# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

**“The Lost Younger Son”**

**Luke 15:11-24**

**September 18, 2022**

I invite you to turn with me to Luke 15 as we continue our sermon series on the parables of Jesus. In verses one and two we learn that there are two groups of people listening to Jesus’ teaching. One group is referred to as “sinners and tax-collectors” and the other as the “Pharisees and teachers of religious law.” The second group has been complaining that Jesus is associating with people in the first group, welcoming them and even accepting their invitations to dinner. The rest of the chapter is Jesus’ explanation of why he welcomes sinners.

In verses three through seven he says that his purpose for welcoming sinners is like a shepherd who finds a lost sheep and celebrates with his friends and neighbors. In verses eight through ten he says that his purpose for welcoming sinners is like a woman who finds a lost coin and celebrates with her friends and neighbors. The lost sheep and the lost coin represent lost sinners, being found represents their returning to God, and the celebration is what God and the angels are doing in heaven when even one sinner is found.

Jesus is the Son of God in human form, seeking the lost, and when the lost turn from their sin and accept his invitation, they come home to God the Father who rejoices. Now, in verses 11-24, Jesus tells a third parable, this time about a father and son. The parable includes a section about an older son; we will save those verses for next week.

To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. “A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything. “When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.”’ “So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’ “But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began.

Jesus’ parable brings us along on a human journey in which there is sorrow and joy, failure and triumph, rebellion and reconciliation. These ups and downs in the young man’s life are presented by Jesus in two basic movements. In the first movement, the young man turns away from his father and turns toward his idea of freedom. This movement ends in misery. In the second movement, the young man turns away from his misery and back to his father. This movement ends in joy. Let’s take a closer look at each of these movements.

The son yearns to be free. He wants to be free of his father’s authority and rules, to be free to make his own decisions, to have his own money and to be free to spend it on whatever he desires. He has convinced himself that he is able to handle his life without his father. So, he demands his share of the estate, and the father allows him the freedom he so desperately desires. Gathering up his possessions, he makes his way to the far country.

At first he is sure he has done the right thing. He rents a home with a great view, and furnishes it lavishly. He spends his money freely on friends and parties, trying anything and everything, especially those things which had formerly been forbidden him. He is free, at least for a season. But, like a skydiver is free as he falls through the air, exhilarating in the rush of the wind and the view of the distant ground, his freedom becomes problematic when he realizes that he isn’t wearing a parachute.

Soon everything changes for the young man. His money runs out, a famine grips the land, he begins to go hungry, and no one will give him anything. Suddenly being free is not so great – it doesn’t provide a roof over his head, clothes for his body, or food on his table. The only job he can find is the disgusting work of feeding pigs. The movement of gaining freedom from his father has ended in misery. Having rejected his loving father’s authority, he is now under the authority of a pig farmer who cares nothing for him.

The turning point in the story happens when he comes to his senses. Having imagined freedom from his father as the greatest thing in the world, he realizes that his so-called freedom has brought him the greatest misery he has ever experienced. Now, he imagines what it would be like to live in his father’s house. He understands that he has lost the right to be called “son,” but he knows that at least his basic necessities will be provided if only his father will allow him to be like his lowest servant. So, he begins his second movement, the movement from misery and back to the father.

Having demanded freedom from his father, he now prepares to seek mercy. Having rejected his father’s authority, he now knows that his very best life can only be lived under that loving authority. Having sinned against his father, he confesses his sin to his father and declares his unworthiness to be called “son.”

The father’s joy is unrestrained. His response to the unworthiness of the young man is to declare him worthy, and he calls for the robe and the ring as signs of his worthiness. He calls for a feast, for it is time to celebrate that this son who was lost has been found. Verse 24 ends by telling us: “So the party began.” I wonder if the son, sitting beside his father, thought of those parties in the far away country and wondered how he could have been so foolish as to believe that they would be better than this. Seeking freedom, he found misery. Returning to his father, he has found joy, the joy of being called “son.”

All of us are like this young man. There is not one person here, myself included, who has not rebelled against our heavenly Father, who has not said: “My will be done.” It feels like freedom, but where will it end up? Yet, even while we are turning away from God, his heart yearns for us in love. We have never gone so far away, we have never committed so great a sin, we have never been so lost, that God will not receive us back with joy and restore us to his family. All we need to do is begin that movement back to him, confessing the sin of our willful disobedience, and watch as he comes running down the road to welcome us home.