!

NARRATOR

Thank you, Oscar. Same to you.

In his excitement he was out the driveway and half way down the block before remembering he had forgotten to let out the Siamese cat. So, he had to go back and start all over again.

MARTA

That perturbed Oscar.

Oscar puts cat out. It screams.

OSCAR

Now I'll be behind schedule.

NARRATOR

. . . for his special day.

Oscar kisses Marta good bye. She gives him a grocery list.

NARRATOR & CHORUS

. . . but not late to work.

He leaves for work again.

#7

Because Oscar always set out to get to work early.

#4 and #6

Not extremely early -- people might see that and think he was inefficient.

#5 and #7

But just early enough that folks would think he was dedicated.

NARRATOR, MARTA, & CHORUS

Yes, dedicated..

NARRATOR

. . . that's how Oscar wanted to appear in the eyes of other people.

MARTA

He wants other people to like him. He wants that very much.

OSCAR

(to the audience)

When the son of the senior partner of the firm graduates from law school, people just expect that the small legal firm of . . .

#6

Holtkamp

#4

Holtkamp

NARRATOR

(becomes FITZPATRICK)

and Fitzpatrick

#7

will become the slightly larger firm of

#6

Holtkamp

#4

Holtkamp

NARRATOR

Fitzpatrick

OSCAR

(Marta taps Oscar to prompt him)

. . . and Holtkamp. But sometimes people are still envious and resentful of that kind of thing, so I'll have to work hard to prove that I have the right stuff.

NARRATOR

Oscar did work hard.

MARTA

He works hard to get people to like him.

NARRATOR, MARTA, & CHORUS

And they did like him.

NARRATOR

All of the staff below him would say,

MARTA, #5, & #7

Good morning, Mr. Holtkamp! Find day, isn't it?

NARRATOR

And all of the staff above him would say,

NARRATOR, #4, & #6

Good morning, Oscar. How are you today?

OSCAR

And they would nod to me while I explained to them that I was just fine.

MARTA

Oscar is a good worker and always tries to do everything well.

#7

His daily work was done to perfection, and he was always available to do those little "extras." It was really no surprise, therefore, when the senior partners approached Oscar

#5

at about 11:00 the morning of his special day . . .

#4

Oscar, we'd like to suggest that you might spend today's lunch hour profitably . . .

OSCAR

(to the audience)

I'm used to spending my lunch hours profitably.

#6

What we have in mind, son, is this: There's this new preacher in town from Nazareth . . .

#4

Name's Jesus.

#6

We think you should check him out. Most likely, he'll be preaching over the noon hour in the plaza.

#4

Go over and ask "What is the greatest commandment of the law?"

#6

Yes, "What is the greatest commandment of the law?"

#5

This was not quite the profitable way Oscar had hoped to spend his lunch hour.

OSCAR

(to #5) I'd rather research some fine point of the law. Who is this guy. . .? (He leaves the office.) Oh, well, it is my -- special -- day, and it is nice to be out in the sunshine and clean air.

The stage now represents the plaza. A crowd has already gathered and there is general noise, but their focus is inward. Backs to the audience.

OSCAR

(arriving at the plaza. . .Oscar will now share his thoughts aloud, though confidentially with the audience.)

What a crowd! And what a crowd! (He moves away in some revulsion to the edge of the plaza.) Oh, brother. It figures: Pharisees and Sadducees all over the poor guy. Why is it whenever I see a Pharisee, I feel like I'm taking the bar exam all over again? Always the same ancient questions, taxes and death, death and taxes. I know they're smart but this is. . .

#6

(A Sadducee has moved away from the crowd. His voice rises above the others.)

Answer me this one, "rabbi" . . .

OSCAR

Wait.

#6

. . . a man takes a wife and he dies, right?

(the crowd laughs, acknowledging the effectiveness of this old riddle in tripping up impostors.)

OSCAR

. . . not that old riddle about the widow who married. . .

#6

. . . then the first of his six brothers marries her and *he* dies, OK? Then the next brother marries her and dies, and the next, and the next, and so on until they've all married her and died and then she dies. And, here's the catch, she bore none of them any children. Now after the "resurrection," *(the Sadducees laugh contemptuously)*-- when everybody comes back to life -- whose wife is she?

OSCAR

What a ridiculous idea! Didn't any of the brothers start to see a pattern here? *(Oscar laughs at his own joke)*. Oh shucks, now I missed his answer. I've got to get closer to him to ask my question. Good, there are just a few of them around him now. Oh, brother, there's that loud-mouth they call "the Rock." Well, I'll just stroll over this way . . .

(The crowd has dispersed and NARRATOR stands alone. The others sit below him. Oscar ambles across the plaza.)

OSCAR

(As he walks nonchalantly by. Out of the side of his mouth.)

Uh, Teacher, which is the greatest commandment of the law?

NARRATOR

You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength. And you will love your neighbor as yourself.

(Pause.)

#7

Oscar was taken aback by Jesus's answer.

#6

It was straight out of the Scripture, right out of the Law itself.

#5

In fact, it was the answer that Oscar himself had come to believe correct.

#4

The teacher thought just like Oscar.

OSCAR

He's not so bad after all.

#4

In his excitement, Oscar unexpectedly blurted out . . .

OSCAR

Right you are, Teacher! There is no greater law than loving God with everything you are and your neighbor as yourself! This is much greater than all the sacrifices and burnt offerings.

MARTA

Oscar has never been much for ritual.

#4

But now the preacher was responding to Oscar again, and suddenly Oscar felt as if all of the electricity in the air was flowing through his body and the light was burning through him as never before.

NARRATOR

You are not far from the Kingdom of God.

#4

Dizzy and disoriented, Oscar scarcely understood how he made it out of the plaza and back to his car and in his car back to the office. All along the way the words kept pounding their way into his mind.

NARRATOR

You are not far from the Kingdom of God.

#5 & #7

You are not far from the Kingdom of God.

MARTA, NARRATOR, & CHORUS

You are not far from the Kingdom of God.

#4

God had noticed Oscar.

#7

What some people were saying was true. This Jesus was a prophet sent from God -- maybe even sent just for Oscar.

#6

God had seen Oscar and had approved of him.

MARTA

That's really what Oscar has been wanting all along--to be *liked* by *God*.

OSCAR

And God does like me. I'm not far from the Kingdom of God. (*Pause.*) But how do I tell people about that? I almost wish I could put it on a shirt, or wear a button saying

NARRATOR, MARTA, & CHORUS

(*LOUD*)

NOT FAR FROM THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

#6

But that would be inappropriate.

OSCAR

Maybe a plaque for the office, a humble plaque . . .

MARTA, #5, & #7

But something which people might just notice out of the corner of their eye as they sit there:

CHORUS

(in a whisper)

OSCAR HOLTkamp -- NOT FAR FROM THE KINGDOM OF GOD

#5

But it's hard to tell people directly. *(Pause.)* When he got back to the office and his senior partners inquired. . .

#6

Well, Oscar how was your trip to the plaza. . .

#4

Yes, how was the preacher?

OSCAR

Well, sir, I think this Jesus is right on and I certainly can't see what all the fuss is about. *(They nod and go about their business. Oscar begins to go on. . .)* In fact, when I asked him our question . . . *(Pause.)* Maybe I'll tell my secretary sometime this afternoon--*(his secretary briskly walks by him)* maybe just drop it in in the course of dictation.

#5

The opportunity never arose.

OSCAR

Well, *(sigh)* I'll tell Marta. She'll understand. *(warming to the prospect)* Yes, she'd want to know something like that. Marta will . . . appreciate . . . that I'm not far from the Kingdom of God.

#4

All the way home in the car he planned it out...

OSCAR

Simultaneously

CHORUS & MARTA

I'll come in the front door and say, "Marta, how was your day? Guess what. . . I'm not far from the Kingdom of God!"

YOU ARE NOT FAR FROM THE
KINGDOM OF GOD.
YOU ARE NOT FAR FROM THE
KINGDOM OF GOD.
YOU ARE NOT FAR FROM THE
KINGDOM OF GOD.

NARRATOR

But when he got home things didn't quite happen that way. When he burst through the door, the Siamese cat was in the way. (*cat screams*) Oscar tripped and lost his balance. He forgot all about asking Marta concerning her day and what came out was something like

OSCAR

Guess who's not far from the Kingdom of God.

MARTA

Your Uncle Milton.

OSCAR

What?

MARTA

Your mother called earlier this afternoon to say that he had taken a turn for the worse and probably wouldn't last the week. What do you expect for someone that old? She tried to catch you at lunch. You were out somewhere so she called here. I'm surprised she left a message for you. Did you stop at the store on the way home?

NARRATOR

Oscar had not stopped at any store on the way home.

#6

And things were not going the way he had planned. He felt it best to drop the Kingdom of God subject for now. . .

MARTA

. . . and the evening, including the evening meal, was spent rather quietly.

OSCAR

(at the supper table) I'm sorry honey, it's been an exhausting day. I think I'll go to bed. *(On the edge of his bed now)* Well, *[sighs]* so much for my "special" day.

#4

He lay there not feeling close at all to the Kingdom of God.

#6

Then, in the silence, he began looking back over his life, reviewing the progress he had made, re-living the success he had in his job over the last couple of years.

#5

He began thinking about how good he was at things and how good he tried to be and how so many people liked him so much, and he began to feel closer and closer to the Kingdom of God.

#4

And the events of the noon hour reinforced that feeling once again--

NARRATOR

Not far from the Kingdom of God. . .

CHORUS

(They get quieter with each line)

Not far from the Kingdom of God. . .Not far from the Kingdom of God...Not far from the Kingdom of God...

OSCAR
(dreaming)

It's so beautiful, but I can't find the way in. . . it's the most beautiful . . . wonderful garden I've ever seen. . . but there's no gateway. . . I'll just have to drive a bit further down this parkway. . . no. . . no. . . there's no way in. . . further down the parkway. . . oh, my God. . . there's no way in!
[OSCAR awakens.]

#4

He was not certain what jarred him awake . . .

MARTA

. . . but suddenly he was wide awake in the middle of the night, his eyes staring up into the darkness and . . .

OSCAR

My heart's throbbing!

#4

He knew his dream had something to do with what Jesus had said.

OSCAR

(Outside now. NARRATOR as Fitzpatrick is there, down on hands and knees.)

No, it's something Jesus *didn't* say. *(Sees NARRATOR and realizes he's spoken aloud.)* Oh . . . Hi . . . What're you doing out this time of night?

NARRATOR

(Fitzpatrick)

Digging night crawlers. *(as if it were the most normal thing in the world)*

OSCAR

(preoccupied)

Oh. Sure. Night crawlers. Are they bitin'?' *(He begins to pace.)*

NARRATOR

Oscar. Something on your . . . mind?

OSCAR

Oh, I . . . Well, I . . . So, I went down to the plaza this afternoon to hear a preacher. *(OSCAR realizes this sounds like a dubious activity. He hesitates.)*

NARRATOR

Yes . . . ? Well, what'd he have to say?

OSCAR

(Encouraged by the prompt. He really needs to talk.) Well, that's just it. He said, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God. . . ."

NARRATOR

Oh, did he? Well . . . good for you.

OSCAR

But you see he didn't say, "Hey welcome to the Kingdom of God!" or "Well, it certainly is nice to meet someone else who's part of the Kingdom of God." What he said was,

NARRATOR

You are not far from the Kingdom of God.

OSCAR

. . . Yes. *(to the audience.)* But that must mean there's a gap, there's still a ways to go. *(Pause.)*

#4

(Oscar returns to the house.)

Oscar was already as good as he could be.

NARRATOR

'Night, Oscar.

#6

He didn't know how he could manage to be better.

MARTA

If there was something more he had to do so God would like him, he couldn't imagine how that was humanly possible.

#4

What if the road he was on did not really lead to the Kingdom of God? (*Oscar gets into bed.*)

#7

What if it was like that parkway in his dream . . . ?

#6

never far away from, but,

NARRATOR & CHORUS

on the other hand,

#5

never getting inside either.

OSCAR

I'm sweating like a racehorse.

#7

Perhaps in her sleep Marta sensed his turmoil, for she moved just slightly,

#4

Oscar noticed her hand on his shoulder.

#7

She often slept with her hand on his shoulder.

OSCAR

(*Half aloud.*) Well, at least she likes me. (*Pause.*) I think. (*He tries to rouse her.*) Marta . . .
Marta. . . You like me, don't you.

MARTA

What . . . Oscar . . . are you all right, dear?

OSCAR

Do you like me, Marta?

MARTA

Oscar, I love you.

OSCAR

Oh, I know that, but do you *like* me?

MARTA

Well, mostly. (*Oscar is downcast*). Well, Oscar, sometimes you're not all that likable.

OSCAR

You mean like tonight at dinner? I was pouting, wasn't I?

MARTA

Well there *was* something I wanted to talk to you about, and then you just went off to bed.

OSCAR

I'm sorry, Marta. I don't blame you for not liking me.

MARTA

Oscar, I *love* you. I've *always* loved you. Do you know what that means?

OSCAR

I don't know. I've always wanted you-- I've always wanted everyone to *like* me. Why do I need to be liked?

MARTA

Because it's easier.

OSCAR

What? Come on, Marta. No jokes. I need to know this. I'm in trouble.

MARTA

It's easier, Oscar. When you're being liked you have some control over the situation; when you're being liked you can make demands; when you're being liked you can cheat a little bit and still come out ahead. But not when you're being loved. I love you, Oscar. But sometimes I feel like you're keeping my love at arm's length. *(Pause.)* Do you love me, Oscar? Don't answer too quickly.

OSCAR

Marta . . . I think I love you. I want to love you . . . I think. I need to be alone for just a little while. OK?

MARTA

Of course, dear. But, don't forget,

(NARRATOR links hands with #4 who links with #6, who links with #7 who links with #5 who then links hands with Marta, who places her hand on Oscar's shoulder)

MARTA, NARRATOR [& CHORUS softly]

I love you.

#4

All of a sudden, Oscar's whole world began to tilt and turn.

CHORUS

The universe around him swirled.

#7

No longer was it just Marta's hand on him, but through her God's hand on him.

CHORUS

Is that the way it is with God, too?

Oscar runs outside.

OSCAR
(*Breathless*)

Does God really love me? Have I been keeping *God's* love away at arm's length all these years because I have demanded that God like me? Could it be that God is not in the "liking business" at all, that what God is up to is loving (*he begins knocking on Mr. Fitzpatrick's "door"*) Mr. Fitzpatrick . . . Mr. Fitzpatrick . . . Oh, please . . . Mr. Fitzpatrick. (*while he waits*) God's been waiting patiently for the tiniest crack to get God's love inside me and now once inside it's going to reach way down to my very depths, I know it!

NARRATOR as Fitzpatrick appears.

NARRATOR

Goodness, Oscar, what is it?

OSCAR

(*startled*)

Oh, Mr. Fitzpatrick, it's you. Mr. Fitzpatrick, have you ever been loved? I mean . . . pardon me, sir . . . I know you've been loved . . . you're married . . . your wife . . . I mean . . . Oh, I don't know what I mean . . . I mean, you know what the preacher said to me today?

NARRATOR

You will love the Lord your God with--

NARRATOR & CHORUS

all your heart--

NARRATOR

with--

NARRATOR & CHORUS

all your soul--

NARRATOR

with--

NARRATOR & CHORUS

all your mind--

NARRATOR

and with--

NARRATOR & CHORUS

all your strength.

OSCAR

(Not listening at first)

No, not that . . . yes, that. How did you?

#4

With a start Oscar realized that such a love for God was really only a response to the God who also loved that way

NARRATOR & CHORUS

totally, unquestionably

NARRATOR

loving every part of him

CHORUS

his body, his mind, his emotions, everything.

OSCAR drops to his knees.

NARRATOR

Oscar, what is it? What's the matter?

OSCAR

I feel like I just met God.

NARRATOR

How does it feel?

OSCAR

Not very pleasant. I feel like I'm in a boxing match and it's the first round. After God's through with me, you won't even recognize me. I'll be. .

NARRATOR

You'll be all new. God'll renew, revitalize, reclaim you.

OSCAR

Mr. Fitzpatrick . . . do *you* know what I'm feeling?

NARRATOR

Well I can't be exactly sure, Oscar, but I'll bet you're feeling . . . skewered . . . yes, skewered, and slowly turning on a spit over the fire of God's love.

OSCAR

What a bizarre image.

MARTA

Twelve hours ago he was scoffing at burnt offerings and now he *feels* like one!

OSCAR

I'm skewered! Hah! . . . 'Night, . . . Mr. Fitzpatrick. (*Oscar goes back inside and stops at the bathroom sink*)

#4

It was all there for Oscar and he knew it. He would get up the next morning and go about doing some of the same old things he had always done to get God to like him . . .

NARRATOR

But there'd be a difference.

#7

Now he would know such things were useless, even absurd, when dealing with a God who loved him.

#6

And he knew that this loving God eventually would cut him up entirely and put him back together . . .

NARRATOR

. . . in a whole new way.

#5

It took Oscar's breath away to think of how long that might take, but God was patient and once begun God would see it through no matter how long it took--

NARRATOR

even if it took--

CHORUS

forever.

MARTA

Oscar's back in bed now.

Been a long day, Oscar?

OSCAR

I knew this was going to be a special day, but I had no idea. *(Pause.)*/ I love you, Marta.

MARTA

Don't use the word *love* lightly.

OSCAR

Never again.

MARTA

Good night, Oscar.

OSCAR

Good night Marta, I think I learned something today, or maybe I remembered it.

MARTA

What's that, dear?

OSCAR

There's no road that leads to the Kingdom of God. *(Pause.)* The kingdom *is* the road.

MARTA

(The beginning of a prayer)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

NARRATOR

(after a brief silence)

Amen

END