

BRINGING HOME THE GOSPEL

March 27, 2022 • 4th Sunday of Lent • Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The Story of the Prodigal Son

When the scribes and Pharisees chastise Jesus for associating with sinners, Jesus tells them a parable about a rich young man who takes his inheritance and squanders it. When he returns home to beg for mercy, his father greets him with love and forgiveness. Jesus is telling us about the unconditional love of God our Father. “But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him” (v. 20).

I know I affirmed my children when they were growing up, but I wish I had done it more often. In hindsight, I realize I got so caught up in the tremendous responsibilities of parenting that sometimes I missed what they needed most. Helping five youngsters grow up to be healthy—physically, emotionally and spiritually—is an awesome task. There were so many things to teach them and to protect them from. Too often, my conversations with them were not conversations at all; rather they were more like sermons with me preaching, teaching or warning against some danger or other.

One of the traits of a strong family is that its members affirm each other often. They congratulate one another on their achievements. They are quick to say “good job” or “well done.” Even more important, they affirm each individual not just for what he or she does, but for who he or she is. It is our job as parents to model this love and affirmation, so our children learn to compliment each other and us, too.

We do this by offering gentle hugs and unequivocal compliments—words or actions that let our toddler or teen or young adult know they are loved no matter what. This does not mean we stop teaching or even preaching. It does mean we take care

in what we say and how we say it. It also means we spend time each day listening to our children, affirming them and assuring them that they are loved. In short, we are asked to reflect God’s unconditional love to our children.

Mirroring that love can be a difficult task if we do not first accept God’s unconditional love for us. We need to remind ourselves that we, too, are God’s children, loved with a love that is unearned and unending.

FAMILY RESPONSE

Have family members write or draw one or two things they most like in each of the other family members. Show what you have each written or drawn.

PERSONAL RESPONSE

Do you find it difficult to believe that God loves you unconditionally? Why or why not? How can you bring yourself to trust more deeply in God’s love?

BRINGING HOME THE GOSPEL

April 3, 2022 • 5th Sunday of Lent • John 11:1-45

Jesus Raises Lazarus From the Dead

Lazarus's sisters, Martha and Mary, send word to Jesus that their brother is very ill. By the time Jesus reaches the home of his friends, Lazarus is dead. Because of Martha and Mary's pleading and faith, their brother is returned to life after being buried for four days.

When Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, we see an amazing display of his power—a power that can conquer even death. Even those disciples who had seen Jesus heal the blind and lame must have been astonished by this act. Sadly, the impact is not the same for many of us. We've heard the stories so often we sometimes take Jesus the miracle-worker for granted.

Our children can be even more blasé. They are growing up in world of superheroes. Games and cartoons like *Spider-Man*, *Wonder Woman* and *Skyforge* are their daily fare. Even if you limit their activity at home, they will still hear about it at school or from friends.

We know that children younger than seven have trouble distinguishing make-believe from real life, but that shouldn't stop us from talking about "just pretend." And as they grow older it's even more important they hear us talk convincingly about Jesus (the real powerhouse of good and conqueror of

evil). They need to see and hear how important Jesus is in our lives. If they aren't positive that we believe in Jesus, they may just grow up thinking God is one more make-believe superhero.

FAMILY RESPONSE

Take turns naming the things about Jesus you like the most. See if anyone in the family can think of a story from Jesus' life that illustrates the things that you each mention.

PERSONAL RESPONSE

Who was a hero of yours when you were growing up? What did you admire about him or her? What quality of Jesus would you most like to have as your own? Why do you need or want it? How can you acquire it?

BRINGING HOME THE GOSPEL

April 3, 2022 • 5th Sunday of Lent • John 8:1-11

Mercy, Not Punishment

Jesus is confronted by prideful leaders who want him to publicly condemn a woman caught in adultery. He refuses to do so, instead challenging everyone present to examine their own lives for their sinfulness.

This story comes amidst a period when Jesus was creating quite a stir. Many of the common people were quite taken by his teachings and speaking favorably of him. They were touched and inspired by his healing acts and the way he preached of God's love and forgiveness. Some had even begun to wonder if he was the long-anticipated Messiah. The religious leaders, on the other hand, had turned against him. They wanted him arrested because his teachings of compassion and mercy conflicted with their way of keeping the people under their control.

When the Pharisees and scribes brought the woman caught in adultery to Jesus, they were openly humiliating her—but note, they didn't involve the man caught in the act. He was off the hook. They also used her to try to trap Jesus into contradicting Moses, the Jews' greatest religious teacher. However, rather than condemn her, Jesus chose that moment to impart a teaching about mercy rather than judgment and forgiveness rather than punishment. He did it gently, asking the crowd to search their own hearts for sins, rather than call them out publicly to shame them.

When the crowd left, Jesus spoke lovingly to the woman, telling her explicitly that he didn't condemn her. But he didn't ignore her trespass either—he asked her not to sin again as she went on her way. His response to her was probably much more effective in moving her to a change of heart than any other punishment would have been.

As parents, we are often in situations in which we need to balance mercy and justice for our own children. What might we learn from Jesus' approach?

FAMILY RESPONSE

When have you wanted to see someone else punished for something they did wrong? Does it upset you to think of Jesus forgiving them? Why or why not?

PERSONAL RESPONSE

What sin(s) of your own have you found it hard to accept God's forgiveness for? Pray to internalize Jesus' words, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

BRINGING HOME THE GOSPEL

April 10, 2022 • Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord • Luke 22:14-23; 23:1-49

Jesus' Last Hours

Jesus, the miracle-worker, enters the capital city of Jerusalem with the crowds cheering and waving palms. A week later, after the Pharisees convince Pilate to convict Jesus of treason, the crowd cheers for his death. This reading includes Jesus' celebration of the Passover, and his gift of the Eucharist as well as his passion and his final words before his death: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (23:46).

Every Palm Sunday, I remember the years of being distracted by wiggling children and the shuffling feet of teenagers as the Passion was read. This story of Jesus' last twenty-four hours is a long reading.

It begins with Jesus getting ready to celebrate the Jewish feast of the Passover with his friends. The Jewish Passover is the celebration of Moses bringing the Jews out of Egypt to freedom. Within three days the world would be celebrating a new freedom.

Jesus sends his apostles to find a suitable place to celebrate the great feast. They meet in an upper room where Jesus has his last meal with his friends. At this meal, Jesus gives them (and us) the great gift of himself as he blesses the bread and wine.

After the meal, Jesus goes to pray in the garden, where he is arrested. He then appears before the chief priest and Pharisees and before the Roman official Pilate. At first Pilate orders that Jesus be scourged and beaten, but the crowd (the same crowd that only a week earlier hailed him with palms and cheers) protests: "Crucify him!" Pilate eventually relents. Jesus, condemned to die, carries his own cross through the city to a hillside outside the gates. There he is nailed to the cross, and, after three hours, he dies. And, as prophesied, three days later Jesus rises from the dead. (The latter is not part of the Palm Sunday reading; rather we hear about this next week at Easter.)

In the short span of three days, Jesus brings about a new Passover. Like Moses of that first Passover, Jesus brings us out of slavery, the slavery of fear, greed and prejudice, to freedom. The Passion and death, along with the Resurrection, are the very heart of the gospel.

FAMILY RESPONSE

Help your children recall the story of the Passion. Read it from a good children's Bible, or tell it in your own words. Put together your own Way of the Cross. As a family, choose six to ten events from the last days of Jesus' life. Draw a picture of each event and hang them all on the walls around your house. As you walk around to each picture, make up a prayer for each station.

PERSONAL RESPONSE

Often our own problems or crosses are mirrored in the events of Jesus' Passion. (Jesus is rejected. He falls for the second time.) Choose one or two of the events of the Passion and, in the space below, write a brief prayer concerning them.

BRINGING HOME THE GOSPEL

April 17, 2022 • Easter Sunday • John 20:1-9

Jesus Is Risen

There is no question that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified; his death is a matter of historical record. But it is what happened on the third day after his death that changed history forever. Jesus, our brother and savior, was raised from the dead.

On Easter we celebrate that God's love conquered death and that Jesus is forever alive in the world. We rejoice in our freedom from the slavery of sin and the bondage of fear and anger that can lead us to sin. We rejoice in our own new life in Christ. Easter is an alleluia day. It is the greatest, biggest, most important feast day in every Christian's life, and it should be celebrated every day by every Christian.

Jesus came to our tiny planet to help us remember something that we had forgotten: We are children of God. Jesus is our brother not only on his mother's side, but on his Father's side, too. He shared our humanity to remind us that through him we share in his divinity.

Jesus died for this truth, rose in this truth and lives in this truth today, through each of us.

In baptism, we choose to live our lives in Christ as lovers, healers and peacemakers. There is no place for greed or prejudice. And as we grow into the divinity Christ shares with us, we become more and more freed from the slavery of fear and anger, self-righteousness and false pride. We grow away from sin and become the person God created us to be, using our unique gifts and talents to make a better world.

If we remember who we are and whose we are, our everyday lives take on new meaning. If we believe that we truly share in Christ's life, then we know that nothing can defeat us. Does this mean we won't suffer or get hurt? Of course not, but we know that no matter what we encounter, God's strength and courage are at our disposal. We are not alone.

What a message of hope in a world full of all sorts of hurtful things. Share this message with your children, and celebrate your life in Christ. Celebrate Easter. Have a party!

FAMILY RESPONSE

No matter what time of year it is, plan an Easter party. Work together to plan the party. You may even want to invite friends.

PERSONAL RESPONSE

Easter is about new life. Where do you need new life in your everyday world? How can you claim it?

BRINGING HOME THE GOSPEL

April 24, 2022 • 2nd Sunday of Easter • John 20:19-31

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

After Jesus had been crucified, the disciples gathered behind locked doors, because they were afraid that they would be arrested as Jesus had been. But Jesus comes and stands with them. He shows them his pierced hands and feet so they know that it is really he who has returned. Twice he wishes them peace. He then breathes on them and tells them: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (v. 22-23).

When Jesus shows his disciples his hands and side, we are all given an important insight: The Risen Christ still carries the wounds of a broken world. In the glorified Christ we find all those who suffer, all those who are estranged and even all those who are unrepentant sinners. In this wounded Christ we find ourselves with all our own hurts and failings. What Jesus does after he presents himself to his followers is even more significant.

After he shows his disciples his wounds, Jesus breathes the Spirit into them. He sends them out as he was sent, to offer healing, forgiveness and, above all, love. This is our mission, too.

We are asked to love the beggar and the sinner as much as we love the self-reliant and the saint. The key is to remember that love is not just a feeling of attraction. It is a sense of attachment and acceptance. Love is a bond. It is realizing in heart and head that we are all one (sinners and saints) in the Risen Christ.

We can't help the way we feel, but we are certainly responsible for the way we act. We have to teach our children, through word and action, not to judge others so harshly that they fail to love them.

FAMILY RESPONSE

Have a family reconciliation prayer service. Light a candle. Read the Scripture above just to the place where Jesus tells his disciples that the sins they have committed are forgiven. Ask each family member to think about a hurt they experienced from a family member that they are ready to let go of. When everyone is ready, ask each person to take a deep breath in and then slowly let the breath out as they forgive the person who hurt them. Close with an Our Father.

PERSONAL RESPONSE

Are you able to forgive easily? What keeps you from letting go of old hurts or wounds? Write a short prayer asking God to help you let go of your anger and disappointment.

BRINGING HOME THE GOSPEL

May 1, 2022 • 3rd Sunday of Easter • John 21:1-19

Jesus Appears to Disciples Who Are Fishing

The Risen Jesus calls to the disciples who are out fishing, just as he had called to them years before. That first time, Jesus invited them to follow him; this time he commissions Peter to leadership. Three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him; three times Peter responds that Jesus knows he loves him; three times Jesus tells him to take care of the others: "...Feed my lambs. ...Tend my sheep. ... Feed my sheep" (vv. 15-17).

Jesus specifically calls on Peter to lead the early church. Jesus tells Peter that he is not only to watch over and protect those in his keeping, but also to nourish them and take care of their needs.

There is a great similarity between the family and the church. In fact, since early times, the family has been called the "domestic church." Both communities share similar visions and tasks. Family and church both have the responsibility of nurturing, supporting and challenging their members to grow to their full potential.

Both communities were founded in love, and both function best when they remember love is both their source and their sustenance. Both communities are called to be welcoming and reconciling. Church members are called to learn, pray, play, celebrate and serve together, and so are families.

Unfortunately because of the splintering of time and collisions of interests in our lives today (both adults and children) being a "family" is no longer a given. Too often we find households of youngsters and adults who share finances and a roof, but hardly a meal or conversation. In today's culture becoming a family often takes deliberate, intentional planning.

As a parent you are responsible for the members of your flock. It is up to you to protect and nourish them, and, somehow in your busy schedule, find time to be a family.

FAMILY RESPONSE

Sit down together and give yourselves a report card on how well you are doing as a family. Give a grade to each of the following activities that, done together, are part of being family: learning, playing, praying, forgiving, celebrating and serving.

PERSONAL RESPONSE

If you are like most adults today, your life is incredibly busy. If you are a single parent, the word incredibly does not begin to cover it. Aware of this dilemma, after looking at the family report card (above), what can you do to bring up one or two of your grades?

BRINGING HOME THE GOSPEL

May 8, 2022 • 4th Sunday of Easter • John 10:27-30

Jesus Declares His Union With the Father

In this short reading, Jesus talks about his commitment to those who follow him. They will have eternal life and never perish. No one can take them from Jesus because they rest in the Father's hands; they rest in Jesus' hands. Jesus explains that this is possible because, "The Father and I are one" (v. 30).

John's Gospel was the last Gospel written. It is probably the most theological Gospel because Jesus' disciples had more time to consider and discuss their experience of being with Jesus. It is in John's Gospel that we hear Jesus tell his disciples he will send the Spirit to do just that sort of discerning. John's Gospel speaks most often of unity among the Father, Son and Spirit.

Believing in a Triune God is the absolute bedrock of our Christian faith. God is one, but God is also three persons. It is, and will remain, a mystery as long as we are part of this finite world. Father, Son and Spirit are not sequential. There wasn't God the Father and Creator first, followed by Jesus the Son and finally, the Spirit. Jesus, the Spirit and the Father have been one from the beginning. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

When it comes to understanding God, we are all children. Our brains are limited to finite time and space, and God is beyond all that. Once in a while, we allow God to break through and we experience the awesomeness of the divine. This is where we discover clues to the mystery of God.

It is through God's self-revelation to a people who lived centuries before us that we see the mystery be-

gin to unfold. They tell us about their experiences of God through stories and metaphors, through history, songs, poetry and letters. We call this library of God's self-revelation the Bible.

It is important to remember, however, that the ultimate and final revelation of our Triune God is Jesus. Always balance the other books of the Bible with the Gospels.

FAMILY RESPONSE

Talk about what a mystery is, and remind each other that God will always be a mystery. Then name the things you know about God.

PERSONAL RESPONSE

Read John 1:1–14, and ponder the mystery of our Triune God. Let go of your need to know everything, and trust that God is with you and in you. Sit quietly with certainty. Reflect on the experience.

BRINGING HOME THE GOSPEL

May 15, 2022 • 5th Sunday of Easter • John 13:31-33, 34-35

Jesus Gives a New Commandment

Jesus tells his disciples that he will only be with them for a little while longer. He then gives them a new commandment: "...[L]ove one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (vv. 34-35).

Every time I read Paul's description of the love Jesus practiced and in turn expects his disciples to practice, I cringe. Paul writes, "Love is patient... it does not insist on its own way..." (1 Corinthians 13:4-5). Perhaps this is such a difficult notion to embrace because patience does not come easily to me. When I was raising my children, it seemed an impossible feat to maintain my patience.

I love my children, and I would give my life for them. But there were times when they were young that I was anything but patient and mild-tempered. At one point, I had a six-year-old, three little ones under the age of three and a husband who traveled.

There were days when the children teased each other, screamed and fought, and I joined right in, screaming even louder. I would go to bed hating myself, resolving to keep my cool the next day, but I'd get up in the morning and before noon I would lose my temper again. Finally, on a retreat, I learned that there were some things about ourselves that we just can't change through sheer willpower. No matter how much we want to, no matter how many times we try, we just can't do it.

So, as the retreat director had suggested, I turned it over to God. Every morning, I asked God for the patience I needed to get me to lunch. At lunch, I prayed to make it to dinner, at dinner, to bedtime. And it worked. After a few weeks I woke up to a different household. Because I was calmer, so were

the kids. God's patient love became mine. I'd like to say the change was permanent, but it wasn't. I'd break the cycle and have to start praying hourly all over again. But I learned something very important through it all. I learned that the love Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians is God's love, which is even more powerful than a mother's love. The good news is that this love is mine for the asking, and once I receive it I am free to share it with my children.

FAMILY RESPONSE

Talk about how difficult it is to change old habits and how we sometimes need God's help. Suggest that each family member writes down one habit he or she would like help with. Say a prayer together and burn the pieces of paper as a sign of your turning it over to God.

PERSONAL RESPONSE

What old habit or trait would you like to change about yourself? How have you tried to change? How can you work at change in the future?

BRINGING HOME THE GOSPEL

May 22, 2022 • 6th Sunday of Easter • John 14:23-29

Jesus Offers His Disciples Peace

Jesus promises his disciples to be with them and in them if they love him and keep his word. He promises to send the Holy Spirit, who will continue to teach them and remind them of what Jesus told them. Finally, Jesus tells them not to be troubled or afraid. He promises them his peace: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (v. 27).

There were so many times in my years of parenting when all I wanted was a little peace. With seven of us in the house, it seemed there was always someone wanting something or arguing with somebody. As toddlers and teens, my kids badgered and whined, poked and pushed. Often I just wanted to say yes when no was the right answer, or give in to the loudest protester just for some peace and quiet.

Real peace, the peace Jesus talks about, is not the same as the peace which is the opposite of war. Arguments can continue, battles can be waged, people can disagree—but we can still experience God’s peace. God’s peace is not grounded in a particular condition or position. It is grounded in love. God’s peace is an inner calm, a certainty that all will be well.

While peace and quiet do not necessarily go hand in hand, I discovered early in my parenting that I needed a little quiet to remind myself that God is with me and God is in me. I needed to set aside time each day when the kids were safely settled (usually during their daily dose of Sesame Street) to sit in quiet prayer. And I needed a yearly getaway retreat to rest and to restore body and spirit.

If you are like me and find it difficult to remain calm and not answer every angry word with an

even angrier retort, if it is hard for you to say, “No, you can’t,” and not dissolve when called the meanest mom or dad in the world—then perhaps you, too, need to find some quiet time for prayer, to let go of your burdens and injuries so that your hands are free to accept God’s gift of peace. Once you accept it, and rest in that gift, you can share it with all those around you.

FAMILY RESPONSE

Set some time aside for family quiet time—a half-hour or so for reading or working with puzzles. Make sure everyone is in the same room, but allow no talking.

PERSONAL RESPONSE

Find some time to be alone. Set a timer for five minutes and sit quietly in a chair. Put your feet on the floor, arms relaxed on your lap. Become aware of your breathing in and out. Try to get rid of all thoughts. Say the name Jesus slowly and reverently over and over.

BRINGING HOME THE GOSPEL

May 26 or May 29, 2022 • Ascension of the Lord • Matthew 28:16-20

He Is With Us

Jesus has lived his life, died, and risen. He has taught his disciples everything he had to teach. Before he leaves them for a final time, Jesus tells them to make disciples of the whole world, teaching all they have learned and baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Once heard a religious educator say that a disciple was like an apprentice. A disciple doesn't have to have it all together—she makes mistakes. She is someone who is still learning. An apprentice also needs mentoring. She needs someone to teach her and instruct her, but she also needs someone to show her how to be whatever it is she is apprenticing to be.

We are disciples of a trinitarian God, baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. Our way into the divine life of this Trinity is through Jesus. Jesus, the Son, is our brother, our savior, and our mentor. He shows us how we can share in his divinity by teaching us to accept our humanity.

It was by living his life completely and embracing his death fully that Jesus became our way and our mentor. He accepted his limitations and embraced his vulnerability. He showed us how to live through pain and loss and die with questions left unanswered. And through it all, he shared his love with everyone: friends and enemies alike.

As disciples, we try, and sometimes fail, to live our lives as Jesus lived his, but like all good apprentices and disciples, we try again. A great thing to remember is that Jesus is not just the ideal—someone we look up to and try to emulate— Jesus is our mentor. He walks with us, helping us clean up our messes. He constantly shares his love and his life with us so that we can share it with others.

FAMILY RESPONSE

Discuss what qualities you like best in Jesus. Have each family member decide on one quality they would like most to have.

PERSONAL RESPONSE

Which of Jesus' qualities would you most like to have? Why?

BRINGING HOME THE GOSPEL

May 29, 2022 • 7th Sunday of Easter • John 17:20-26

Jesus Prays for Unity

Jesus lifts his eyes to heaven and prays to his Father. He prays for his disciples and for all those who will believe in him. He prays that they may be one as he and his Father are one, and that they will know that he is with them and in them.

As parents, we know how important it is to put up a united front. Children learn at a very early age whom to go to when they want certain things. And sometime before early adolescence, they also learn the technique of “divide and conquer.” It is important for parents not to let their guard down.

After a few years of being married (or perhaps working through shared custody), as parents you will know what issues you tend to disagree about. Don't let your child take advantage of this knowledge. As parents, make a pact that when conflicts concerning the welfare of the children come up, you will discuss them before making any final decisions. For example, if a child comes to you with a request after she has already asked her other parent, simply respond: “We (your parents) will talk about (the request), later and we'll get back to you with *our* decision.” Whether children know it or not, they need to have parents who back each other up.

I learned from my own parents to always show respect for my husband. In all of my growing up years, I never heard my dad or mom speak one word against the other. And my siblings and I certainly were not allowed to speak disrespectfully to or about them.

We were never allowed to call my mother, *she*, or my dad, *he*. My dad (who was from Poland), told us that every language except English had a distinct

pronoun to use when speaking to people we were to respect. So Mom was always Mom and Dad was Dad. It was a habit my sisters and I formed when we were young and keep to this day. It was something my husband and I tried to teach our own children.

FAMILY RESPONSE

The average American family only eats two meals a week with all family members present. If this is the case in your household, make those meals special. Don't argue, preach or watch TV at the table. Spend at least thirty minutes together at the table talking about your day, and afterward share the cleanup responsibilities.

PERSONAL RESPONSE

Make sure you show respect for your spouse outside of your home, too. Try to limit talking about your spouse's bad points with others. Think about how your parents respected each other when you were growing up. Has this influenced the way you speak about your spouse? Do you feel respected by your spouse?