

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So Jesus told them this parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. 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. 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. 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.' 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!' And they began to celebrate.

"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. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 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 so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' 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 to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Let me start this morning with a question. By a show of hands, how many here have won the lottery? Now, don't worry. You can be honest. This is not a stewardship question. Well, you know, when I think about it, maybe it is.

The younger son in the parable did win the lottery, sort of. He went to his dad, who was pretty darn well off I might add, and asked for a huge chunk of what his father had accumulated over his lifetime. Maybe it was wealth accumulated over generations. Then he took what he was given and cashed out and moved to Vegas, or maybe it was Beverly Hills, or Palm Beach, or a Penthouse in New York...I don't know. Either way, I picture him pulling up somewhere like those places in a bright red Cadillac El Dorado convertible with a blonde on one side and a brunette and red head in the back seat. You know what I'm talking about, right? He had hit the lottery, he had entered the big time, he had found what he had been looking for, and now it was time to be happy.

Yesterday, on the way back from the Diocesan Executive Committee meeting, I was listening to a talk that I had come across. The talk was a comparison. I guess it was really a contrast between dis-satisfaction and happiness. The speaker was explaining that there is not necessarily a connection between the two.

Now, for most of us, that just wouldn't compute. We would think that being happy and being satisfied go hand in hand. If you had one you had to have the other. It was automatic. But not according to the speaker. And so I listened on.

The case he was making was that it is the natural condition of humanity to not be satisfied. That is a good thing, by the way. That's what he would say. Dis-satisfaction pushes us. It drives us to excel and succeed. That makes sense, I guess.

He went on, however, to say that satisfaction, or lack of it, does not have any impact on our happiness.

As I listened to him make his case and thought about what it might mean, and trying not to drive off the road, I kept coming back to the Prodigal Son. I wondered, "What was it in the life of the younger son that drove him to ask for what he did in the first place and then to use it in the way he did in that far away land?" Something wasn't right for him. Something wasn't there for him. That's obvious. But was he lacking satisfaction or was he missing happiness? What caused him to grab what he could and make a run for it?

The traditional understanding of the Parable of the Prodigal Son tells us that it is about rebellion and forgiveness. It goes like this...the father in the story is God and the farm or ranch or vineyard, wherever the father and his two sons lived, is the Kingdom of God. We, as individuals or as the church or even possibly, I suppose, as a nation, are the sons, either in the form of the self-focused younger son, or the unforgiving older son. The truth being taught was that the self-focused, younger son became lost in the distractions and the temptations of the world until he made a discovery about himself, about his adopted life, that drove him home. Returning home, back to his father and his family, he finds what he had all along. His brother, however, takes the other path and decides in the end to separate himself from what his younger brother had finally found.

So what was it? What did he discover about his previous life that he had left behind when he came to himself in the slop with the pigs? Was it about dis-satisfaction or was it about happiness?

I kept wanting to go back to traditional teaching. He found forgiveness and a renewed relationship with his father, with God. He found his true identity as a member of the family, a child of God in God's kingdom. He found forgiveness and restoration. He found his father's robe on his back and the family's ring on his finger. All of that is true. He was no longer hanging out with the pigs or with the people who he used to party with, so long as he had the money to foot the bill. He had gone home. He had discovered something, through his experience, that somehow he had not known before. He could finally be satisfied, just like his older brother.

But, that couldn't be it. That couldn't be it because his older brother wasn't satisfied. What did he say to his father? "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me even a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!" You can hear it in his voice, can't you? He's not getting what he deserves. It's not fair. His life is lacking...satisfaction.

So it couldn't be about satisfaction. I should have known that, as I approached Simpsonville from the south. The lecturer had made it clear that none of us are satisfied. So, maybe it *was* about happiness, after all.

But happiness seems so fleeting. And it seems so subjective. Can you build a deep truth on something so shallow? For the older son, happiness was about having a goat to eat with his buddies. And happiness for the younger son, at least at one point, was about living large in the big city. Happiness is so self-determined and so changable. I mean, a double scoop of rocky road in a waffle cone would do it for me on most days.

So, there I was, pondering the root problem for the two sons. I was kind of trapped into the satisfaction - happiness thing, as I drove up 385. But the truth is that it is not about either one. It is about so much more, something so much bigger. You see, here's our struggle. We want to make it about us and our desires, when God says that we need to make it about Christ. We want to make it about personal satisfaction and God tells us that we are shooting way too low. We want to make it about a group of friends gathered around a goat turning on a spit or even a fatted calf served up on a platter, robes on our backs and rings on our fingers, when God has a feast in mind that is beyond our imagination. We think in terms of personal happiness and God offers us amazing joy.

The Prodigal Son, I think, came to himself and discovered that he was made for immense joy and because of that he was willing to jettison everything that he once thought was indispensable in order to be part of it.

Jesus said to his disciples, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." The professor was saying that happiness can't be found in

satisfaction because it is not our nature to ever be satisfied. Jesus is saying that joy, the joy that you were created for, cannot be found in happiness because we look for happiness in the wrong places and joy is not a worldly thing.

The younger son looked for it in money and power and all the things that money and power can buy. The older son looked for it in recognition and privilege and family position and all that he felt that he deserved through his hard work. Jesus would tell them both that they are approaching things from the wrong direction. What we seek, what we were made for, never can be found through worldly things. They can only be found in Christ. Joy can never be found through worldly satisfaction and personal happiness. The opposite, however, is true. Joy will bring you happiness and satisfaction because joy transforms and elevates them to be something more. And true, full Joy can only found in Christ.

So, back to my original question. Have you ever won the lottery? The answer is yes, every day. And the payoff is JOY. Now take your proceeds and spend them out in the world. I guess it is a stewardship question, after all.

Amen