



Sunday March 27, 2022  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (Fourth Sunday in Lent)

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Pastor Tony Acompañado

Lately I've noticed that my dislike for people who cut in line has not decreased as I've gotten older, in fact, I think it's even grown over the years. Go ahead and laugh, but I have a feeling many of you can relate – whether it's someone who skips the line at a restaurant, theme park, grocery store, or in the airport security line in an unfair way, our irritation is raised.

We fume over discourteous people who blatantly drive past the lane closed ahead signs refusing to merge until the last minute and then speed ahead expecting someone to slow down and let them in before they hit the fast-approaching construction barrels. And then there are the people who rudely and knowingly steal our parking spots just as we're about to turn into them. These circumstances cause our blood pressure to rise and our frustration to boil over leading us toward an explosive and uncontrollable string of expletives and irrational threats aimed at anyone who's wronged us.

But it's not just about being orderly and following the rules, is it? Instead, in our unshakable bitterness we despise the breach of justice and fairness. "I've been waiting patiently in line; so, what gives you the right to consider yourself better or more deserving than me?"

Yet if we're honest with ourselves, then we will quickly realize that such outrageous reactions to equally outrageous behaviors are no better than those of the line cutter or parking space thief. See, our sense of injustice is quite attuned to personal moments of being wronged or unfairly treated, even as we neglect to see how our own actions may inconvenience or harm others. If anything, these moments reveal more about us than those we think have wronged us.

Such feelings are as ancient as human desire. And in chapter 15 of Luke's gospel, Jesus addresses these feelings by way of three famous parables about being lost and found, and he chastises the Pharisees and scribes who disapprove of the "questionable" company he's been keeping. Put more simply, they feel Jesus hangs out with the wrong people. He spent time with good-for-nothings, undesirables, and the lowest of the low – he hung out with the people none of us would ever consider inviting to a dinner party. And yet Jesus broke bread with them much to the dismay of his critics.

In response to their criticism, Jesus begins by referencing a shepherd who leaves his flock to find one wayward sheep. Next, he describes a woman who loses a coin. And in both stories, there are some basic patterns shared between them.

First, we're introduced to a main character. Second, that main character loses something of value. Third, the main character searches frantically – even ridiculously – in search of what was lost. Fourth, what was lost is found. Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, the finding of what was lost brings about an excessive celebration. So, what are we to learn from these stories?

Well, Jesus brings each of the parables to a close by noting that the heavens rejoice far more with the repentance of the one we would call despicable, a sinner, or an outcast than when 99 good, honorable, and well-regarded individuals do the same. But now, you might be thinking, "this isn't fair, why would God value one over 99?" Well, this is where the third parable comes in to precisely answer this lingering question.

At first, it seems like the famous story of the Prodigal Son will follow all the same patterns as the parables that came before it. A father loses a son. A father searches unceasingly for the son over the horizon. When the son returns, the father celebrates extravagantly. But then the pattern breaks down because the return of the son is not celebrated by all. Outside the lavish party, the older brother grumbles, steamed over the foolishness of a father who would embrace such an ungrateful and wayward son.

We can certainly relate to the older brother, can't we? Can you imagine the audacity of his younger brother? When he demands his inheritance, it's as if he were wishing for his father's premature death. And as we reflect more upon the older son's reaction, we begin to identify with his point of view more fully – with his pride, jealousy, anger, and self-righteousness.



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But take a step back for a moment and notice the father's reaction. Because if the pattern of the first two stories holds, then it's actually the father who is the main character of the parable, not the prodigal. This is not the story of a lost son but of a father who never ceases loving his ungrateful child. It is he who searches and yearns for his son's return. It is he who embraces his lost son, cutting off his apology mid-sentiment. It doesn't matter why the son has come home only that he has. This wayward son was dead, and now he is alive. He was lost and is now found. This is why Jesus eats with sinners and tax collectors, with the despised, the rejected, and the uncivilized. This is precisely where God's heart is, with the lost and the dead.

But does this mean that God is uninterested in the 99 who do the "right" thing? No, God cares for all of us deeply, but because God's dream is to renew, reconcile, repair, and restore all that God loves, God may say to us, "You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we must celebrate and rejoice, because this brother or sister of yours was dead and has come back to life!"

And this is the key. As long as the one is lost, the 99 are incomplete. As long as one of our brothers or sisters is broken by the world, cast aside as irrelevant, or called a sinner by the rest of us, then we are all at a loss – and God's heart is broken. God will never stop reaching for the one because God's love is too wide, and God's grace is too rich to stop looking for the lost – especially for those whom we deem unredeemable.

Jesus tells these parables in response to the self-righteous Pharisees and scribes who express disapproval of Jesus' reaching out to the broken. As people of faith, it's natural to not want to be lumped together with the hypocrites whom Jesus rebukes; we would much rather see ourselves as the recipients of God's ridiculous grace. However, each time we set ourselves apart from the people who have appeared to cut in line or taken the supposedly easy road, we echo the dismay of those Pharisees and scribes. We would do well to recognize that more often than not we place ourselves with the supposed righteous rather than with the sinners of the world.

When we condemn the undocumented for "cheating" the system, and the poor for relying on government assistance, and people of color for perpetuating their circumstances without hearing their stories and empathizing with their difficulties, we join the naysaying of the Pharisees and scribes.

And when we see gaping inequality between us and credit the well off for their success but judge the poor for their incompetence, and when we see people convicted of crimes offered the chance at rehabilitation but see it as a waste of time and resources, we fall into these destructive but ancient patterns. In the end, our responses may say much more about us than those we are quick to condemn as criminals, sinners, and unworthy.

The parable of the Prodigal offers us an alternative perspective. It is a kingdom view that stands in contrast to our worldly view of "the way things should be." Mercy overrides justice, abundance eclipses anger, and wayward children are welcomed home by loving parents. It is a vision of the expanse of the love, grace, compassion, and justice of God. This parable points to God's deepest desire, greatest yearning, and passionate dream for all of God's children and the whole of God's creation.

God's unending and immeasurable love and grace are what lie at the heart of this parable – the economy of such love and grace should surprise, even offend us in its extravagance. God's ever-expanding, scandalous grace – grace that defies all earthly rules, grace that will challenge our sensibilities, and confront our collective sense of fairness. Grace that is cause for great rejoicing and ought to change us as its recipients.

Perhaps then, when viewed this way, the parable of the Prodigal will inspire us to see the world as God sees it: God tirelessly looks for, welcomes, and rejoices the return of the one who is lost, and my dear brothers and sisters, God calls us to do the same? Thanks be to God! Amen.