

When I was in seminary, I lived in an apartment with one of my best friends. We had been roommates in college and so we got a place together. Now, college and seminary students are, in my experience, not exactly flush with cash. But just to give you a sense of what our living situation was like, the fridge was tiny, the counters space could barely hold a crock pot, and the oven was two steps above an easy bake. And that was just the kitchen. The windows were so drafty that you questioned whether they were open or closed, the furnace was so loud that you couldn't have a conversation while it was running, and the bathroom leaked all the time, much to the frustration of our neighbors below us. But for two years, we called this place home.

In our living room, there was an old, heavy-as-could-be tube TV and a three-cushion couch we got from someone who was moving out and didn't want it anymore. We also had a couple of bookshelves for our seminary books. Amid all the books, there was something that probably went largely unnoticed. It was small snowman that had paperclips for arms. And in one of those paperclip arms was a small scrap of paper that had a handwritten note on it that said, "Choose Joy." And as I look back on my time in that apartment, that is the thing that I remember the most. Because in spite of all of the quirks and challenges that apartment had, that little snowman and its daily reminder to choose joy, reminds me of what a joyful time of life it was.

The beautiful thing about parables is that they are intentionally open. There is no one way to read or understand a parable because it continues to speak to us in ever new ways. Which is the challenge when you have a parable that is as familiar as this one in Luke 15. We know it so well that we actually have to work harder to hear it again. And we could spend hours and hours digging into this parable, trying to root out all of the goodness found in its nooks and crannies, but that's not what it's about. A parable is not meant to be solved, if that were even possible. Rather, a parable invites us to an encounter with the Holy Spirit, who helps us to hear and know the word of God today. Well, this time I am imagining this parable speaking to us as a snowman with paperclip arms holding a piece of wrinkled scrap paper.

Because it seems that both of the sons in this parable are searching for joy. Which isn't an unreasonable thing to want or to seek. I think most people are looking for more joy in their lives. So let's begin as the parable does with the younger son, who boldly and even profanely goes to his father and asks for his inheritance early. Which is tantamount to saying, "Dad, I know you're still here, alive and kicking, but you're dead to me, so can you just give me what you've set aside for me in your will already?" Perhaps even more shocking than the request is that the father grants it. And off the younger son goes, to live his life in search of joy. Now, we don't know all that he did and, given what's presented in the text, it's unfair to assume the younger son did anything immoral. It simply says he squandered or wasted what he was given by living recklessly, extravagantly, or loosely.

He got caught up in all the exciting things of the world and was careless with the financial resources he had, until finally he has very little left. Which is often what we point to as the problem. But Jesus, in telling this parable, seems very careful to orchestrate a story that cannot be so simple. Yes, the son lived wastefully, but his sudden turn of misfortune is also impacted by a severe famine taking place in the land and that when he is finally at his lowest point, living among the pigs, no one was willing to help him in his time of need. We'd like to think that people get what they deserve, but rarely is the case because life is full of events and circumstances that are outside of our control. The younger son went searching for joy and was ill-prepared for the unexpected things of life. He lived his life as one who believes that joy can be found in the things we have, the luxuries we add to our lives, the things that simply make us feel good. He believes joy is found through pleasure.

Which is one of the ways the world teaches us to seek joy. By doing things, buying things, consuming things that bring us pleasure, happiness, and make us feel good, we are promised that we will find joy. But what isn't disclosed is that such joy is always conditional. It will come and go, just as our emotions fluctuate. And so we will never truly find joy because we'll never have enough and if we never have enough, then we will constantly be chasing the carrot on a stick that remains forever out of reach. The son, for one reason or another, gets smart and realizes that he doesn't want to play that game anymore. And so he returns home, ready to earn his way back into the good graces of his father.

So what about the eldest son? Well he too is in search of joy, only not the kind of joy that comes from life's pleasures, but the kind of joy that is earned and deserved. He seeks joy through duty and obedience. He's the son that believes if I do enough good things, if I do enough right, I'll deserve to have joy because I've earned it and the recognition that comes from being an upright person. It is joy that comes from the pride of putting in full effort, full dedication, a full day's work. Which is also one way we believe we can experience joy. But again, what isn't disclosed in this line of thinking is that one of two things will inevitably happen: we'll either feel entitled or resentful. Entitled because in our minds we've earned it. Resentful because it seems totally and completely unfair that others, who aren't nearly as dedicated, nearly as devoted, nearly as hard working or deserving, seem to be rewarded, all while we feel slighted, neglected, and unrecognized.

Two brothers, both in search of joy and both experiencing the hard lessons of the limits of joy, as understood by the world. But then, there is the father. The one who quietly and steadfastly radiates stability and assurance and commitment to his sons, as they navigate the challenges of life. It is the father who knows joy. And he knows his sons have been searching for joy and has allowed them the space to do that. Because he knows that joy cannot be forced upon someone. You can't make people choose joy. But you can be an ongoing present reminder that joy is always available. So of course, he welcomes his youngest son home. Of course he responds to the one who wished him dead by throwing a lavish party. Because even as his son was lost for all that time, even as the father waited in anguish and sorrow and pain, joy was always there. Because joy doesn't depend on our circumstances. It's not about how we feel or what will make us happy. Joy is the little light that shines in the darkness of sorrow and loss; it's the steadfast commitment of refusing to live in the darkness because true joy doesn't depend on all being made well. We can choose to live in joy now.

And of course the father would beg and plead his eldest son to come join in the celebration. Of course he will not leave this one to stew in resentment and jealousy because there is no less love for the elder son. The father has always been there, will always be there, and gives everything he has. Because joy is meant to be shared. It's not something we hold onto for ourselves, it's not something that belongs only to us. Joy is relational, it's something we invite others into, continuously and endlessly pointing to the little flashes of light that remind us the Kingdom of God is in our midst. True joy is always unearned, unlimited, unqualified, and unreserved. And the party simply cannot go on, the joy of the father cannot be made complete unless his sons choose to share in it.

My friends in Christ, there's a lot happening in our lives and in the world around us – a lot to be concerned about, a lot to worry about, a lot of things that can and do make it feel like the darkness and hate and division and evil are closing in, consuming more and more of life. But we are not called to that life. We are not called to give any heed to the powers of sin and death because they are dying. Instead, we are called to be people of hope, people who put our faith in the promise of God that all is being made new. We are called to be people who recognize and point out the light that is ever-present in the world. We are called to choose joy, today, tomorrow, and always. Thanks be to God! Amen.