
Compassion Over Birth Order

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Ashley Carr
The Fourth Sunday in Lent – Year C**

It is quite a coincidence that this Sunday, of all the Sundays, sitting among you all in the pews visiting from Virginia sits my older sister. And there she's perched dutifully next to our ever loving and usually approving mother. My sister, Elizabeth, is the epitome of the eldest child. Her being is steeped in a sense of obedience, respect, and responsibility to our parents and our family. She got good grades, did as she was told, she wore her earrings, she wrote her thank you notes, and she rarely got in trouble. Perhaps she was well behaved, or perhaps she was good at never getting caught.

Maybe ironically, I, the younger sibling, stand here in a pulpit, a priest. If you asked someone from my childhood to describe me, they would likely not use the same adjectives as those for my older sister. I was, maybe am, the epitome of the youngest sibling. A touch wild, a dash disobedient, and, let's say, creative in the ways I demonstrate the respect I have for my parents and our family.

Now, we could tell you countless stories wherein my behavior mirrors that of the wayward son, and my sister's mirrors that of the eldest son in today's gospel. I beg of you not to draw out such stories as you and I are still getting to know one another. These stories would entertain you, no doubt, and depending on your birth order you would easily relate to one character or the other, drawing to mind the episodes of your own life. Stories of youthful disobedience, or of dutiful anger. If we sat together and told these stories, we would laugh and cringe and get lost in our own experiences. You're doing it right now, I bet.

But in the case of our family's stories, every single one, every single anecdote would end the same way, in the loving and compassionate arms of parents who welcomed home the feral wayward youngest and embraced the biased emotions of the dutiful eldest. Whether we deserved it or not, and I'm sure not easily given, we were fortunate to have parents who lived and acted with such Christ-like love. To youngest and oldest alike, they never once withheld their love or rejected our pitiful return back home. Even if they never cooked up a fatted calf.

This parable that Jesus tells, the Prodigal Son, as it is most commonly known, is the third in a series wherein God seeks out the lost, and it's a parable he tells in the context of criticism. The Pharisees and Scribes are grumbling, it makes no sense at all to them that Jesus sits with tax collectors and sinners, some of the worst kinds of God's children, they think. As is often the case, Jesus does not succumb to their grumbings, instead he offers up this creative explanation of the character of God that motivates such aggravating and countercultural behavior from the Son of Man.

Remember that this is a story about God, not about who's better—younger or older siblings. We are supposed to hear parables and learn about God, and thus, how we, created in the image of God, regardless of birth order, ought to move through this world in a God like way.

So, let's cut to the chase.

Did you hear how the father reacted when he saw his lost son, far off in the distance, head hung, but coming home? I hope you heard it when Jesus tells us that he was filled with compassion. Moved to the depths of his being, to the seat of love inside of him, he wrapped his boy up with kisses and love. His kid came home. Should he be mad? Heck yes. Should he be embarrassed? Without a doubt. Should he be ashamed? You betcha. Instead, he is filled and exudes compassion.

Can you imagine?

I bet you can imagine being met with compassion because I bet that's part of why we're all here in church today. Because we know something of God's boundless compassion. We've have been lost, way out over our skis. We have done the work of recognizing that discontinuity between who we're acting like and who we are. We have come back to ourselves, knowing that we must return home to the one who formed us. Younger, older, only child, loving parents, complicated parents, no parents, no matter who we are, we have been at the end of that road, feeling unworthy, and still wrapped in the loving arms of a compassionate God. We can imagine that because we know that grace.

We can easily imagine being one son or the other, we can imagine being unworthily blessed by compassion, but can we imagine extending it? Can we fathom being the one left behind, betrayed, bewildered, and still taking up the mantle of compassion rather than anger or even worse, rejection? To be filled with compassion when all the cards are stacked against it seems almost impossible.

And yet. That is what we are tasked with.

To have received such loving compassion is to know it, and so we give it. God formed us with the capacity to be as the father in this beloved story and to ooze unconditional love and compassion to, well, everyone. It's part of who we are, how we were knit together, it's part of God's will for us, God's dream for how we will be in this life. Even when it makes no sense at all.

You know that as that boy walked heavily down that road, and his father ran to not just greet him, but to celebrate him, you know that the neighbors, betrayed in their own right, were peering through their blinds like what the heck is that guy doing? From top to bottom this story is countercultural. That kid should have never taken that money, he should have never left, he should have never slacked off on his obligation to his family. He should have been kicked out never to return. And yet, there goes dad, arms open to welcome, to celebrate, to love his son just as God would have him do. It would have made no sense then and it makes no sense now in our logical minds.

And let's not forget the one perhaps most perplexed by this act of surprising and countercultural compassion, the older brother. Having given so much, having done everything right, having received nothing in return, in seeing the way his father embraced his brother, he fills with anger. Even us younger siblings can understand that reaction. No one blames him, it does seem unfair, unreasonable. But yet again, that father extends compassion, unflapped by what must have been quite a scene. Shouting angry accusations, the older brother wailed, and his father listened. Tenderly reassuring his dutiful and obedient boy that they are still part of each other, that there is enough, that he will still have what he is owed, what he has earned. And he teaches the angry son how to act as God would have us act with compassion and love, celebrating when the lost become found.

Not everyone has experienced this kind of unconditional love and compassion from their family of origin, but God's creativity works in many wonderful and mysterious ways. From chosen family to church family, to those bizarre and seemingly random encounters, God extends compassion to each of us and through each of us. And every single time we receive it, we earn another stripe qualifying us to extend it.

That's our work.

Not to be the arbiters of worthiness, but to be compassionate to everyone regardless of how lost they've been, how dead they've seemed, how broken they are. Rooted in that love between us and God that we simply cannot break, we extend compassion. Celebrating the found, honoring the angry, teaching the stuck.

We know compassion, and thus we are compassionate. We would do well to remember the grace that has been done unto us. The love that has celebrated us, formed us and caught us as we fall. The compassion extended when we were sure there was none to spare.

God's looking at the youngest child.

God's looking at the oldest child.

God's looking at the middle child.

God's looking at the only child.

Each and every one of us God has tasked with the work of being God's love compassionately moving through this world. Even when it makes no sense at all.

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