

**LUKE 15:1–3, 11–32.** (EHV)

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to hear him. But the Pharisees and the experts in the law were complaining, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” He told them this parable: ... “A certain man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered together all that he had and traveled to a distant country. There he wasted his wealth with reckless living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that country, and he began to be in need. He went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He would have liked to fill his stomach with the carob 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 more than enough bread, and I am dying from hunger! I will get up, go to my father, and tell him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.”’ He got up and went to his father. While he was still far away, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, hugged his son, and kissed him. The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick, bring out 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 us eat and celebrate, because this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.’ Then they began to celebrate. His older son was in the field. As he approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. The servant told him, ‘Your brother is here! Your father killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ The older brother was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. He answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I’ve been serving you, and I never disobeyed your command, but you never gave me even a young goat so that I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours arrived after wasting your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ The father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. But it was fitting to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.’”

Every year since 2012, the Wellbeing Research Centre at the University of Oxford has published the World Happiness Report. This report attempts to rank the happiness of various nations based on metrics like gross domestic product per capita, life expectancy, social freedom, family, trust, and generosity. People selected to participate in the report are asked to view their life as a ladder and to rank it between 0, which is the worst possible life, and 10, which is the happiest possible life.

Fellow Christians and churchgoers, how would you rank your happiness?

Jesus tells a story to regular churchgoers who weren't happy because of the kind of people Jesus was welcoming into the church and interacting with in the church. It's a story about a father, his two sons, and happiness.

It starts out with one of the sons, the younger one, being unhappy. He was the son of a very wealthy man, a man who had servants and herds and flocks and land to spare. But in spite of all that wealth, the only thing he seemed to get out of it was blood and sweat and toil.

He wasn't happy. But that was about to change.

He approached his father one day and said, "Father, give me the share of your property that I've got coming to me." Now you might expect this to be the part of the story where the son indeed gets what's coming to him for such a request. What gall, not just to presume that he was included in his father's will, not just to ask his father for his inheritance before he was even dead, while he was apparently still in good health, but for the son to demand it from his father as if it were his by right, as if it were not really his father's in the first place at all! We would not be surprised or disappointed if the father drove his wicked son out of the house without a penny.

But he didn't. He called in both of his sons and divided all he had between both of them. And it wasn't many days later that the younger son, after gathering up all of his newfound wealth, packed his bags and left for a far-away land.

And there, in that far-away land, where there were no familiar eyes to recognize him, where not even a rumor of his activity could make it back home, he squandered his wealth. The finest and latest clothes, gourmet restaurants for every meal, something alcoholic in every cup, a different woman showing up every night in his five-star hotel room—a lifestyle whose details the apostle Paul says it would be shameful even to talk about.

But oh, was he ever happy.

But even though he sang his heart out with all the entertainers who encouraged their audience to live for themselves because you can't please anyone else, to live for the moment because there was no guarantee of tomorrow, tomorrow kept coming. And on one of those tomorrows, the younger son woke up next to the only real friend he had made living for himself—nobody—and realized this would have to be the last night in this hotel, because his money was gone. And even if he had any money left, he couldn't eat his usual fare in a gourmet restaurant that night, because there was a severe famine in the land.

Need has a way of showing people for who they truly are. The famine showed all the man's supposed friends for who they truly were. They were selfish, just like he was, and now that they were in need, they weren't about to help out anyone, this man included. And the famine showed the man himself for what he truly was. He was not high and mighty. Beneath all that extravagance and laughter was a poor miserable beggar without so much as a friend.

So he had to do what he had come to escape. He had to work. He hired himself out to a local citizen who sent him out to work with animals he had never worked with before, pigs—animals that were unclean in the Jewish religion in which he grew up. But he didn't care. He had left his religion behind long ago.

Included in the food he was supposed to feed the pigs were carob pods, brownish-purple pods of the carob tree somewhat resembling pea pods. Carob pods are considered a fruit. Though you wouldn't order a side of them in a restaurant, they do have seeds in them that are mildly sweet. The younger son had fallen so far that he salivated over those pods. But we're told that no

one was giving any to him. And here's the thing: In Greek, the word for *pig* is a masculine word just like the word for *no one* is. So when it says that "no one" was giving any pods to him, it could mean that no one from his employer's household was giving him any, but it could also mean that the *pigs* were refusing to share their food with him. This man couldn't even make a friend from a dirty, grunting animal.

One day the younger son woke up and realized: He wasn't happy anymore. At all.

"How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, and I am dying from hunger! I will get up, go to my father, and tell him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'"

As it turned out, the younger son didn't have it so bad under his father's roof. Yes, he had to work, but it was useful work, work that contributed to human life, work within a family, work with people who loved him, steady work that came with provision, care, and protection. He knew he couldn't regain his former position, but he thought, "If I just confess my sin before God and my father and throw myself at his mercy, perhaps he will have enough heart to let me earn the bread I eat under his roof."

So he gathered all he had once again, which he basically did this time in the time it took for him to stand up out of bed, and he set out for home.

Every evening before sunset, an old man would get up from his supper and go outside. There he would stand and stare into the horizon, as if he were searching for something, until the sun disappeared behind it. Then he would turn inside and go to bed. This particular evening was no different. He got up and went out to his veranda. He squinted and peered hard into the sunset. He was just about to turn around and retire as usual when his eye caught a speck in the distance.

The younger son knew he was getting close. Eyes fixed firmly on the ground in front of him, he had been rehearsing what he would say over and over again. But suddenly he heard footsteps—rapid and heavy. He looked up and saw a grey-haired man doing something he hadn't done in years, something he would probably never do again. He was running. And he was making pretty good time. The younger son stopped in his tracks, not sure what to expect. But before he could think what to do, suddenly his father was upon him and around him and crying on him and kissing him.

Not sure what to say, the younger son began saying the only thing that had been going through his mind for the past twelve hours. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

But his father didn't let him finish his spiel. He grabbed his son's arm and began walking home, yelling for his servants. When a few arrived out of breath, the father said, "Quick, bring out 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 us eat and celebrate, because this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found."

The servants hadn't seen their old master this happy in years. They complied immediately and began to celebrate.

And the younger son, for the first time in his life really, was deeply, completely, truly happy.

But as beautiful as this all is, this isn't even the climax of the story. This is the story of two sons, not one. Remember, Jesus was telling this story to church people who were unhappy because Jesus was hanging out with people like this first son. So Jesus now turns his attention to the older son. He was out in the field working late when his brother came home, so he had no idea what had happened. He had an estate to maintain. When he finally ran out of daylight, he headed for home. But before he got there, he heard music and singing and dancing inside. So he called one of the servants and asked what was going on.

"Your brother is here!" he replied. "Your father killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound."

The older brother was not happy. He was steaming mad. He refused to go in.

So the father went out to his older son too. "Come on in," he pleaded with him.

But the older son answered, "Look, these many years I've been slaving for you, and I never disobeyed your command, but you never gave me even a young goat so that I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours arrived after wasting your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!"

Now you might expect this to be the part of the story where the older son gets what's coming to him. If this part of the story hadn't happened, you might think that what the older son has coming to him is the respect and love of his father and the respect and devotion of the servants and the surrounding community. But now, what lies he tells!

"These many years I've been slaving for you"? Remember what the younger son said? "How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread!" Even if it were true that the older son had been *slaving* for his father, the younger son, who now knew what life was like outside his father's house, was ready to do anything to be as fortunate as such a slave.

But the fact is that this older son was far more than a slave. Do you remember what the father did when the younger son demanded his share of the wealth? He divided all he had among *both of them*. Slaving for his father? If anything, his father had been slaving for him, since his older son now technically owned everything that was left of the estate. Yet what second lie does this older son tell?

"But you never gave me even a young goat so that I could celebrate with my friends." What? Everything was his! The servants were his. The herds were his. The flocks were his. The land was his. He could have taken a young goat and celebrated with his friends at any time he wanted. The only reason he hadn't was because of his own failure to see the opportunities to be happy and rejoice staring him in the face every single day. Not only that, but precisely because he followed what his father had taught him, his wealth didn't just consist of a pile of money that could be spent and then it would be gone. He had an inheritance that would continue to provide for him and his family for who knows how many generations.

If anyone should have been happy, if anyone should have been generous, if anyone should have been in the mood to welcome back the younger son, it should have been this older brother. But instead he tells lies and refuses even to call him his brother. "This son of yours," he calls him. What a grouch! Here's where he should get what's coming to him, right?

"Son," the father said.

“Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. But it was fitting to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.”

Have you ever grumbled and complained about those around you, whether those seated around you or the one standing up in front of you, whether your current pastor or one in the past? “He did this.” “She said that.” “Did you hear about him? I can’t believe that.” “I can’t believe so-and-so does that,” or “has the nerve to just sit there like that after everything he or she has done.” Sometimes our complaining might at least have a pious aspect to it, because it’s connected to our hatred for things that go against God’s word, but sometimes we’re not even getting upset about actual sins. Or are you just unhappy in general? “I could sure use more of this,” or “less of that.” “What’s with this weather?” “Did you see what was on the news?” “Why did so-and-so have to die?” “What is this world coming to?”

First of all, what do we deserve? After all, all of us fall into the camp of either the first or second son in some way. Either the base pleasures of the world have appealed to us, or we have lied to ourselves and to God about how good we are while looking down our noses at others. And so what we deserve is what we thought should have happened to the younger son at the beginning of the story and the older son at the end. We should be kicked out of heaven. We should be allowed to suffer all the painful consequences of our poor choices. We should be bent over God’s knees, given a good wallop, then unceremoniously kicked into hell. Do any of the things that get our undies in a bundle compare to that?

And second, what are you lacking? God is always with you, and everything he has is yours! Through the life and death of Jesus, through the good news about him shared with you in the Word, in your baptism, in Communion, God has divided all he has among each one of you, and it’s infinitely better than any of your earthly fathers could have given you. We have an inheritance waiting for us in heaven that will never spoil, is without defect, and will never diminish in quality. In the meantime, we have the full assurance of his love, care, and protection. Not one of you who believes in Jesus will ever remain in need of your needs, even if there’s a famine.

We deserve to be banished by our heavenly Father, but instead, in his mercy, he calls us his sons and daughters and has given us a share in all he has.

So are you grumpy or happy? Mad or glad?

People call this the parable of the prodigal son or the lost son. Which son is that? One son got lost far away, and the other son got lost right at home. It’s really not the parable of either, is it? It’s the parable of the merciful Father, who wants each one of us to have the loyalty and steadfastness that the older son had at first and the deep peace and sublime joy that the younger, repentant son had at last.

Brothers and sisters, your merciful Father is always with you, and in Jesus, everything he has is yours. It is necessary for us to—we simply must—celebrate and be happy.

So, be happy. Amen.