

### **A Successful Life!**

How would you define success? The dictionary defines it this way: "Success: The achievement of something desired, planned or attempted." What would it take for you to look back on your life with satisfaction and say, "I succeeded?" In our gospel reading today we have the familiar story of the "Lost Son." This parable tells us how to succeed. Success isn't measure by worldly standards, what we do or gain. Instead it is measured in heavenly standards, what God gives us.

#### *I. Worldly success leads to failure.*

***Then Jesus told them this parable: ... "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.***

This second son had dreams and he had the means to achieve those dreams. He asked his father for his share of his inheritance. And what were his dreams? Luke simply calls it "wild living." Maybe it involved lots of drinking, gambling, wild parties, one night stands. He probably bought fancy cars and ran around with the "in" crowd. Of course he gained lots of new friends; he paid for everything.

***"After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.***

He spent it all. And then it got worse. Famine struck and he began to wonder where his next meal would come from. Where were his friends? Once the money dried up, they disappeared. And because the economy was bad, he had trouble finding a job. He attached himself to some "foreigner" slopping hogs for a living. The hogs were better off than him.

Would you consider that a success story? Unfortunately some would. On cable there is a channel called, "Viceland." At least they are honest for the channel generally promotes what we would call "vices." But what made this son wild wasn't because he spent all his money on wild living. It was the fact he did whatever he wanted to do. It is like the difference between a tame and wild horse. The wild horse doesn't want a saddle or horseshoes or anything. He wants to do what he wants to do and resists the bit and bridle. That is what made him wild.

As I look over this congregation, I don't see anyone passing out from a hangover after a night of wild living. Yet that doesn't mean we can't relate to the lost son in our text. Remember, wild is defined by a life that does whatever it wants. If you want to get angry instead of being patient or forgiving, you are wild. If all you can think about in any given day are earthly things like saving for retirement, your chores, who's going to win the NCAA Tournament, but you can barely lend God your ear one hour a week, you are wild. If your level of success depends on how much you can make or if your kids stay out of jail or how many grandkids or great grand kids you have, if these are at the top of the list, then you are wild and lost.

Worldly success looks good on paper, but in the end it isn't successful. It goes away. But there is a success story out there. ***"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father."*** He knew he didn't have any right to ask his father for anything. He didn't say he made a couple mistakes; he had sinned against his father and against God. The most he hoped for was to be a lowly servant living in the bunkhouse eating servant food, and if his father said no to that, he would understand.

In other words, he realized he was lost. I am the last one to ask for directions. I am too proud. So I keep driving which means I stay lost. Finally, when I admit I am lost, I get directions and I get to where I am going. This is the point we need to reach, to understand we are lost. And there are no excuses. We don't make a couple mistakes. We have sinned against God and our neighbor. We don't deserve anything good, and if the father turns us away, we understand.

But he doesn't turn us away. ***"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 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. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate."***

I can see the father looking down that long farm road every single day, hoping, praying to see his son. And when he saw him, he ran out to meet him and instantly hugged him. Notice what the father did not do. He did not go on for half hour telling him how much he had hurt him. He didn't put him on probation so the son has time to prove himself. He wasn't going to make the son pay back the inheritance. He forgave him and regarded him as a son again as if nothing every happened.

This is a picture of God's unconditional love. Yes, he will remind us how lost we are. You can hardly find a page in the Bible where God doesn't remind us of our sins and what they deserve. He does this to bring us to our senses, so we realize the we are lost and look to God for directions, and he gives us those directions. Paul put it so well in our reading earlier. ***"For the***

**message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ... Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified.**” Some look for miracles. Some look for fancy sermons. But what we need is simply Christ crucified. By his death God forgives us.

So how does God treat the lost sinner? He doesn't put him on probation. He doesn't make him pay for it. He doesn't keep on yelling at him. He hugs him, forgives him, treats him as a son as if nothing happened, and he celebrates. Two other parables came before this one, and each ended with the phrase, ***In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.***” I sometimes wish God would pull back the curtains when a sinner repents so we hear the angels cheering. Then again, he probably doesn't because we would have to cover our ears; it would be deafening. But the angels prove this is the true measure of success. They don't cheer when someone wins the lottery. They cheer when a sinner repents. Success is not measured in the accumulation of wealth or glory or fame or the number of kids, grandkids, or great grandkids you have. It is repentance. It is sharing in his inheritance in heaven.

This point is driven home even more by the reaction of the older brother. ***“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”***

How sad it is that angels would cheer, but the older brother couldn't. This is called the Parable of the Lost Son. I guess we know who is the true lost son. It is not the younger brother because he is found. It is the older brother who is lost even though he lived with his father all his life. Instead of preaching Christ crucified, he preaches about the sacrifices he made. Instead of repenting, he is smug and blind to his own lost condition. Instead of sharing in God's joy over a sinner who repents, he is mad and wished certain sinners never repent.

But that is why Jesus preached this sermon. ***“Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Then Jesus told them this parable.***” Sermons are not for those people out there. It is for people who are listening. We can become lost in wild living. We can also be lost when we come to church, but listen as though others need to hear the sermon, not us. But that is the love of Christ. He wants all the lost to be saved. He calls all of us to repentance even those who sit in pews every week.

So what is the ideal success story? Is it when your enemies get what's coming to them, or when they repent and believe? Success is when the angels cheer, when the sinner repents and lives in heaven forever. Amen.