

The Bell Curve of Love

John 15:9-17

At some point through most people's lives, they find themselves butting up against Gaussian's law. It's a term we likely learned in math class (assuming one can remember anything from math class), and it refers to the normal distribution of data which, according to 18th century German mathematician Johann Carl Friedrich Gauss, falls in a very predictable pattern. As Gauss explained it, under normal situations, most data will coalesce around a mean value and the remaining data will taper off in both directions in lesser and lesser amounts until you reach the extremes on both ends. The result is a graph that takes the shape of a bell. Hence, the term "bell curve."

Now the use of this statistical tool is actually widespread—in business, for instance, in determining everything from relative value in compensation to performance reviews, from promotions to marketing. It's used by sociologists to portray population trends and characteristics; it's employed by government agencies to evaluate policies and by politicians to judge public opinion polls. What it essentially reflects is the normal distribution of data, presuming roughly half of it will be above the average and half below.

Most of us probably encountered it in high school and college when some of our teachers graded on a curve, where instead of failing the entire class (except for the brown-nosed brainiacs, who actually cared about learning and scored way above the rest of us), the teacher chose to determine grades according to the scores most students achieved.

Hence, in my Junior year in high school, when my friends and I blew off Chemistry and failed every test, we all somehow ended up with “C’s,” which allowed me to graduate as well as work through the summer, instead of having to attend Summer School, which then provided the funds to attend college, where I didn’t take Chemistry, so I could graduate and go on to a very conservative Seminary, where I felt no chemistry, and then went onto a career in ministry, where I’ve embodied chemistry by being an absolute zero and a catalyst for many combustible chain reactions! So you see, grading on a curve can be life-changing.

In spite of Gauss’ law, I have found another useful way to stay ahead of the curve. It has to do with viewing the bell curve, not as a distribution of data per se, but as a portrayal of the course of the average person’s life and the degree to which we are autonomous from or dependent upon someone to provide for and watch over us. I call it, “The Great Bell Curve of Life.” What it means is that we begin at birth where we are totally dependent upon parents or guardians to take care of our needs. The autonomy quotient is close to nil, whereas dependency is high. All our needs are taken care of by someone else. When we became a toddler, however, we started the process of independence and autonomy that, for most, grows exponentially through adolescence and young adulthood. Usually, by the time of early midlife, we are entirely independent of parents’ oversight, often relating to them on an adult level, perhaps even engaging them more like friends.

Somewhere, though, around later midlife, the roles reverse and parents start to become more dependent on their children (or

someone else) to watch over them, if not take care of them, continuing in this progression through the senior years until health issues often place significant limitations on their abilities and autonomy. Eventually, as one's health declines, independence diminishes, sometimes to a minimum, while dependency on others increases, mirroring the years of their early childhood when they needed constant supervision and daily care. The result is, if you and I live through to the average lifespan of 80-90 years or older, then it's likely the bell curve will reflect in some way the dynamic of dependency and autonomy in each of our lives. The zenith of our autonomy would have been in our early and middle adult years, balanced by our most dependent periods on either end of the proverbial slope of our personal "bell curve."

The relationship between dependence and independence is something to ponder as it impacts the way we view ourselves (e.g., we may think we're more independent than we are, or vice versa, we may not be as autonomous as we should be—depending on which the stage of life we're in). But it's not just self-image at stake. The relationships of our lives are likewise affected, in the way we relate as parents to children or as children to parents. This role reversal can take place at various points in life, depending on the physical and psychological health of the parent, and usually it is no small hurdle to overcome.

In fact, there is an expanding field of study under the topic of "parentification," which is when children are called upon to serve as "parents," as it were, to their families growing up or later in life to their own parent(s). Researchers study children who are made to

take on adult responsibilities well before their time because they are not being handled well by the parent, as well as exploring the growing numbers of adult children who psychologically and emotionally are struggling with providing for all the needs of an aging parent. There are stresses, expectations, and other psycho-spiritual elements on both ends of the relationship that make interpersonal love difficult to express or understand.

Some of the issues and questions that naturally come into play are:

- How do we manage the responsibility of providing care for parents who want to maintain independence and control of their lives? From the other side, comes this: how do we get some assistance from our children without having them take over our entire lives?
- Why do my children treat me like a child?
- Why won't my parents respect my advice?
- What do I do when the person I always loved as my mother or father no longer is recognizable in the person I must take care of?
- Why doesn't my son or daughter come to me like they used to when they needed help?

On and on the drama goes in working out the relationships between parents and children when the parents are in a more dependent stage. Depending on the situation, the relationships may become strained, communication difficult, and memories scarred by the new realities imposed by role reversal. Frankly, we could spend all day swapping stories and hearing complaints about parent/child relationships.

On the other hand, there is a grace that can be found in such a change of life, as well. In many ways, caregiving for elderly parents can be a noble and honorable and loving exchange. It's not easy, but it can be filled with grace. When adult children appreciate the love they have received from their parents over the years, or at least recognize how tough parenting can be at times, then there can be a sense that you are providing for the one who provided for you. It's a fair and loving exchange of caregiving, each for the other, at the points of dependency and need.

Recently, I came across some thoughts from a helpful book titled, *The Inspired Caregiver: Finding Joy While Caring for Those You Love*.¹ It's helpful insofar as it offers some insights and suggestions to reframe a caregiver's attitude and perspective from taking on a family burden to embracing the privilege of expressing meaningful and merciful love to those who did the same for you. Let me just quote a few lines:

- *Caregiving often calls us to lean into love we didn't know possible;*
- *In the heart of every caregiver is a knowing that we are all connected. As I do for you, I do for me;*
- *I believe that most caregivers find that they inherit a situation where they just kind of move into caregiving. It's not a conscious decision for most caregivers, and they are ultimately left with the responsibility of working while still trying to be the caregiver, the provider, and the nurturer;*
- *The phrase "Love one another" is so wise. By loving one another, we invest in each other and in ourselves. Perhaps someday, when we need someone to care for us, it may not come from the person we expect, but from the person we least expect. It may be our sons or daughter-in-laws, our neighbors, friends, cousins, stepchildren, or stepparents whose love*

¹ Peggi Spears and Tia Walker, *The Inspired Caregiver: Finding Joy While Caring for Those You Love*, 2013.

for us has assigned them to the honorable, yet dangerous position of caregiver;

- *To care for those who once cared for us is one of the highest honors.*

Frankly, because caregiving doesn't always seem like a high honor or a noble act of service, it's important to be mindful of one's attitude and outlook, and remind ourselves of what love is all about. Love isn't always a matter of sentimental feelings or warm, reciprocated affection; sometimes love is the hard task of taking on of a responsibility in a sacrificial way and allowing the energies of one's day to be used in menial service to provide for a dependent's needs. I find that this is the type of setting where the Apostle Paul's admonitions take root and have a great deal of instruction and meaning—words we know well:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

(I Corinthians 13:4-7)

This goes both ways, on either end of the relationship between a parent and a child.

Even though love can be a lonely and thankless expression of care for another, it can be compensated by the memory of when a similar love was expressed in kind, or if not, of the assurance that simply having an outlook of love and kindness, more than anything else, makes things go easier. Resentment, bitterness, chronic frustration, and anything else that might poison the relationship don't make the duty any easier. Reframing one's attitude and outlook with love makes things go easier—even when you have to lean into it to

make it happen. Love is often the best healer of heartache. Love is often the only way to restore or maintain a caregiving relationship.

Our lectionary text for today is not foreign to this thought. We often view Jesus' counsel about love as merely being a act of religious devotion (i.e., that's it's all about God)—that it speaks mainly to the lofty aspirations of faith, not the menial sacrifices we make each day. But I would disagree. Love is what helps us deal with the nitty-gritty of life; it is what saves us from despair and anger; love is what helps us keep balance, so we don't wreck and discard the important relationships of our lives.

As Christians, we aren't just meant to hear divine love expressed when we hear these stirring words:

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. It's also a mother's love, a son's love, a daughter's love, the love of a soul friend, the love of a caregiver. It's about reciprocal love, realized or even imagined, but it completes the cycle of care in the Great Bell Curve of Life, becoming the great bell curve of love.

Love is what allows us to embrace service as an act of mercy and compassion, not just as a drudgery or obligation. Love is what lifts our heart as we deal with the fears, worries, fatigue, crankiness, disappointment and sorrow that daily life brings. Taking care of one who is dependent and fragile is the most mother-like expression of love and nurturing there can be. It works on both ends of life and all throughout. It is a gift that returns to the giver.

On this day when we honor our mothers, it is a good time to be reminded of this, wherever we find ourselves along the bell curve of life. May we see life best served and fulfilled as an expression of love,

one to another, reciprocal and blessed with grace. May we experience love that will never end—love that endures, and hopes, and bears all things.

In that way, we shall know that the relationships that bind a caregiver to one receiving care provide the best opportunity for us to express love, something that we all depend on as we look ahead to the future from whatever point we find ourselves on the Great Bell Curve of Love. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly,...[now] we know only in part.”

And when all is said and done, when all the kisses and hugs have been exchanged, when all of the tears have been shed and dried, when all that life brings to us is complete, we’ll know in our hearts that the greatest of all gifts is love.

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