

## The Search for Happiness ~ Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Pastor Colin Rieke ~ March 10, 2013

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable: Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"



This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

Last week, Joe Flacco, quarterback of the Baltimore Ravens, became the highest paid player in the NFL. One comment that he made afterwards was, "It was never about earning the money and all that. It was about earning the respect." Now there are many out there who are convinced that it was about the money, it's always about the money. But regardless of whether it was about money or respect, you can bet that Joe Flacco is a pretty happy guy right now. At least for now, he has "found" happiness.

And doesn't that seem to be what everybody is after – to be happy? One of the more famous lines from the Declaration of Independence states that all men have the right to life, liberty, and the *pursuit of*

*happiness*. This is what all the talk shows talk about, how you can be happy. And in this post-modern world that we live in, they say happiness can be found anywhere and everywhere. Happiness is a “warm and fuzzy” feeling. The only problem with feelings is that they change. So at one moment you may have happiness, at another moment you may not. Along Euclid, there’s a building that has the words, “Happiness is Submission to God.” While that might sound good, is that really where happiness is found?

In our gospel for this morning, Jesus addresses the Pharisees, tax collectors, and “sinners” about the only place happiness is found. He uses the well-known parable of the prodigal son. But as we go through this parable, let’s look at it from a slightly different perspective, from that of the older son. And as we do this, we see THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS take three people on vastly different paths:

1. Some try to find it by running away
2. Some try to work for it
3. Some do find it by returning in sorrow

**“There was once a man who had two sons.”** The sons were very close to one another, sharing with each other everything. The older son enjoyed his time at home, caring for the family estate, while the younger one was ready to stretch his wings. One day the younger son told the older son about his plans to ask their father for his inheritance right away. “I don’t know if that’s the greatest idea, Jim. That’s going to really hurt dad. I guess if you want to, go ahead, but don’t go burning any bridges.” Despite the older son’s concern, the younger son, Jim went ahead and asked for his inheritance from his father.

The father was quite disappointed in his younger son. But, knowing that he couldn’t force his love upon him, decided to divide up the estate. As was the custom, he reserved 2/3 of the estate for the older son, while giving Jim his share. Not completely surprising, Jim, took what he had, and left for greener pastures in a far-away land. Once he arrived there, he took the time to send a letter back home to his brother. I happen to have it here. The letter read:

“John, I’ve made it here safely. This is so much better than living with dad. The women are pretty, the wine is cheap, and the people are friendly. I’m having a great time. You should come out sometime and we’ll paint the town. Sincerely, Jim”

It’s a good thing that John did not think to go out and visit his brother. For shortly after that, another letter showed up in the mail:

“John, It pains me to write these words, but things aren’t so great here anymore. It seems like people just liked me because I had money, and now that the money is gone, so are all my “friends.” To make matters worse, there hasn’t been rain here in months, people are starving. I’ve had to hire myself out as a pig herder of all things. I don’t know how much more of this I can stand. Love, Jim

PS – Please don’t mention this to dad”

“Well, what goes around comes around,” John thought smugly as he crumpled up the letter to throw it in the trash. As much as he loved his brother, it was satisfying to see the foolishness of his

brother catching up to him. John did not lose much sleep over the straights that his brother was in. If his brother really needed help, then he would probably just come crawling back to dad asking for more money, that was Jim's way. A few months past and John had completely put this issue out of his mind. He had more pressing things to worry about, like working the fields and making sure the animals were all taken care of.

But one evening, as he was approaching the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. His father had not allowed this since Jim left. What was going on? He called one of the servants out and asked this question. **"Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound."** The servant turned and hurried back inside at the sight of John's face turning red. John would not, he could not go inside, not to face his insolent brother who had been welcomed back a hero. So his father came out to talk with John. "Why are you angry, my son? **Everything I have is yours, but we have to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.**" What was John to do? How was John to react?

And that is how the parable Jesus told ends. It doesn't end with a resolution of how the older son acted. Did he heed his father's words, or ignore them? We aren't told, and maybe that was how Jesus wanted it. Remember, he was telling this parable to the Pharisees, who were angry that Jesus was eating with tax-collectors and sinners. Jesus made it clear in the parable, where happiness was found.

(1)

We see the younger son and HIS SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS. He thought he could find happiness by getting out from under his father's shadow. He tried to find it by running away. He demanded what was not yet his, so that he could fulfill his wildest desires. And he thought he had found happiness. He had wealth, he had friends, he lived it up. But happiness and wealth was not found in any of these things, because soon enough, all of those things were gone. To make matters worse a famine struck the land and he sunk even lower.

How easy it can be for us to picture the type of people this son represents. Of course it's those people who have fallen upon rough straights, those people who have carelessly departed from God's way, and have found out how difficult it is to live without God. While these people are certainly included, they certainly don't represent all of those who Jesus was talking about. That younger son is you! That younger son is me! When we have searched for happiness by running away from God. When we only follow God's ways when it's convenient to us, but most of the time it's not. We have hurt our heavenly father with the Words that have come out of our mouths and with our actions.

But we see the way that Jesus describes the younger son, **"When he came to his senses."** He realized how foolish he had been. Just as we realize how foolish we have been. We have done what we know is wrong, we have done what we wish we had not done, and we come to our senses. Come to our senses and are reminded of the Father's love. It is the Father's love that draws us back to him. We shouldn't expect anything, we should expect only not to be punished as severely as we deserve. Somewhat like an accused criminal makes a plea deal.

But what do we see when we return to the Lord in repentance. We can't even get our full confession out. Our Father in heaven has seen our heart, he has seen our attitude, and forgives us. Surely

this is not reason to think our sins have not offended God, but it is more reason to think of the great love of the father. We are welcomed back as children of our heavenly Father.

(2)

But let us not forget about the other son, for he too has a role to play in the parable. He was the son that represented the Pharisees. Those who thought themselves deserving of God's love because they had obeyed him all the time. But the older son's attitude is no better than the younger. He becomes jealous and bitter, much like you or I would be had we heard about a brother who had just cut in line and received the Father's love without so much as lifting a finger.

Even the Father's urging was not enough to get his older son to come inside. How often have we acted like this older brother too. When we have forgotten the blessing of living in God's house for so long, that we become jealous when someone else comes in. We think that we have given up so much to be children of God – we have given up the ways of the world, we have given up the coarse joking and drunken parties, we have given up the sleeping around and given some of our hard earned cash into the offering plate. We don't remember how blessed it is to be in the presence of God, to have the love of God, the comfort of God, something that those outside of the family of God have never known.

(3)

This story is titled after the younger son, he is the primary subject of the story. But it really isn't so much about his actions. It isn't even really about the actions of the older brother. It's about the actions of a loving father. A father whose love is so strong that he doesn't force it upon his sons, he doesn't force them to stay and love him back, but he lets his sons go their own way. It's about a father's love that he showed to an undeserving son, and that same love that he showed to an angry and envious son.

That father represents a small picture of what God is like. God does not just love, God is love. His love is so strong that he draws us to himself, like a magnet. He is a God who loves us so much that he doesn't treat us as our sins deserve. Instead he punished Jesus in our place. He is a God who continues to shower his love upon us, his ungrateful children who whine and complain about everything we have to give up to be his. His love is not a spoiling love, but a righteous love.

The parable of the prodigal son and its outcome are probably familiar to us. But see how much this parable of Jesus contrasts the parables of Rabbinic literature. There was a similar story about a lost son, this particular son had sold himself into slavery to pay off his debts. His father bought him, but instead of welcoming him back as a son (like in Jesus' parable), this father treated him as a slave in order to teach him a lesson about obedience and humility. While unloving, I don't think we could argue much about the fairness of that father. Thank God that he doesn't treat us as our sins deserve. Thank God for his love, a love that draws us to him in true repentance, like iron filaments to a magnet, like a prodigal son to a father. For we once were dead, and now we are alive, we once were lost, and now we are found. Amen!