

1-1-2004

# The Brother

John Steven Paul  
*Valparaiso University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholar.valpo.edu/soul\\_purpose](http://scholar.valpo.edu/soul_purpose)

---

## Recommended Citation

Paul, John Steven, "The Brother" (2004). Soul Purpose Liturgical Drama. Paper 23. [http://scholar.valpo.edu/soul\\_purpose/23](http://scholar.valpo.edu/soul_purpose/23)

This Liturgical Drama is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Theatre at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Soul Purpose Liturgical Dramas and Essays by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at [scholar@valpo.edu](mailto:scholar@valpo.edu).

The Brother<sup>1</sup>©  
Adapted from a homily by David H. Kehret  
Based on Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32.  
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:

Lefty, *a gas station attendant and “one of the boys”*

Man, *a ranch owner*

Jake, *his son*

Woman, *his wife (deceased)*

A waitress

*The scene is a cafe. It’s a friendly, not a fancy place. The kind of place where people come to tell their stories and can expect to be listened to. The five tables are spread with checkered cloths. At the table upstage left sits a WOMAN alone. At rise, a WAITRESS saunters in with one thing on her mind, the jukebox, at left. She drops A coin into the slot and music animates the scene. She then goes about the business of wiping the tables, seeming not to notice the WOMAN. Now LEFTY, an attendant at the service station attached to the cafe, walks in, greets the WAITRESS and proceeds to the jukebox. Finally, a MAN enters and joins the WOMAN at her table. At the other are seated a MAN and a WOMAN. The entrance to the cafe is up center. Down left is an empty table: this is the audience’s table. The WAITRESS waits on the audience in the same manner that she does the other four customers.*

WAITRESS

The Gospel reading appointed for today is found in **Luke, chapter 15, verses 1-3 and 11-32.**

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told this parable:

THE MAN

There was a man who had two sons.

THE WOMAN

The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.”

---

<sup>1</sup>© All rights reserved.

## THE MAN

So he divided his property between them.

## THE WOMAN

A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off and went to his father.

## LEFTY

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

## THE WOMAN

Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

## THE MAN

But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"

## LEFTY

And they began to celebrate.

## JAKE

Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.

## LEFTY

He replied, your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got back safe and sound.

JAKE

Then he became angry and refused to go in.

THE MAN

His father came out and began to plead with him.

JAKE

But he answered his father, Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat to celebrate with my friends. But when this son of your came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!

THE MAN

Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and has been found.

LEFTY

*(to the WAITRESS)* . . . Jake’s got this dark, gray pickup truck, you know it ‘cause it’s got, “Mister J” printed on the side. Jeep. Four-wheeler with a black roll bar, oversized tires, and a double gun rack up on the window behind the driver’ seat. [*JAKE enters and crosses down center*] So, he pulls up on the concrete pad under the canopy. Next to the gas pump.

**JAKE**

**LEFTY**

*(simultaneously)* I beep the horn . . .

*(simultaneously)* He beeps the horn.

JAKE *(continuing)*

. . . open the door and step down from the driver’s seat. I remember exactly closing the door, leaning against it and fiddling for a minute under my vest -- I was wearing my blue, plaid shirt -- taking out a cigarette, lighting it, and putting the Bic back into my jeans pocket

LEFTY

He tapped the heels of his boots together to loosen the dried mud caked on them. Hey, Jake . . .

JAKE

*(to the audience)* Lefty.

LEFTY

Sorry to keep you waiting. Raiders givin' the Broncos one hell of an afternoon! Fill 'er up?

JAKE

Yeah, fill it up, and check this front tire; looks sort of low. Beer in the cooler?

LEFTY

Help yourself. *[JAKE moves to the down right table and sits by himself]*

WAITRESS

*[Moving to the table down left]* Lefty's station, next door (just the wall between us) is a wonder of diversity. The profitability of pumping gas faded long ago. Just like the bright red, winged horse on the side of the station, which is now a pink shadow of its former glory. Automotive repair was an attempt to help make ends meet, but the things Lefty can fix most folks around here can fix themselves. So retail trade makes up the profit margin--candy and pop, snacks, beer, cigarettes, hunting and fishing licenses and gear, and maps for the occasional stranger who wanders in not knowing how to get somewhere. That isn't often, since there aren't many places to get to from out here.

LEFTY

*[to the WAITRESS]* I heard the snap and fizz of a beer can opening as Jake came out of the station. He put the rest of the cans on the seat of the truck. *[calling to JAKE]* Say, Jake? Tire pressure's OK, but you got all kinds of mud caked up here in your wheel well that's weighing it down. Where you been anyway? You got mud all over "Mister J".

JAKE

Up North. Me and Dutch and Gater and Dutch's cousin from Cheyenne. We decided to get in on the last of the hunting season. Got into a rain shower up there this morning. That's how I picked up the mud. First rain I've seen for weeks. Maybe the weather will break. Herd is scattered all over the place, spooked by the smoke from the fires. Took us from Wednesday till just this morning to get anything. Nice buck. Dropped him off at Johanson's on the way in. I'll bring some sausage by when it's done. Some for your ma, too.

LEFTY

That's kind of you, Jake. Say then, you've been away since Wednesday?

JAKE

Yup.

LEFTY

And you're just on the way in--haven't been out to the ranch yet?

JAKE

Right again.

LEFTY

Then you haven't heard

JAKE

Heard what?

LEFTY

That he's back.

JAKE

Lefty, I still don't know any more than when you started. Who's back?

LEFTY

He's back. Alex.

WOMAN

Your brother. Alex is back.

JAKE

Well, I'll be damned.

LEFTY

*[to the WAITRESS]* He slumped over the hood of "Mister J".

JAKE

That good-for-nothing bastard. Just when I thought he had dropped off the face of the earth and the world a better place for it. Now you say he's back again. How did he get here? When?

LEFTY

Just last Friday. Word is your pa drove into Laramie to pick him up. Say, Jake, maybe I shouldn't have said nothing. Maybe they wanted to keep it a surprise for you. But hell, the whole town knows. Probably a good thing you stopped by here, so as I could tell you. I know things haven't always been the best between you and Alex. [pause] Well, anyway, that's an even twenty on the gas, the beer is on me, and don't forget to bring some sausage by, OK? *[to the WAITRESS]* He gives me a twenty and then he's up in the cab firing up "Mister J" and heading down the highway west out of town.

JAKE

Snap. Fizz.

WAITRESS

West of town about ten miles, the highway takes a turn to the north. Just at the curve is the gravel road to the Thompson ranch. That ranch covers miles in every direction. Up by the ranch house, there's a half-dozen barns and a few sheds.

JAKE

There must of been six, maybe eight cars parked around the house just off the edge of the grass. I drove on through the yard and around behind one of the barns onto a cracked cement slab where there's a water line and a hose hooked up. Felt better to drive on out there rather than go on into the house. I'd just started to hose the mud off of "Mister J" when I heard the screen door slam. Saw folks are starting to go home; hoping nobody saw me drive in.

MAN

Jake?

JAKE

It was Dad coming around the corner of the barn.

MAN

Hi, Jake, thought I saw you come in. How was hunting?

JAKE

All right.

MAN

Well, did you bring anything back?

JAKE

Got a buck this morning.

MAN

You bring him down?

JAKE

Gater did. Say what's with all the cars around the house?

MAN

Well, Son, that's just what I was coming on out to tell you about. We got a little get-together going on inside. It's one of those things that you hope for and pray for so long that you stop believing it could ever happen. Your brother, Alex. Your brother has come back home!

JAKE

Yeah, I know!

MAN

Oh, Son, I was hoping to tell you myself.

JAKE

Stopped by Lefty's. Seems I was the last one in town to hear about it. What's he up to anyway?

MAN

Well, what he's up to is just that he's decided to come back home.

JAKE

Just decided to come back home, huh? Just like that! You make it sound like he was off on some vacation. Hasn't shown his face around here for over three years and never let us know where in the world he might be or even if he was alive or dead, and you say. "Well, he just decided to come home."

MAN

Now, Jake, I know you feel some resentment toward your brother about his never keeping in touch.

JAKE

Dad, Alex doesn't owe me a thing, and I don't owe him anything. And I don't resent anything for myself; it's you he's hurt. You're the one whose life has been a pain because of him--not me.

MAN

Listen, Jake, your brother just had to find his own way through life. That comes harder for some than for others. Maybe this is a turning point for him. Maybe he'll stay here on the ranch now.

JAKE

Oh? And that prospect is supposed to make me glad to see him back. And just like that forget about all he's done.

MAN

We don't know anything about what your brother's been up to. Probably just trying to find himself.

JAKE

Dammit, Dad, have you forgotten all the things he did to you? You sent him off to college. Four years you scrimp and save to keep him in school. It's only when you start asking questions about graduation that you find out he dropped out of school middle of his second year. And all that money you kept sending him for college--whatever happened to that? God only knows what he wasted every cent on! Month after month, you scrimped--he blew it away. Promised to pay

you back after he got on his feet, right? And that promise kept you on the string for how much longer? Until you finally decided he had to learn to stand on his own and earn his own way! Like I had been doing all along! Then what? Is he grateful for your encouragement? Hell, no! That's when he up and disappears. Not a word for three years! Now he's back, to stand on his own feet? Well, I'm not buying it!

MAN

Jake, how about you just come in and say hello. Alex would like to see you again. Forget about what he's done. Uncle Ray is here. And the Pattersons. They'd all like to see you.

JAKE

That's bullshit, Dad; they came to see him. "Let's all go out to the ranch and see the prodigal son come home." Well, they can sit and gawk at him. I for one am not setting foot into that house as long as Alex is there. There's not enough room under that roof for the both of us. I'll be in town.

MAN

Jake hopped in the cab of "Mister J", started the engine with a roar, and backed off the cement slab. Then he was through the yard and down the lane to the highway.

JAKE

I knew what I wanted. Snap. Fizz.

WAITRESS

The town and the Wayside Cafe, of course, on a Sunday evening was all locked up. . .

JAKE

. . . with the exception of Lefty's.

LEFTY

I was just closing up. But Jake stopped by and picked up a whole armload of Twinkies, beef jerky, chips, smoked sausage--those kind in plastic wrappers-- and, a , uh--

JAKE

---bag of redskin peanuts.

LEFTY

yeah.

JAKE

Naturally, there was a vacant room at the Castaway motel, just on the west side of town.

MAN

Jake had his Sunday dinner and two cans of beer spread out on the coffee table with the television way high up on the wall switched on. He was settled back into an overstuffed chair.

LEFTY

I think HBO had on some movie about aliens in outer space that night.

MAN

He'd dozed off.

JAKE

Something startled me awake. It was dark outside.

LEFTY

No, I remember now. It was some movie about primitive warriors.

MAN

Jake?

JAKE

Just a minute. I pulled myself out of the chair and stumbled over to the door. Before I could get there he banged again. I finally got the door open. It was Dad.

MAN

Saw your truck outside. Figured you was probably holed up here. Mind if I come in? [*Jake moves out of the way.*] Mind if I sit down? Aliens?

JAKE

Primitive warriors.

MAN

hmmn. *[pause]* Company finally all left. Ed and Jules stayed til dark. You know how they always are. Hadn't seen their kids for awhile; sure have grown. And you know Syble Jimson? Hadn't seen him for years. Matter of fact we haven't had a house full like that for quite some spell. *[no response]* Dammit, Son, I'm not going to stand here all night and do one-liners, trying to get you to talk to me. If all you're going to do is sit there like a bump on a log, I might as well go home.

JAKE

If you're wanting conversation, go home and talk to Alex.

MAN

Don't do that to me , Jake. Don't make me have to choose between the two of you.

JAKE

Well, what do you want from me anyway? Do you really expect me to come home and pretend like nothing ever happened--like Alex had stayed around and helped out with the ranch--or like he had gone off and made something of himself for everybody to be proud of? So here he comes home. Let's throw a family reunion; have all the folks in. Come on into the party, Jake, you say, we'll all have a wonderful time. We'll just all pretend there's been no water over the dam. You sure have guts, Dad. You come here and say, "My goodness we haven't had a house full like that for quite some time! You're damned right we haven't had a house full like that for quite some time. The place has been like a mortuary for years. Now, when Alex suddenly reappears, it's party-time.

MAN

Jake. Jake. Just come on out to the ranch and see your brother. That's all I'm asking of you. Maybe if the two of you talked, maybe if you listened to each other, we could get things together again. God knows how I've tried to hold the two of you together. But you were always so different from each other, and I love you both. Jake, don't forsake me like this.

JAKE

Dad, I'm not going to forsake you. And don't worry about the ranch. I'll be out there first thing in the morning. We have a load of feed coming in. But I'm not going to live out there as long as Alex is around.

MAN

No, come back on out and be with us. If not for my sake then at least for the sake of your mom, so we can be together again. There's not much time for that anymore.

JAKE

If you mean Alex is going to be off and running again in no time, you're probably right. He'll be around just long enough to con you out of some more money, then he'll be off and up to no good. Say, he isn't back trying to weasel a share of the ranch is he?

MAN

The ranch is in your name and your name alone. Besides, your brother is not going to have any use for a share of the ranch. *[long pause]* Jake, Alex is dying.

JAKE

He's what?

MAN

He's dying. I didn't know it till just now. We talked after the company all left. That's why it took me so long to get in here to talk to you. Makes things start to fall into place--like him calling from Laramie, saying he would have hitched a ride out but he wasn't feeling well enough. That's why I had to drive in to pick him up.

JAKE

What makes him think he's dying? How can you be sure? Has he been to a doctor? Probably just needs a prescription. Doc Halverson . . .

MAN

Jake, your brother has AIDS.

JAKE

What?

MAN

AIDS. *[JAKE looks at his father dumbstruck.]* Don't act like you're the last person on earth to hear of it!

JAKE

Alex has that faggot disease? Dad, you know what that disease is all about? You know how people get it? It comes from guys screwing . . .

MAN

I know where it comes from! And from drugs, and from blood transfusions. It's not just the one thing.

JAKE

So now you're going to tell me that Alex got AIDS from a blood transfusion.

MAN

No. He didn't get it from a blood transfusion. He says it could have been from dirty needles doing dope. Or, it could have been from the other.

JAKE

Holy Shit! My own brother, a goddamn faggot! And he comes to die on our doorstep. You know how fast everybody in town is going to know about it? We'll never live it down. After all your talk over all these years about the Thompson name and the Thompson ranch. "Queer Ranch," that's what they'll call the spread. Last time there was a queer around here was that Larry Cabot wimp. You remember what the guys did to him?

MAN

No one has to know, Jake. We'll just keep it in the family. He has medicine, but the doctor says he won't have a long time anymore. Some kind of cancer because of the AIDS. That's what we'll tell the folks around here. That he's dying of cancer. If he has to go to a hospital, we'll take him to Cheyenne, even Denver. No one will ever know.

JAKE

Nobody but us, right? Like we don't count. Like it makes no difference that this is absolutely the last straw of everything Alex ever put us through over the years. We don't count. We can just take all the shit he ever has to dish out . . .

MAN

Jake. Not for me. Do it for your mom, for Mom, for her sake. Come on back and be family yet for the little while we got left. *[The MAN gets up, stands in silence for a moment, and goes to the door. He turns and pauses as if wishing there was still something else he could say to turn the trick. Then he gives up and goes out the door.]*

WOMAN

Jake sat alone in the quiet darkness of the room. Only the dim light from the parking lot came through the window. The small table was a clutter of peanut bags, Twinkie wrappers, and two crushed beer cans. The room had a stale scent about it that old motels share in common, a scent of beer and cigarette smoke and human sweat, embedded in old, worn carpeting and drapes and wooden panels. Jake's mind was a total blur of unfocused shadows, slipping from one unfinished thought to another half formed notion, then off again to yet another dismal corner. The room where he had sought refuge, a place from which to stand up for all that was right and decent, had become a prison. The walls closed in on him. Perhaps the night air would do him some good to clear his head and let him think.

LEFTY

Jake got up and went outside, *[JAKE exits]* pulling the door shut behind him. He went over to "Mister J" and got a jacket, threw it on and started down the cinder lane leading along the side of the motel away from the highway and out along the edge of town.

WAITRESS

The air was crisp and clear, the black night sky was alive with stars. A thin sliver of a new moon hung over the western horizon.

WOMAN

It felt good to be outside, in the open. The muddle in his head was evaporating. But the clearness that replaced it only added to the sharpness of the dilemma in which Jake found himself. The very worst possible set of circumstances had all come down together to gang up on him.

LEFTY

Jake could have gone happily through life without Alex ever returning.

WOMAN

In fact, Jake secretly had feared precisely that which indeed had happened--that one day, out of the clear blue, Alex would again be part of the picture. As if that wasn't bad enough, Alex had come home to die. There would be no way to get rid of him.

LEFTY

And the word would get out, His dad was wrong. Secrets like that could not be hidden forever. Somebody would know someone else off somewhere who knew about Alex, and the gossip would begin to flow.

WAITRESS

Never a word would be spoken openly to them about what had been common knowledge. The facade would be left in place. But the knowledge would be in everyone's eyes . . .

LEFTY

. . . Sneering . . .

WAITRESS

. . . ridiculing . . .

WOMAN

. . . or, worst of all, pitying. And there was no way out. Jake was locked into it to the bitter end.

LEFTY

Only half aware of the direction his footsteps were leading, Jake followed the cinder lane along the west side of town, stepped over the dry weeds of a ditch, then over an old rusty fence. He had not been out there for some time and had never come in like this from the backside.

WOMAN

Still, he figured he could find his way.

WAITRESS

It was not an entirely unfamiliar place.

WOMAN

The years had brought him there again and again for various occasions.

LEFTY

He moved along the dark paths, past markers lighted only by the stars, across a couple of rows of granite slabs, standing like soldiers at attention. Then down a ways [*JAKE re-enters*].

WOMAN

A familiar angle. A familiar shape of stone, though not so different from all the others.

*[JAKE bends close and feels the rough surface and the carved letters.]*

JAKE

+ Elizabeth Marie Thompson + Wife and Mother + April 7, 1950 + October 23, 1987 +  
Well, Mom, he's back. Your darling is back. He was the apple of your eye, your delight. I wonder what you'd think of him now. Probably make no difference to you.

WOMAN

Poor Alex.

JAKE

I was the one who always obeyed all the rules.

WOMAN

You're a good boy, Jake.

JAKE

While Alex who was always pulling some shit or another always found room in your lap, always an empty hand to hold.

LEFTY

By now, Jake had found a club-like branch, blown off a dry tree by the wind, and was swinging it wildly in the air.

JAKE

Well, he's back with us, Mom, to stay! And it won't be long before he's right here by your side again. When Dad bought these plots, he never figured one of us kids would go before him. But I can hear him already . . .

MAN

*[from off]* We'll put him there next to his mom. He belongs there, next to Mom.

JAKE

And when it's Dad's time to go, probably some plot over in the corner, and when it's my time, God only knows. *[The swinging of the branch becomes sharper and more vicious.]* So he's going to be all yours, Mom. I hope you're happy now.

LEFTY

The stout branch smashed upon the edge of the tombstone, shattering to bits and sending tiny bits of stone flying.

WOMAN

And with the shattering of the wood and the stone, Jake's anger broke apart as well.

LEFTY

He stooped suddenly to run his fingers along the newly marred edge of the stone marker.

JAKE

Oh, Mom, Mom. I needed your love so badly. And maybe you loved me in your own way, but I could never feel it. Alex was always in the way. And then you were gone. I needed you so desperately. Just when I needed you most you weren't there anymore. Three men together, one hardly grown up and the other two barely starting to be men, trying to make sense out of a world without a woman in it. The pain was more than I could bear. I had to get you out of my mind, had to forget you, just to go on living. I needed you so.

WOMAN

The words had at last all been spoken. There was nothing left but sobs to come out in great waves as Jake lay on the ground, tears streaming down his face soaking the dry earth. And when one great wave of sobbing was over, another would take its place, and another until finally there was nothing left at all.

LEFTY

Jake lay there in the stillness, exhausted.

WAITRESS

The sliver of a moon had set.

LEFTY

Only the stars lit the night, as Jake found his way back again across the fence and weed-filled ditch. His boots crunched upon the gravel lane as he slowly made his way back to the highway and the motel. The Castaway Motel lot was empty except for “Mister J”. Jake walked to his room, found the keys in his vest pocket, and unlocked the door. He opened the door . . .

WOMAN

. . . and looked around to see if there was anything worth retrieving. Then he tossed the keys on the bed and moved toward the door.

LEFTY

He was on his way to “Mister J”, when he heard a pickup pull into the motel lot. In a moment Dad was in the room.

MAN

You can come on home now.

JAKE

What?

MAN

You can come on home. He’s gone. [*JAKE stares at the MAN in silence.*] He was gone by the time I got back from talking to you. His things were gone. The hundred dollars I had thrown on his dresser so he would have some cash was gone. I checked the garage. The Chrysler’s gone. He didn’t steal it: it was his for the asking. And I know where we can find it. Bus station parking lot in Laramie. By then Alex will be long gone. [*JAKE looks at the MAN realizing that his dying brother is in Laramie waiting for a bus.*] Come on home, Son. [*JAKE pauses for a moment, then exits.*] Jake didn’t say anything more. He walked out to “Mister J”, fishing for the keys out of another vest pocket. I backed my truck around and drove out to the highway, then headed west back to the ranch. [*MAN exits*]

LEFTY

Jake settled into "Mister J", backed around, and drove to the highway's edge. He waited there for the longest time as if for invisible traffic to pass. He fiddled for a moment under his leather vest in the pocket of his blue plaid shirt, took out a cigarette and lit it. He slumped forward over the steering wheel of "Mister J".

WOMAN

Through the smoke he could still see the glow of the taillights of Dad's truck far off down the road towards the Thompson Ranch. In the other direction, over the glowing tip of his cigarette, he could see a road sign he had passed countless times. Now it was as if he was looking at it for the first time:

JAKE

Laramie -- 90 mi.; Cheyenne -- 135 mi.

WAITRESS

Jake took a deep draw on his cigarette and let his breath out ever so slowly.

**END**