

4th Sunday in Lent

Grace, mercy and peace belong to you because the Lord found you, chased you down and saved you from your own sinfulness. We were lost and now we are found. Praise be to the God who found us and raised us to life! NIV Luke 15:22 "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. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

Prayer: Lord God almighty, we are sorry for running away from your merciful plan, your loving family, your great grace, move us by your Word to regretful sorrow over our sins and a firm faith in your acceptance of sinners that we might live in constant joy as your children.

Introduction: Have you ever heard of the "Happiness Factor"? Psychologists have done a study of people's actions. They came to the conclusion that every act is in fact a search for happiness, even if on the surface it doesn't look so. Happiness is always the main target they say. Playing a game of cards, going to a party, going out for supper are motivated by the happiness factor. Sometimes the food is bad, the party boring and the game of cards is a loss, so the search continues for happiness. A thief they say is searching for happiness; maybe it is the thrill of stealing or the quick cash that gives him happiness. We may say it is illegal yet the search for happiness – the happiness factor is motivating him. They also say that even people that sacrifice themselves for others as parents, spouses, people who are doing good things for others are also following the happiness factor. They make these sacrifices in the hopes of finding happiness.

Our text for today is the well-known parable of the Lost Son as it is called. Today I want us to look at it from the perspective of the **Human Heart's Search for Happiness**. We will see the younger son's heart for pleasure, the older son's heart for payment and the Father's heart for penitence. Only one heart will have the happiness we are searching for.

1) Heart for Pleasure

The verses of our gospel reading actually introduce 3 parables – the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. All three teach us God's love for sinners. In the first two parables the focus is on God's loving heart reaching out and searching for sinners as they are still very valuable to him. The last one, the parable of the Lost SONS, focuses our attention more on sinners and their willful on purpose desire to BE lost. The coin is accidentally lost and the sheep is too dumb to recognize what he is doing, but the young son and the older son, in our parable – they know what they are doing – willful disobedience and a stubborn search for happiness away from their Father.

The young son's heart leads him to find happiness in "freedom" away from the family. He goes searching for pleasure. To drink the pleasures of this world down to the last drop is his goal. I feel a sense of impatience in his words, "Father give me my share of the estate." There is no reason given. No respect, no common courtesy. *"I want out. There are bigger and better things out there for me than living under Daddy's roof and playing the role of the younger brother."*

King Solomon also had a heart for pleasure. He tried to search for happiness in wine, women and wild living. Listen to what he concluded, when he came out the other end:

NIV Proverbs 21:17 He who loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich.

NIV Proverbs 23:31 Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! 32 In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper.

NIV Proverbs 23:26 My son, give me your heart and let your eyes keep to my ways, 27 for a prostitute is a deep pit and a wayward wife is a narrow well.

NIV Ecclesiastes 5:10 Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless.

Solomon's words came true, the young son's wild living led him into a deep pit he couldn't escape and a narrow well he could get nothing out of to sustain him. He was poor and had maybe the worse job you can imagine if you couple it with the food he was trying to get his hands on – pig slop.

How sad it is to see this so often repeated in our families – wild living, money runs dry, helpless. The life of sin and running away from the Lord is a hard one. Life away from God’s love and mercy is simply a struggle to survive. The young son wanted to find happiness in pleasures of the world but only found a hollow lonely struggle to survive.

What happens next is nothing short of a miracle. The young son comes to reflect on himself and then on his Father. He takes inventory of himself, who he is and his identity. He no longer deserves the title son. He has disrespected His father and all his gifts to him. He has disrespected his family name by his selfish life. He has ruined his identity to ever be a son again. How right he was. He deserved nothing from his Father. Yet he also remembered the mercy of His father. He remembered that even his slaves were well fed, well paid and treated with dignity. He came to his senses and thought of His father’s mercy. He decided he would throw himself on his father’s mercy and be a slave for His father. He goes back to home.

2) The Heart for Payment

The other lost son during all this was working in the field. Yeah, I said the other “Lost” son. He was lost as well. No, he didn’t run away from home. No, he didn’t disrespect His Father by wanting to find happiness in wine women and wild living. Yet he was lost as well searching for happiness in payment. You see the older Son was to get the lion’s share of the estate. He would be groomed to take over the family farm when his Father retired or went to heaven. The firstborn identity and responsibility went to the older son’s head. He actually began to believe that the family farm and all these things from his father were payment to him for being a good son. The older son was working in the field not for His father, not because he loved his father but because he wanted to receive a payment, a payment that he earned by his hard work and sacrifice! So you can imagine that when the noise of singing and dancing reached him in the field covered in sweat and dirt from his hard day of work, how ticked off he must have been. *“I am the one who deserves that party! This is not fair or just or right any place in the world! I am the one who has been doing the good work! I am the one who earned your gifts!”* The older son was lost as well, searching for happiness in payments for his performance.

The Historian Josephus tells us that at his time the Pharisees numbered more than 6000 strong. It’s hard for us to even say the name “Pharisee” without snarling our lips a bit. They were fake sons of God – fake believers. They only sacrificed, worked and sweated for the Lord to gain their happiness and blessings by payment, by their earnings.

I wonder how strong the number of Pharisees are today in our midst? It is so easy for me to slip into the older sons shoes as a Pastor and as a lifelong believer. No, I am not a perfect Christian but I’ve sacrificed and worked harder than most. I work to stay away from the wild living and wasted life of sinners. And then I feel it --the thoughts of entitlement. I am entitled to certain blessings - certain gifts certain promises because I’m doing more sacrificing for God than others. Where’s my payment?

There is no happiness to be found in work, payment and earnings with our God. Sinners are entitled to only one thing – death.

NIV Romans 11:35 "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" 36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

3) The Father’s Heart for Penitence

There is only one place and one reason alone that we have found happiness – the heart of our Heavenly Father searches for Penitence.

NIV Titus 3:4 But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. 8 This is a trustworthy saying

For the young lost son with the heart for pleasure - he remembered the heart of his father as he came to see himself and his actions in light of His Father’s heart, he was filled with penitence. His terrible condition and His Father’s reputation of mercy led him to be penitent. He had a regretful sorrow over what he had done against his father and against his Creator. He came to his senses that he had searched for happiness in a deep pit

and a narrow well – there was no escape and nothing to sustain his life. He would rely on the heart of His Father. He remembered his father’s heart of mercy and love and would place himself at his father’s feet relying on His mercy. He would believe in His Father’s love.

That is a beautiful picture of penitence. Sorrow over sin and trust in God’s mercy. That is where true lasting happiness is found in the heart of our heavenly Father. When it comes to being sorry for our sins we thank God for bringing us to our senses. It is the Word of God that reveals the truth to us about our sins and about our Father’s heart. Many times he uses the events of our life to keep us focused on him for our happiness. Remember Paul’s thorn in the flesh? Theologians debate what it might have been. I have heard things like a speech impediment, a vision problem to even uncontrollable seizures. Whatever it might have been Paul tells us that the Lord gave it to him on purpose, not as a punishment but as an aid. We could say that the Lord gave it to him to keep him happy in His Father’s grace-

NIV 2 Corinthians 12:7 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.

Even as the older lost son was fuming mad, still searching for happiness in his performance and payment –the Father’s heart went out to him searching for him to be penitent. The father tried to change his son’s heart and make him sorry for his sins and to trust in His Father’s mercy. In the parable the Father went out to his hard hearted Son and reminded him of his great love and blessings he gave to him as gifts: *“My son, you are always with me and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”*

For us, it still comes down to the Father’s heart searching and seeking for us sinners who are continually searching and seeking for happiness everyplace else except where it is found – the word of our loving father. In His Word, we experience the heart of our Heavenly Father. He tells us the truth about our sins, our performance and our deserved payment. By His Word he breaks our hard hearts and fills us with proper sorrow and regret over our sins. Then By His Powerful Word he reminds us of the great love and mercy he continually showers upon a world of sinners through Jesus Christ our Savior. His Word of love and mercy compels us to come home, no matter how terrible we have sinned. His reputation for acceptance of sinners excites us and fills our hearts with acceptance of sinners all around us as well.

Let us all celebrate when the Lord’s reputation for love and mercy brings his sons and daughters home from wild living – that we might enjoy the family of God and our Father’s mercy again and again into eternity!

At times our sinful hearts lead us to find happiness in pleasure and other times our sinful heart leads us to find happiness in payment and performance from God. By God’s grace let us stay close to the heart of our Heavenly Father that we might never search too long for happiness away from His love and mercy for sinners through Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection. Amen.