

+ Lent 4 + Sermon preached at Saint Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church (WELS),
Tomah, WI on March 31, 2019. Pastor Curt S. Backhaus

Repeated for Hagen Sports Network broadcast on Monday, March 23, 2020

Luke 15:1-3, 11-24 | 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.’”

Have you ever had one of those vacations where you scrimped and saved and planned and prepped –you were so determined to have the time of your life—but then everything went absolutely wrong?

You took a fishing trip to Canada, but the only thing biting were the bugs. Or it never quit raining. You went on a cruise, only to get seasick and then sunburned. You booked a week at an all-inclusive resort in Mexico or Florida and found the place overrun with college kids who were determined to party their way through Spring Break. Your car broke down. Or you missed a flight. Or you had to cut your vacation short because a loved-one died. Your eagerly-awaited, journey of joy was anything but.

Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son is a story about a trip that didn't satisfy. It's also the story of a trip that led to joy. The young man in our text really made two trips. One was away from his father; one was back home to his father.

The trip away from his father was made with high hopes, with money in hand, with the optimism of youth and the anticipation of good things to come. The boy had his freedom and he was intent on enjoying it. When he set out from home he was undoubtedly quite satisfied for a time. But as he set out to fulfill his own goals in life he ended up going further and further away from his father.

His second journey was a journey of joy. It started "when he came to his senses" --when his sense of smell told him that the goal of his first trip wasn't supposed to end up with him shoveling slop in a pigpen in a foreign country where no one cared about him. His sense of hunger reminded him that he had something better way back when.

So the son decided to go back to his father, but just to beg. He would ask to be a hired hand --a servant-- since he had already forfeited the right to be a son. Even menial servitude would be better than what he had to endure in that distant land. And when he topped the last hill and rounded the last corner, just as he stepped foot on the land he once called home, he looked toward the house and the first familiar sight to catch his eye was his Dad! His father had been watching and waiting and wondering if his son might ever return! It has rightly been said that this shouldn't be called the parable of the prodigal or "wasteful" son, but the story of the waiting father.

When this rebellious son asked for his inheritance basically he was telling Dad that he wished he was already dead. Then he traveled off to a distant land --intent on getting as far away from home as he could. There he lived however he wanted to. But then the money ran out, his friends deserted him, and finally he was so down and out he hired himself out to a boss that didn't even bother to pay him well enough to keep body and soul together. And the smell! You know you've bottomed out when you smell like the city kid who fell for the farmer's daughter because he could tell how cute she was but he didn't realize what a cruel streak she had. He begged to go to the fair with her so she let him ride along with her and her friends in the FFA ("Future Farmers of America") --only there wasn't enough room in her truck so she "let him" ride in the trailer with the prize pigs she was going to show.

You know what that city kid smelled like? He smelled like regret. He smelled so bad that when he got home his Mom took a garden hose to him and made him leave his clothes out back before he could come anywhere near the house. He smelled exactly like this unclean, wasteful son, who regretted the trip he took and was surprised anyone could smell so bad or feel so hungry. Man was he sure surprised to get home and see a loving father waiting for his return!

But his father didn't wait long, did he? He didn't wait to hear his son's confession. He didn't wait for his son to clean himself up. Instead the father ran to his son, threw his arms around him, kissed him and welcomed him home.

There was no doubt in that young man's mind: "You can home!" You're welcome there. You're free to return to a loving father. Soon there was a party and a new robe, a ring on his finger and the smell of a feast. This was his journey of joy. But what made it such a joyous occasion wasn't the robe! Or the ring! Or the smells! Or the feast! The real joy was the reconciliation between father and son.

Isn't that what makes our lives so meaningful? Ask Francisco Calderon of Spain. You wouldn't know this unless you spoke Spanish, but if your name's Francisco your nickname is automatically "Paco." This poor Paco offended his father and ran away from home, headed for the big city of Madrid. A short while later his father went to look for him. In desperation, his father put an ad in the newspaper, "Paco, meet me at the plaza on Saturday at 2:00 in the afternoon. All is forgiven. Love, Papa!" That Saturday 800 Pacos showed up looking for their fathers!

Reconciliation is what we all need. It's the same thing that makes our spiritual journey so wonderful. We too can come home, come back and be welcomed home by our heavenly Father.

That pattern of two trips, one away from the Father and another back home is descriptive of our lives as well. The first trip is a disappointing journey that every one of you has made --a journey that I have made, too. It's the trip away from our heavenly Father that we take when we set out with our own resources to satisfy our own desires and follow our own will. We make that trip whenever we sin --when we fail to love God above all things or love our neighbor as ourselves. It begins when we get the idea that we are free to do whatever we want and what we want is wrong. That trip never leads to freedom and joy. Remember how Jesus described it? "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin!" And sooner or later everyone will realize that whatever takes us away from God leads to disappointment and an emptiness that nothing can satisfy.

But then, we meet up with the God who's watching, waiting, eager to welcome us into his loving and forgiving arms. We meet up with him in Jesus.

I've often wondered what Jesus looked like when he preached, when he taught this parable. Did he talk with his hands? When he got to the part about the waiting father, did his face have the same warm, loving smile? Did Jesus stretch open his arms in warm welcome like the father in the story? I like to imagine he did.

But even if he didn't, there did come a time at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, where he stretched wide his arms in welcome and had them nailed open, so that tax collectors and sinners like you and me can know for sure we're free to come home. Jesus died on Calvary's cross to reconcile us to God, to wash away our sins, to cover our guilt and shame with the pure robe of his righteousness, to restore us as God's dear children. Through Jesus we find our way back home to the Father. And the joy of that journey, that's worth celebrating! Amen.