

Paul didn't really stand out. He played sports, but he wasn't the star. He was a decent student, but far from being top of his class. He was useful and steady, but he was not even what you might call being *seen*, to say nothing of being celebrated.

There was a girl Paul had liked since sophomore year. That was when Jackie sat kiddy-corner from him in History class. He liked everything about her. He liked how she flipped her hair behind her shoulders. He liked the way she laughed. She held her head a certain way as she doodled during class.

Paul had liked Jackie for two years. Now it was senior year, prom season. Couples were pairing off, and Paul decided that he was going to risk it. A flashy prom-posal was not his style. He wrote a note that went like this: "Jackie, you're brilliant and cool and real. If you'd want to go to prom with someone who's maybe none of those things but thinks the world of you—well, I'd like that." He folded it up and slipped it into the grates of her locker before first period. Immediately he felt like throwing up.

That whole day, nothing. He only saw her from afar. Lunch. Eighth period. Bell rang. He was just outside the door when Jackie caught up to him, tapping him on the shoulder. His heart was racing. She put his folded up note into his hand, looked into his eyes, and smiled, before flipping her hair and running back in. He opened the note and saw what she wrote. Below his message she said, "You're more of those things than you realize. I'd love to go to prom with you!"

How'd you like that story? Way to go Paul, right!? Very sweet.

Now I'm going to change the story. Forewarning: you might not like this version quite as much. I'm just going to change the ending, so all the stuff at the beginning stays the same. Paul's liked Jackie since sophomore year. He writes the note: "Jackie, you're brilliant and cool and real..." He slipped it into her locker. Heart racing. Whole day, nothing.

But here's where it changes: when the final bell rang he went to his locker to get his stuff. When he opened his locker a folded up note wafted down to the floor. He knew immediately what it was. His first thought was that she had simply shoved his original note back into his locker, but as he unfolded it he could see that she had written on it. Here's what she wrote: "You are so sweet and so brave. You are more than you think you are. Unfortunately, I don't have the same feelings towards you. Thank you for asking, but I'm going to say no."

That's quite different, isn't it? A bit disappointing. We've been trained by all kinds of stories that this is not how it is supposed to go, but I'd like to point out that what Jackie did here was completely honorable and good. She didn't want to hurt him, but she didn't want to lie to him either. Good for her.

I'm going to do this one more time, but this version you're not going to like. You're not going to like what I did to Jackie. I don't like what I did to Jackie.

Same story. Paul's liked Jackie for two years. Same note: "You're brilliant and cool and real" and so on. Butterflies in his stomach as he slips it into her locker. How will she respond? Nervous hope. In this version of the story Paul didn't have to wait until school was over. He was at lunch. His friend sat down opposite him and when Paul looked up he noticed that his friend had a strange look on his face. He said,

“Oh, man, Paul. I’m so sorry. You’re not going to like this.” He pulled out his phone and handed it to Paul. It was a photo of Paul’s folded up note. Jackie had sent it to her friends. At the bottom of the note she had written: “Um, no!” Which would have been bad enough, but she had added one of her doodles. It was a remarkably true to life rendering of Paul’s face, but with the ears sticking out even more prominently than they did in real life. Paul was very self-conscious about his ears. His face flushed red, he handed the phone back to his friend, and he choked down his lunch.

These three stories have very different outcomes even though Paul took the same risk in each of them. Despite the different outcomes, we can sense something noble and good in Paul’s actions. What we are sensing is freedom. Paul was not enslaved by his fears—very real and understandable fears, as the various endings show. Paul opened the door, he let himself be seen, and somebody else decided what she was going to do with that. That requires a lot of courage, and we are right to be proud of Paul, even when things didn’t turn out as he had hoped.

The alternative is obvious and all too easy. Paul could have kept his feelings to himself. He could have avoided the risk, avoided the pain, but he also would not have been free.

Let’s consider the story that Jesus told in our Gospel reading. This is a story about freedom and risk just as much as it is a story about love. The Samaritan saw the man half-dead on the side of the road. Do you have any idea how many problems people like that can have? To get involved was a huge risk. *He* could have been beaten up, robbed and left for dead. But this Samaritan was brave. He got right down in there despite the risk. He wasn’t going to be a slave to fears. He showed his fears who’s boss, and what he did was noble and beautiful.

He bound up his wound. He comforted him. He put him on his own donkey to take him to a place of safety. He took care of him during the night and made sure that he would be well cared for by paying the innkeeper in the morning. Love, courage, freedom, joy, victory—this is the real stuff of life. This is the real stuff of God, the author and preserver of life.

There is some irony in this story along these lines. Samaritans were regarded as false believers, dangerous and heretical, and yet it was a Samaritan who displayed these qualities of God. Meanwhile, the priest and the Levite—the ones who are supposed to be closest to God, the most like him, were not like him at all. They were slaves to their fears. They passed by on the other side of the road, rather than taking up the adventure that God had placed before them. That might seem like the prudent thing to do, but there is a hidden heavy cost. They cut themselves off from knowing what God is really like.

To know God we need to learn what kind of love he would have us have—bold, honest, courageous. We also need to begin to learn about God’s love, his freedom, the risks he took, what gives him joy, and what gives him pain. God has not remained on the sidelines with his love. Paul folded up a note and put it in Jackie’s locker. God sent his Son, whom he loved with a perfect love—and who loved him perfectly right back—to a people whom he loved, but who did not love him. His people did not receive Jesus gladly. Instead, they crucified the Lord of glory.

Why should the Father or the Son take such a risk? Endure such pain? Why should God die? It is because he is noble, good, loving, free. Even the mere possibility of consummating the love that God has for us makes it worth the risk of rejection. God is not a slave to fears. **“He bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”** The adventure of God being with us and we being with God is what has prompted all of God’s acts of love toward us.

If you think about it, this is why Paul wrote that note to Jackie. He wanted to go on an adventure with her. Maybe when I was telling that second and third versions of the story a part of you was thinking, “Oh, Jackie! You’re missing out! What adventures Paul might bring you on!”

How common that is among us. Each of us has received our own invitations to adventures from God—adventures like we heard about in our Gospel reading. How common it is for us to say, “Oh, I couldn’t take risks like that. I couldn’t waste my time or money like that. I couldn’t be so bold or courageous as that.”

Quit being such a coward. Be free! Take risks—especially risks that require an open heart. We are not alone. God’s heart is wide open towards us. He’ll go with us on our adventures of love, even—or really *especially*—when those risks result in loss or rejection. That is when we really get to know him.

Life with God is not safe, but it is good. And it is good because love is real, and love is worth it—even when it hurts, even when it bleeds. That’s what God has shown us. That’s the road he’s on. Let’s go with him.

